



Fiction

Group 3

Debits Carried West

Canadian International School, Wong, Chung, Connor – 14

“Timmy! I told you to brush your teeth!” Mom called. “Stop playing catch with him, Richard!”

Timmy rushed inside, dropping his mitt on the table. He brushed his teeth, changed into pajamas, and crawled into bed. A moment later, Mom came and tucked him in.

“Can you tell me that story about ancestor Qian again?” Timmy inquired.

“You’ve heard this many times,” Mom sighed.

“Please? I’m seven now, you promised to tell me everything when I’m older!” Timmy pleaded, bouncing slightly.

Mom hesitated, her thumb brushing the edge of Timmy’s blanket protectively. She tried to maintain a stern expression but failed, letting out a soft laugh. “Fine, you’re a big boy now,” she said, sitting at the edge of his bed.

She cleared her throat and began, “A long time ago, in Chang’an...”

“Before Grandpa was born?” Timmy interrupted.

She smiled, ruffling his hair. “Way before Grandpa’s grandparents. Our ancestor, Zhang Qian, left his hometown to explore the Silk Road. It was a dangerous adventure.”

Dad came to the door, casting a long shadow from the hallway light. “What’s happening?”

Mom replied, “I’m telling Timmy the real story of ancestor Qian, since he’s older now.”

Dad cracked a smile. “Can I join?”

Mom nodded. “Of course, Richard,” she said softly.

She continued, “Not long after he left, he caught a deadly disease.”

“Dysentery, right?” Dad asked.

“Yes, Richard, you’ve heard this story multiple times,” Mom said, though a smile tugged at her lips.

“Sorry, I forgot,” he winked.

Mom elaborated, “He passed away, leaving his wife and kids to run the family business back in Chang’an. At first, business was booming. But when the Silk Road opened, everything changed. Traders returned with teas that smelled of distant mountains and exotic spices no one in the city had ever tasted. Crowds drifted to other stalls. Day by day, fewer customers came. Shelves stayed full; the money box stayed light. At night, the family whispered in the dark, wondering how much longer they could last.

“They finally turned to the last solution: the three sons, Xing, Yao, and Qian, would travel the Silk Road through Alma-Ata and on to Tashkent in search of foreign goods that would revive the family business. Their parents were terrified with the memory of ancestor Qian dying still fresh.”

Dad contributed, “Their father was especially worried. He’d been raised by only his mother, with no memories of his own father. But despite their parents’ pleas, the brothers embarked, taking their family’s best products and most of their savings.

“They joined a caravan heading west, hopes high. Before they left, an old man who haggled with shopkeepers stopped them.

“‘Aye, lads,’ he said. ‘I’ve been on the Silk Road too many times to count. I’ve seen every pebble, every drop of blood spilled, and every good exchanged. Let me give you some advice.’ The brothers leaned in, intrigued.

“‘Trust no one but your own kin,’ the old man continued, his voice low and rough. ‘Out there, smiles hide knives. If you are ever in danger, assume any kindness is a trap.’ The brothers shuddered but nodded. They began to step away when the old man suddenly shouted after them, his eyes sharp and unsettling. ‘And remember this. Knowledge is worth more than any treasure you carry.’

His words lingered ominously. The brothers thanked him quickly and climbed aboard their caravan as the camels carried them into the fading light.”

Mom proceeded, “They carried nothing but parcels of trade goods and the old man’s warning in their minds. At first, the road looked harmless. But that ended quickly as copper rings, combs, and trinkets littered the trail... even corpses. The items they picked up were leftovers from the deceased. At camps, they fumbled through strange languages, trading for food. They heard whispers about raiders and merchants who poisoned rivals. The brothers finally understood the old man’s advice.”

Timmy’s fingers tightened around his pillow. “People really... died there?” he murmured.

Mom nodded gently. “Powerful monsoons swept away some of their goods, forcing them to take shelter in a cave. Unfortunately, they weren’t alone. Soon after, they faced bandits demanding all their possessions. Thinking fast, Yao pretended to be a plague victim, covering his mouth and coughing violently. The others followed suit until the bandits turned away, repulsed.”

Dad contributed, “Over time, the brothers developed their own skills. Yao bargained fluently in other languages. Xing became adept with the bow, guarding their supplies at night. The youngest, Qian, boosted morale with songs and stories from home, reminding them why they came. They began to see the Silk Road not only as a trade route, but as threads weaving together people’s cultures and destinies.

“Months passed; their supplies dwindled. One night, they met a group of travelers offering food and shelter. Temporarily forgetting the old man’s advice, they accepted. The travelers were about to ambush them, but Xing woke just in time. A struggle broke out under the pale moonlight.

“When the dust settled, their attackers had fled, stealing the brothers’ caravan and supplies. Qian was injured. Both Yao and Qian wanted to turn back, but Xing, the eldest, refused. ‘We have come too far,’ he said. ‘We cannot return to our parents with nothing but a story of failure.’”

Mom sighed, though a ghost of a smile remained. “Alright, who’s telling this story?” She continued, “Following faint caravan trails, they found an abandoned outpost. Inside were pieces of old maps, torn silk, and the remains of forgotten travelers. Among the relics was a trinket that caught Yao’s eye: a small emerald pendant with their family name engraved on the back. Yao held it, feeling the terrible weight of it—the price of ambition, paid across generations. The desert wind howled outside, covering their footsteps. As they lay on the cool sand, they wondered if their parents were okay.

“The next day, they rose to resume their journey, but Qian wouldn’t wake.”

Timmy’s eyebrows knit together. “Mom... is this the sad part?”

She nodded mournfully. “He died of dysentery, meeting the same fate as his grandfather. With tears in their eyes, Xing and Yao began the arduous journey home.

“Eventually, they returned, one brother short. The family still struggled for customers. But thirteen years later, Xing’s own children set out. Their journey was different. Successful. The family business became renowned in China. People came from all over the world. Even Emperor Ping bought a sacred treasure from them. Another time, a mysterious man bought a cursed vase, only to never be seen again.”

“What did he buy, Mommy?” Timmy asked with puppy eyes.

“That’s a story for another time,” she said warmly, checking her watch. “It’s fifteen minutes after your bedtime, Timmy. Get some rest; you have soccer practice in the morning.”

“He’ll understand when he needs to,” Dad said tenderly, not to Timmy, but to Mom, his voice carrying a weight that made the air feel still.

Mom slipped out, and Dad leaned in to kiss Timmy’s forehead. As he pulled back, something flickered at his neck. A brief glint of emerald green.

Timmy blinked. “Dad...?”

But the door closed before he could finish, sealing the room in darkness. The green light lingered in his mind, pulsing like a silent heartbeat. It felt like a secret he was meant to one day discover, and a warning he was too young to hear. A legacy that was equal parts treasure and trap, waiting for him in the dark.

The Silk Dragon

Carmel School – Elsa High School, Lavine, Evelyn – 11

My name is Natasha and for all my life I've always thought that the world would be endless wars and fights that is until I met Silk. You don't know her? Well then lend me your ears and I'll tell you all about her.

It all started one peaceful Sunday morning, or so I thought the Chinese and the Romans were at it again fighting over small little things. As a Chinese princess I'm pretty much used to this. As I walked through the village I noticed something interesting: a beautiful, silver blue dragon necklace glowing in the hot china sun.

When I carefully touched it the necklace glowed a strange shade of blue and so I bought it determined to find out why it glowed only when I touched it. (I tried my dad didn't work as well)

The next morning, I woke up to find a dragon on my window sill. A DRAGON. I rubbed my eyes twice to see if I was dreaming but nope I was wide awake. The dragon turned around and said; "are you Natasha?"

"Yes I'm Natsha, and you?"

The dragon looked at me strangely. She said; "I'm Silk the Dragon of peace and you're an idiot!"

I stared at her for a while before reluctantly climbed on to her back to fly over town. When we saw two people fighting I just sat there but Silk was not having any of it. Instead she told each person how that culture worked and that's what we did every single day until we made the silk road the first trading system.

I was really proud now knowing that I had changed the world but that's when I realized that I would have to say goodbye to Silk for good.

"Until our next adventure " she said hopefully I nodded and waved as she flew away not looking back but I knew this wouldn't be the last time we saw each other and who knows she might be right here with a smile for peace and wonder.

Where the Bench Waited

Carmel School – Elsa High School, Levi, Noa – 12

This was the place. The same bench from my grandmother's photo, waiting for me. The edges of the photo were torn, as if the picture was ripped in half. She was sitting right in front of where I was standing. The bench was still there. I walked towards it and sat down next to her. I felt as if she were with me there, talking to me. This is the place my grandma found herself, no matter where she was, China, Central Asia, the Middle East and Europe. I knew she would be sharing her Chinese culture through selling silk. The silk was her, her language, her way of sharing where she came from. All these years, I've been wishing I could see the place where the picture of her is sitting. The same photo was in my hand, but I was the one on the bench. The bench felt worn, but strong. It felt as if it were holding all of her stories together. I wasn't really close to her when she was alive. Evenings when she tried to tell me stories about her childhood, I would nod quickly and move on. She gave me the photo, starting to tell me the story behind it, but I wasn't paying enough attention. I should have asked her about the bench, about the silk, about the people she met. I should have listened to her stories and written down her answers. Instead, the photo sat in a drawer, basically forgotten. I could feel her with me on the bench, like she had left me a plan to follow.

I heard people talking near me, but I could not understand what they were saying. It sounded like they were a mix of languages. Their voices got louder, but I still could not recognise what they were saying. A group of travellers were walking by, with people from different places, different cultures, and yet they were all here together. I heard camel bells jingling, many traders shouting prices, and children laughing as they ran around. The Silk Road was not just a road or a path, but also carried stories. I hesitated, I wasn't sure if I should join them, but I looked down at the photo and reminded myself that I had come to learn more about my grandmother. If she had been able to connect with strangers across the Silk Road, then I could too. My grandmother didn't need to speak every language, her silk was enough. The silk itself was her way of sharing her stories. I wasn't close to her when she was alive, and I should've asked her questions and written down her answers. But now, surrounded by unfamiliar sounds and voices. I felt her guiding me in my head, showing me that I could connect with these people even without perfectly understanding. I felt her beside me, showing me where to go even though she wasn't really there. Even though I could not understand their languages, I could still try to understand their cultures and stories.

As I walked with the travellers, I noticed a Chinese lady dressed almost exactly like my grandmother in the photo. She wore the same patterns I had seen on my grandmother's silk fabric. She spoke Mandarin to another traveller, and though I could not understand, the sound felt familiar. Many more people were speaking different languages, but none of them really stood out to me. The caravans that passed us were full of silk and other trade items. I kept watching the lady in silk. She carried a small bundle wrapped in the silk pattern identical to the one my grandmother was holding in the photo, and I wondered if she had any similar stories like my grandmother's did. Walking beside her, I realised I was no longer just following the group. I was also part of it, moving with them, connecting with them. She turned her head slightly, made eye contact and smiled. For a moment, I felt like the road was alive, and my grandmother was alive in my head.

The lady noticed me holding the photo and paused. I showed her the photo of my grandmother, and she leaned in, looking and feeling the torn edge carefully. Then she reached into her bundle and pulled out a photo of her own. I was confused. What was she thinking? Why did she care so much about the torn edge? I looked over at her photo, trying to follow. It was the same bench, dressed in silk, holding their bundles. Her photo's ripped edge fit with mine perfectly, like they were once one whole picture. She spoke to me in Mandarin, and one of the leaders translated: "Our grandmothers were best friends. They sold silk together on this bench. They planned for us to meet here." I held the two halves together, and the photo became whole again. My grandmother and her best friend sat together

side by side, smiling. They had planned for us to meet, they wanted us to follow what they started together. The Silk Road was not just a place for trade, it was full of memories and stories.

A New Tale of China's Silk Road

Carmel School – Elsa High School, Osofsky, Jade – 11

I woke up to the sun shining through my face, greeting me with pleasant warm rays, while I finished sweeping up the leftover hay.

“Mei!” my mother shouted.

“Breakfast is ready!”

I hurried to the table where my breakfast lay.

“I’m not very hungry,” I told my mother

“Why not?” she replied back.

“I’m just not very hungry, that’s all.”

“Well ok. Would you like to go back to the farm?”

“I guess so...”

I hurried out of my seat, kissed my mother goodbye and slowly walked back to the farm.

Everyday I did the same tedious farm work, waiting for some change to happen, when three unknown figures grew closer in my surroundings. My head swept around to see three old men dressed in long silk gowns, each in a different color, with beautiful embroidered details. They were whispering viciously to each other of rumours they had heard, and I couldn't help to eavesdrop.

They were discussing a mysterious teleportation machine that could send you to the future or the past, or anywhere you could ever think about. I spent the rest of the day thinking about how I could sneak away and find that machine. I could pretend to be one of the silk traders, riding camels and hiding in plain sight. The thought of that idea made me laugh. If I could just make it to that machine, I could change everything!

That evening my mind raced with thoughts. I couldn't help but wonder – What if I succeeded? I would make history. I sat up with my head full of plans and thoughts. I couldn't take it anymore, I had to put my plan into action.

When night had come I gathered my belongings, carefully packing a small bag with all the essentials I would need on my journey. I made sure I wrapped my scarf over my head and put on a worn out travelling cloak to blend in with all the silk traders. I softly kissed my mother on the cheek. But I set off for my adventure feeling both excited and nervous.

As day turned to night, I crept out of the house, and made my way to where the silk traders gathered, their voices mixed with the camels' low grunting in the cool night air. The divine aroma of spices and other goods filled my nose, an exotic reminder of what was being traveled.

There it was, the majestic teleportation machine, the powerful blue light dreamily catching my eyes before I remembered what had to be done. Anxiously, I approached a sturdy looking camel tied to a nearby post, its large, calming eyes studying me while I approached it. With a deep breath, I climbed onto the camel's back, gripping its rough dry skin for balance. I felt its bumpy body adjusting beneath me, while I finally settled onto it. I felt a rush of excitement flowing through my body, before I set off for the greatest adventure of my life.

As we began to move, I felt the earth below me move before my eyes, while the refreshing night air brushed against my face. I urged my camel to move closer to the teleportation machine, but it strongly refused my pleading. I then jumped off and ran in the direction of the machine, before the leader of all the silk traders stopped me in my tracks.

“Where do you think you’re going?” he questioned me in a dark, grimy voice.

“I – I was on guard duty tonight,” I stuttered back.

“No you aren’t, I already assigned someone.” he responded in the same deep voice.

“No, I swear that person was me,” I lied.

“Oh, in that case, what do you think you are doing here?”

I was about to argue, but I remembered my role as an obedient silk trader and walked over to the machine immediately.

I was determined to guard the teleportation machine until midnight had struck. As hours passed and daylight, laughter, and chatter faded away. It felt like I stood there waiting for days, when eventually everyone had fallen asleep. I scanned the area twice before I finally opened the glowing door of the mystical and one and only teleportation machine!

Taking a deep breath, I entered the teleportation machine. I felt like I was entering a spaceship or a UFO at most. The interior was surprisingly spacious, with plenty of multi – color buttons, unknown control levers and screens at every wall. I couldn’t help but grin at the thought of what history I could change.

I hesitated for just a moment as I examined the array of buttons, they all glowed enticingly each promising a different adventure, but one caught my eye. A bright red button in the middle, larger than the rest, shimmering with a charming light. This had to be the one.

I pressed it with a strong confidence, and the machine glittered to life in a brilliant glow. Lights sparkled and danced around me, while the world began to swirl and fade into the distance. I felt a strange sensational pull through thousands of years, when I found myself in a whole new world.

I was confused like I had been hypnotized. I looked around and realized I was on solid ground midday, no longer in the quiet of the night, but in a crowded, futuristic place. I didn’t believe this is what the farmland and deserts turned into. I blinked in disbelief as I took in my surroundings. Sphere shaped flying pods travelling people at 80 mph and high – tech metal creatures that represented the same animals I cared for everyday. Everything seemed so different and strange.

I turned to my left and then I saw what used to be the Silk Road. It was the exact hill I teleported from the night before. There were no more camels or silk traders roaming the area, but a long, rapid line with sets of seats that zoomed right past.

I looked around in awe. This was the future, 2076! I spun around a few times to embrace the new world I was standing in. As I walked around, I felt like I was floating on air overwhelmed by the sights and sounds of this new world. Every turn I made held something brand new, but extraordinary.

I stared at my reflection in a puddle of water nearby, when something made my heart sink, it was like something was missing. I paused, and turned around, then it hit me. Where had the teleportation machine gone? I spun in every direction, my heart sinking deeper with every turn I took.

Had I truly been left behind? The thought of being stranded in this odd new world without a way back home made me go numb. Memories of home flickered in my mind, my peaceful farm life, the faces of my family, and the warm comfort of my bed suddenly felt distant like a fading photograph.

Determined to find a way back home, I took a deep breath, attempting to steady my racing heart. I couldn't let my fear take over me, there had to be answers somewhere in this bizarre new world. With a renewed sense of hope, I turned back toward the most historical looking building hoping it would offer the clues I needed to figure my way home.

As I approached the structure, I noticed futuristic displays outside, showcasing phenomenal inventions like more of the same high – tech metal creatures that could do anything and a screen that could answer any question at your request. I knew each of these creations must have a name, but I couldn't even imagine what they were called.

Stepping inside, I was greeted by a sign that said 'The Museum of History' and the sound of excited voices. The lobby was filled with tons of people, all eager to explore what the place had to offer. I wandered past exhibits featuring incredible gadgets that all had a futuristic touch to them. But one exhibition caught my eye: 'Time Travelers Through the Years'. This had to be it! I walked inside to find a crowded exhibit where a door lay shut. On it read 'DANGER'. I didn't understand what it meant, so I opened the door to find the same eye – catching, magical blue light, and the teleportation machine that brought me here. I let out a sigh of relief and the knot in my stomach untied itself while I climbed into the machine, and the same sensational pull took me back through thousands of years.

There I lay on my bed, my mind filled with everything that just happened. I stared at the beautiful view outside, appreciating the old world I live in now. I realised that it doesn't matter where or when I live, but to live in the moment, and make the best out of it.

New Tales of China's Silk Road: I am the Silk Road

Chinese International School, Han, 韓知雨 Chloe – 12

I am the merchant of the Silk Road. The camel sways in rhythm, its steps sure and steady, treading determinedly towards our next destination. The piles of goods and trade secured on the camel's back will always reach their fated goal. I vow it. My entire family is successful merchants, and I will pass on this legacy. We are strong enough to endure the terrors of the Silk Road. To bring wealth back to our family and country. My goods will go far beyond what my eyes can see. It will, as it always has, and I shall return home with new riches. I will, and I always have.

But...what is that deafening sound? Rolling, furious swirls of sand surged over the dunes towards me, roaring in their own wild melody. Perhaps my goods will make it across, but I accept that it may never be today...

I am the Sun. I burn. I blister. I scorch everything in my path. I bake the sand into a scalding pan of fire. I watch as all shrubbery and growth that wormed out of the trickles of sand succumb and shrivel under the rampage of my power. Even sand skips and bounces in agitation, popping under the pressure of heat and the dry desert air. Sometimes I offer mercy and provide solace to those who are frozen through the cold nights. But I always come back with the same shades of blinding white, blazing fiery rays in fury at the scathing, searing sand.

I am the Sand. I provide sanctuary, and I also flay them alive. I run out endlessly in shifting, swirling formations of glittering sand, stretching into an endless sea. The infinite in-between. The day weathers on with the Sun's unwavering wrath beating down upon me, sucking the moisture out of bone-dry creatures and bleaching them into shimmering, iridescent white bones, and I lay peace to them with layers and blankets of sifting, soft sand. The night trudges through with the promise of glacial cold and numbing silence. The twinkling stars wink from above, illuminating the backdrop of time ticking into the next sunrise, where those who braved the night will arise and defrost, only to burn up and go through the process again.

I am the Oasis. I am the only means of peace in the hellhole of a desert. It is a simple rule: Without water, there is no life. Every living being will cease to exist if I disappear. I sit, cool, calm, and collected, sun reflecting on my surface and casting rays of glaring light out to the arid desert. Always, the sun will try to suck me dry. Always, the sun will try to make me evaporate and disappear into the humid, hot air of the desert. But I never will. I have witnessed the death of many, but I am also the saviour of those, too. Those who don't have the energy to crawl forward another step collapse mere inches from the crystal-clear depths that I provide. The stronger ones, they survive. They obtain their treasure, me, and guzzle it down their throats. They swallow hastily, finally boosted with the sweet, cool, glassy water that they yearned for so long. I am the key to survival.

I am the Fauna. The Desert's pulse. Emerging from the depths of the cool sand where I buried myself. Staggering awake to the blinding rays of the Sun. I am disoriented for a moment. The line between space and sand blurs under the heat, and I decide I must stand for another day. My mouth is a canyon of drought, my tongue a piece of dry leather, and my throat a parched piece of land. I chase the shimmering ghosts of water. Wavering mirages of water taunt me, and sharp tingling erupts in my mouth at the mere thought of cool, sparkling water. I see it in the distance. Over the sun-baked dunes of glinting sand, I see a sliver of glimmering water. I stagger towards it, joy and elation clouding my vision. I... am almost there. My ears ring, and I wobble, collapsing to the ground in a heap. It burns me, the sand. But I slowly inch forward at the guarantee of water in the distance... nearer... nearer. To the crystal clear water to save me, to save me.

I am the Flora. The splotches of green in this dry, barren land. The stretch of forest, just out of the desert's claws. I am the trees, the plantation, my gnarled branches reaching up for the sky and the sunlight, my roots burrowing deep in need of moisture and nutrients. I have stayed standing through eons of sand battering at my trunk, at winds pelting

me with small, sharp rocks, and at storms graciously pouring water into my roots. I absorb, I drink, I survive. I am a survivor. The azure blue sky is deceptively innocent, formidably clear. Oh, the millions of days I spent, my desolate silhouette standing while all my comrades fell. The sun breaks me, then dresses me up in beautiful shades of orange and yellow, dappling my leaves with a golden coat, and wrapping my trunk with burning pieces of blinding white. But I will keep on standing through another gruelling day by my sheer willpower, if needed. I will stay here stubbornly through pure determination and will never fall.

I am a scientist on the ancient Silk Road. It's remarkable how so many years haven't changed the views that the merchants who used to walk these grounds were able to see. I glance down at the AI tablet report in my hands. But then again, what merchant, fighting for survival in such harsh conditions, would stop and look at views? They weren't in an air-conditioned tank, purely observing. They had a destination to achieve, and I had a Silk Road to examine. Such pure sand! And the Sun! Such high intensity of light. I wonder how the merchants of old made it to the gates.

Wait. Whatever is that beaming light in the distance? I control my monstrosity of a tank towards it and hop off. My eyes widen in exhilaration, and my mouth spreads into a wild smile. This is a one-of-a-kind discovery! Ivory-pale bones of a camel carcass and its master curled up beside it, and a heap of goods next to them. I felt a pang of remorse and sadness for the perished trader, but my eyes were set on the goods that were transported. I wriggled the bag of goods out with tremendous care and sighed happily at it. This will be of most importance to the research of the Silk Road. I just discovered a treasure!

My tank trekked forward steadily, and I reached the ruins of a gate that once stood on the Silk Road. I hopped off the tank, the treasure that I uncovered safely in a box that I took out with me. The once-mighty gate and trading city of the Silk Road now hangs in ruins. The caravans and inns that used to house the residents now stand upon pillars of rickety wood, rotting away in the harsh conditions of the desert. Tapestries are riddled with holes and scavenged away by other critters long ago, and my eyebrows pull together at the thought of the sheer beauty of what used to be.

Something in the coins and goods of the old merchant slipped and fell, clinking and jingling in the slight wind. The sound of jingling bells clung to the heavy, musty silence of the ruins. Something chiming, echoing, ancient, light. Something that resonates in answer to the dark, broken ruins of an old place of magnificence.

The other gates have been like this, a ruin, crumbling to disrepair... I get lost in thought, and the goods slip from my hand and clunk onto the floor, covered with grime but shining with recognition and a sense of belonging. My eyebrows raised, but I let the bag of goods be. It must have seen the days, been there, when the skeleton of market stalls and ruins of buildings was teeming with life, streets buzzing with those hollering and yelling for attention from customers and buyers. You must have seen the sights of the city and the gate; heard the clink of coin, the heartbeat; felt the flow of merchants, the lifeblood; inhaled the aroma of imported, exotic spices, the taste; felt the cool smoothness of gemstones and jewels from far-off mines. The goods must have witnessed most of what the Silk Road could offer, a survivor, till this day. It will see another sunrise in the Silk Road. It reached its final destination.

Everything is finally where it is fated to be.

My vow is fulfilled.

Before it was a Museum

Chinese International School, Ho, 何藹嵐 Allie – 13

The air of the Tang West Market Museum was undisturbed, rank with dust. Brian, a University student stuck on a school trip, lingered at the back of the crowd of students, bleary eyes, sweeping over the ceramic statues and vases. Everything seemed dull. To him, the past was only a pile of broken artifacts, unrelated to the present. His professor droned on about “artifacts” and “cultural exchange”, his words a distant buzz as Brian zoned out. Leaning on a display case, his fingers drummed the glass, breath fogging the glass case of pottery shards.

He put his headphones on and a high-pitched sound filled his ears. He ripped them off, but the note rang on. The ground rumbled. Dizzy, he reached out. A jolt, like slithering lightning, crawled up his arm.

Then, the present fractured like old varnish.

Before he could react, a dense wall of sound slammed into him. A dozen languages in a clamour, pungent smells of spices and the rumble of wooden carts filled his senses. The cool air-conditioned chill of the sterile museum was replaced with a moist, humid blanket of warmth that clung to his skin.

Brian’s knee hit the hard earth with a thump. He scrambled up, finding the polished floor gone, replaced by packed dirt. Hundreds of people teemed the streets, a river of feet, footsteps, a symphony of thunder. Scrambling up, his gaze fell upon his surroundings. A bustling street crammed with vendors and wagons. A cloudless blue sky had replaced the museum roof. The air was filled with pungent smells of sizzling lamb, spices and ripe fruit.

“Get out of the way, peasant,” a man barked, shoving past with a heavy sack bursting with silk. Dust kicked up from the road and tickled Brian’s throat.

The stream of people flowed endlessly around him. Rushing past, people cast curious glances at him, inspecting his outfit, but other than swift glances, dismissing him as just another foreign merchant.

He turned and glanced at a middle-aged woman seated behind a wooden table with sparkling jewels laid out. Dressed in patterned scarves that Brian had never seen before.

He muttered, hands fidgeting by his side, “Miss, do you know the way to the Tang West Market Museum?”

Puzzled, the woman looked at him, “What do you mean a 'Museum'? There is no such thing. Here is the West Market in Chang'an, of the Tang Dynasty. If you’re lost, boy, I suggest you go to the Inn.”

Fingers twitching, he reached out to feel around him; this was no hologram. The sheer overwhelming reality hit him all at once. This was the authentic West Market, the international trading centre for the Silk Road that connected the East and the West.

A tap on the shoulder. He spun around to see a male merchant with wide globe-like eyes staring back at him, barely an inch from his face.

“Young man, how much for that quire outfit and magnificent eye accessory on your face. I’ve never seen such exquisite clothes in my life. Name your price.” The man fumbled for coins from his sack.

Brian blinked and put on a smile. If he were to survive here, he'd have to play the act, "These are the finest works from Southern China, made with special material. I'll take the entire sack," he announced haughtily, attracting more customers as they yelled prices for his clothes. Soon, he traded his sneakers and jacket, except for his glasses. Brian had severe myopia, with a prescription of -10.0. He couldn't live without them.

With a handful of coins clinking in his hand, he walked to the Inn and ordered a room for the night. The coins covered the payment just enough.

He settled at a nearby restaurant to rest when a commotion across the room drew his attention. A group of men, faces flushed red with wine and laughter, stumbled across the tables. Throwing compliments at the female dancers who are whirling endlessly.

He watched, fascinated by the captivating scene. One man who particularly caught his eye stood up with a porcelain wine vessel in his hand. A wide smile spread across his drunken face as he pointed at Brian.

"Young man, you, with the weird haircut. Join us," the man beckoned him over in a booming voice.

He approached warily and sat down beside the group of drunken people. A flower-patterned cup was stuffed in his hand and was immediately filled to the brim with wine. The cup was a detailed, intricate carving of whorls of flowers. The wine swished gently in his cup as he drank. It tasted like red wine, the one his father introduced him to a month ago. He didn't know that there was red wine in Ancient China.

The man threw an arm around him, "The finest putaojiu (grape wine) from the West."

As the night wore on, the dancers' silk became a blur of colour as they whirled around. Brian found these wondrous tales of travelling across the dune and avoiding arrest much more vibrant than the dull stories his professor droned on about.

As Brian got drunk, he raised his glass to the luminous moon. A gush of homesickness filled him.

"The moon's lovely tonight. Everyone has someone here except me. I miss home," Li raised his head. "Stop, I have to capture this beautiful scene for my poem," he mumbled to himself. "I lift my head and see the glowing moon, head sinking, I think of home."

One of the dancers giggled, "Master Li Bai will probably be one of the greatest poets in history. His poems are marvellous."

Petrified, Brian realized, no doubt standing before him was the "Poet Immortal" – Li Bai. He quickly fumbled to get a paper, a pen, anything for a precious autograph that would be worth millions in the present. But before he could ask, the burly restaurant owner stood in front of him and asked for the bill.

Brian stuck his hand in his pocket, but it was empty. He had spent all his coins in the Inn. The restaurant owner's friendly smile vanished, replaced with a scowl. Brian acted on instinct and bolted towards the door, running through the narrow alleyways.

After what felt like an eternity, he reached a dead end, trapped with three brick walls. A slender hand pulled him up from the roof, escaping the crowd below. Presumably, he was a monk, with a simple white cloak, a wooden staff and eyes that screamed wisdom.

“Amitabha. They will not circle back here,” the monk blinked stoically.

Brian panted, taking a moment to catch his breath, “Thank you. I got into a little trouble over there.”

The monk blinked and tipped his head, “Your accent is strange and you don’t seem to belong here. Are you from foreign lands? Samarkand? Persia? Perhaps beyond?”

Struggling to pick an answer the monk would understand, Brian decided on telling him a half-truth, “Yes, a Southern land named Hong Kong.” The monk’s eyes lit up, “Then you must have journeyed far. I am Xuanzang. I’ve been hesitant about whether to travel to the West in search of the sacred sutra.” A shadow crossed his face, “But I’ve heard from many that the road is treacherous. For many have vanished on the way. Have you seen any Monsters? Ghosts? Flesh-eating beasts?”

Brian stared as the name rang in his head. Xuanzang – The Tang Monk. The name belonged to the Myth, “The Journey to the West”.

Brimming with excitement, he circled Xuanzang, “Where’s the Monkey King, where’s Pigsy?”

Brian was met with utter bewilderment. Xuanzang raised his head, “I’m travelling alone on my donkey. But pray tell me, young one, should I turn back on my path before it’s too late?”

With no hesitation, Brian gripped the monk’s shoulders fiercely, “Do not turn back, your journey will succeed in 17 years. I believe in you.”

Xuanzang blinked and smiled, determination growing. He thanked Brian, saddled his donkey and headed off to the West. Brian felt stunned. Just as he took one step down from the stairs to leave, he heard footsteps and shouts. The crowd had found him and this time, they were armed to the teeth. Brian raced through the alleyways to escape the crowd, but they were too fast. With a yell, he fell forward.

A finger snapped, “Brian, Brian,” the professor’s face appeared in front of him. He sat up and found the entire class laughing at him. Embarrassed, he lowered his head and followed the professor, trying to ignore his vivid dream.

That night, as Brian lay in bed, his mind replayed the enchanting dream he’d had at the museum. Wandering on the ancient market, drinking wine with Li Bai and encountering the Tang Monk, it seemed like a dream that was too real.

“Ding.” Brian’s phone popped up with the latest news update.

“Tang dynasty fresco uncovers a citizen in spectacles centuries before time.”

New Tales of China's Silk Road

Chinese International School, Huang, 黄逸琳 Alison – 11

She got up, stepped outside, letting the morning sun bathe over her body. She could feel the energy coursing through her, excitement flooding her brain. It was finally her time to learn the art of trade. Her father promised he would take her this time, after years of begging, he promised he would, and Yi Xin believed him. She sprinted out, jumping into her father's arms.

"Father! Thank you, thank you, thank you!" she squealed, full of excitement. Her father only looked awkward, Yi Xin noticed.

"Father...? Is everything ok?"

Her father awkwardly smiled and stuttered out, "Yi Xin, maybe...we could rethink it? I me—mean the Silk Road could be dangerous for a, a girl," her face fell, the excitement replaced by betrayal.

"Father...you've promised this trip for...for years," Yi Xin's bottom lip started quivering and tears flowed out of her eyes, "Father! FATHER! HOW COULD YOU! You pinky promised, you promised!" She was sobbing now and ran inside. Father just stood there, a tired look on his face. Yi Xin lay on her bed, thinking long, then suddenly it struck her. She gave herself a composed face and walked outside.

"Father...", she choked out the next few words, they tasted bitter on her tongue, "Father, I forgive you and understand, you were just trying to protect me", her father blinked, surprised at this sudden change.

"Uhm, thank you, Yi Xin, I...I knew you would understand,"

"Well, ok, Father, I'll...just go help Mother!" She scurried back to her room and packed a small bag consisting of clothes and other essentials besides food. She snuck out the back door and started to look for a small cart. She couldn't find one and when she thought all hope was lost, she found one just big enough to fit her small frame. She carefully jumped in, then tried to get comfortable in this small space but she barely managed to even fit. She could hear some movement outside the cart. They got closer and closer...then they stopped right in front of her cart. She held her breath. A muffled voice called out, then the footsteps left. She sighed in relief.

She felt the cart get strapped to a horse. So now she knew it was too late; she couldn't leave even if she wanted to. The cart started moving, the roads were bumpier than she expected. She got jostled around and prayed no one could hear her. She fell asleep to the 'skrisk skrisk' of the carts. Heavy breathing filling the cart.

She jolted awake as the cart lurched to a stop. Loud voices sounded outside. Then a crash. She held in a scream.

Then chaos.

The cart jerked.

Then everything went silent.

She lay in silence for a minute, then took the risk and opened the cart a little just to peek out. It was dark out. She saw that they were in a roadside inn. Her father stood outside the cart, a disappointed look on his face.

“Zi yin,” he said, his face etched with discontent, “I am...” he trailed off, searching for the right words, “I am VERY disappointed with your actions.” Yi Xin stepped out, “I’m sorry, Father, I really am, I just wanted to see the Silk Road!” Her father just sighed, “Well, I can’t take you back, I suppose you must stay with me now.” “Really?” Yi Xin squealed, “Thank you, Father! Thank you!”

“But you must promise, not more secrets”, Yi Xin nodded, then remembered the noises outside.

“Father, what were those noises outside?” Her father cackled, “Oh, Yi xin that was only to make you come out”. She gave him a glare that slowly melted into a smile. Her father wrapped his arm around her shoulders and guided her to the eating area, “Here, sit, and eat some food.” She obediently grabbed a few kebabs, scarfing down the meal like she hadn’t eaten in days.

“Whoa, slow down there!” her father said smiling, “Don’t want to get any stomach problems before we finish the trip!” Yi Xin smiled and nodded, taking smaller bites. In a few more minutes, Yi Xin finished about 3 kebabs.

“Are you done yet, Father?” Yi Xin whined, “I’m hungry!” Her father sighs, “Fine, let’s go.” They walked towards their cots. Within seconds of lying down, her father was out cold, but Yi Xin was still restless. She couldn’t sleep thinking about the adventures she would have tomorrow. Riding camels, feeding the horse, making trades...the list could go on and on. Eventually, her breathing slowed and she fell asleep. She woke that morning to her father over the face with a “quiet!” gesture over his lips. He crept out of bed towards his prized bow, the one with arrows so sharp it could pass through a human cleanly. He raised the bow and called out, “Show yourself, thieves!” Someone stepped out holding a knife, Yi Xin screamed. Father aimed and shot him in the leg, his buddies came out screaming.

“Return everything you stole or I will shoot again!” A thief emptied his bag, “There, are you happy?” His voice sounded extremely young. All the thieves emptied their bags and such and dragged their friend out who was still writhing on the ground. Her father turned to Yi Xin and asked, “Are you ok?” Yi Xin nodded. Father told her to get ready, to continue the trip.

“What?! Right now?” Yi Xin asked in disbelief. “Yup, gotta start early!” Her father replied cheerfully. Yi Xin sighed, but got on with it. After that, Father dragged her out and sat her on a camel.

“I will ride with you but be careful,” he warned.

“Yes, yes, I know Father, I know how to ride a camel!”

Her father sighed, “I know, I know, just..stay safe.”

“Fine.” They started the trip and Yi Xin, yet again fell asleep. A carousel of loud voices awoke her. She was very aware of the pain in the legs, she had loads of blisters on the inside of her thighs from rubbing against the saddle, but she ignored it all because she was focused on the loud voices and bright colors. It was beautiful. Trades happening all around them, fine fabrics being exchanged. Tangy spices being tasted. They had finally arrived in the big city of Kashgar.

New Tales of China's Silk Road: Kidnapped on the Silk Road

Chinese International School, Lee, 李嘉亨 Jayden – 12

“Yet another kidnapping!” A faint voice was emitted from the car radio in the background, amplifying as Rob frantically jabbed the button, “There is a proliferation of crimes on the new Silk Road – that’s our fifth report this week!”

In blissful ignorance of the radio’s warning, the three brothers decided to focus on their own reality – admiring the breathtaking view as they neared their campsite. Dark oak trees towered around them, the moonlight streaming through the knitted branches, casting a kaleidoscope of silver and shadow on the forest floor. All around, despite it being early before sunrise, the woods were already alive with the buzzing of insects.

Abruptly, the car came to an immediate halt. Rob stepped out of the car. There was no one and nothing in sight. Rob strode into the woods to see if anyone could help, with John and Jeremy quickly trailing behind, discussing how excited they were for the road trip.

However, sudden yelps cut the air as three men clad in black coats brusquely shoved Rob, before swiftly snatching both Jeremy and John away.

Rob, alone and horrified, instantly recuperated himself. But the thieves held him down firmly. Knocking him down unconscious before he left, Rob scoured the dirt on the ground, praying to find any traces of where they had gone. As he was just about to give up all hope, he stumbled upon a map that had probably fallen out of one of the kidnapper’s pockets, titled ‘The Old Silk Road’. Rob, bewildered, glanced around his surroundings – was he in the Silk Road? Indeed, the more he wandered around, the more his surroundings started to magically morph into the ones painted by the map he held in his two hands. Yet, a slight problem was that in his present surroundings, the merchant stalls and bustling cities which dotted the map were nothing but ashes, the signs of any merchants were as good as none, and the massive shops were all gone. All he could see was a barren wasteland stretching thousands of meters out into the horizon. Rob peered more closely, as he spotted a small, red ‘x’ on the map. The only hunch he had was that this might be where Jeremy and John were kidnapped. Without a second of hesitation, he sprinted off into the distance, determined to get there.

After a long and gruelling trek and getting lost countless times, Rob arrived at what he assumed was present-day Constantinople. The journey had left him fatigued, so he was determined to find some food. As he strolled along the cobbled streets, he scanned the delicacies on display at every food stall. As the sun started rising, people from around the world started setting up their food stalls to attract wandering tourists. The foods ranged from the savory and warm perfection of the Chinese burger ‘rou jia nuo’, to the crisp sweetness of the fruits. He could not help but drool in admiration. Reaching into his pockets, he pulled out a few crumpled bills that he had stolen from his mom to go on this road trip. Butterflies of excitement filled his previously weary stomach as he handed the bills to the shopkeeper, pointing eagerly at a juicy watermelon on display. However, this was met with the shopkeeper’s stare of confusion. She replied to Rob, in a monotone voice, that watermelons were 40RMB. Rob jumped up in shock – this was an exorbitant price for simply one watermelon. Hoping that other stalls had better prices, he refused that shopkeeper’s offer and opted to continue strolling around. After a while, a cold, heavy stone of dread settled in the pit of his empty stomach as he realized that all stalls charged similar or even higher prices – reflective of the outrageously high pricing strategies at tourist destinations. After persistently trying to beg for food from shopkeepers, he came to no avail. If he wanted to retrieve food, he would need to steal.

Rob used a metal tool he found to distract the shopkeeper while he gathered as much food and useful tools as he could in his arms. In a heartbeat, a sheer cry of alarm pierced the air, snapping the other merchants’ heads to

attention. Rob bolted for the door in the flash of lightning; however, he unluckily got his ankle caught up by a lasso thrown by the shopkeeper. As he tried his best to wiggle his way out of the rope, the shopkeeper inched closer and closer. As luck would have it, Rob managed to pull the rope out of the merchant's hands just before the shopkeeper got to him. He bolted for the city gates, his heart pumping with every step he took, his breathing accelerating, his mind replaying what just happened in a frantic loop. As he finally widened the distance, he felt a wave of relief rushing over him when it finally hit him that he had successfully escaped...

Suddenly, three thieves that the shopkeeper had presumably hired had snapped out of thin air, cornering Rob into a pit that they had dug up on the side of the road. Rob was on his knees, pleading to let him leave this miserable pit. At this moment, a luminous lightbulb lit up in his brain, as he thought of a brilliant plan to escape this pit of doom.

Unleashing his hidden talent, Rob started showcasing his humorous choreographies to keep the thieves entertained. Simultaneously, he removed the lasso from his ankle using slight movements to ensure the thieves wouldn't notice. While they were cackling and rolling on the floor in sheer joy, Rob created a lasso using the rope and tossed it around a nearby rock. When the rope was tightened, he sprinted and climbed out of the pit masterfully. The unknowing thieves continued to laugh, unaware that Rob had already tiptoed behind them. Unhesitatingly, Rob pushed the thieves into the hole. A chorus of startled yelps erupted as they tumbled into the darkness and landed at the very bottom with three consecutive thuds. Scouring through the trolley filled with the items he had stolen, he found the scissors wedged firmly under two fruits, and he cut the rope just in the nick of time. Once again, he had narrowly escaped death.

Soon after returning to his quest to relocate his brothers, he reached the final destination – present-day Samarkand. However, as Rob reached for his treasure map which he was sure he had placed deep in his pocket. It was gone. His eyes scanned the horizon panickedly, catching a slight glimpse of a distant figure gradually disappearing as he darted away.

Rob tilted his head in confusion, “I definitely recognise that clothing! I just can't remember where...”

The puzzle pieces finally fit together in his head, “That might be one of the kidnappers who kidnapped John and Jeremy!”

After a long search, Rob exclaimed in glee, “I might have found a trace!” He followed the dents on the sand in the shape of footsteps, ready to catch the culprit. As the shoe marks came to a stop, he noticed the kidnapper right in front of him.

When the unsuspecting kidnapper's back was turned, Rob grasped this opportunity and grabbed at the treasure map, successfully snatching it. By the time the kidnapper reacted, Rob had already vanished. Rob bolted in the direction of the 'x' mark. As he approached it, he could make out silhouettes of two people tied to a pole stuck in the gravel – they were his brothers! Rob garnered all of his might to untie and tug at the ropes binding the brothers to the pole. Yet after countless efforts, the rope would not budge. Suddenly, in the distance, he noticed the kidnapper stomping his feet so loudly that the entire China could feel the ground rumbling. Desperately, Rob used his last bit of strength and managed to untie the rope and free both brothers. As they glanced back, they realized that if they wanted any chance of getting back home, they needed to run fast. An hour later, they could finally make out a van in the distance.

“We're back!” John shrieked in pure joy. The three brothers raced each other to the van as Jeremy closed the door. As they settled down into the van. Rob took a quick glance, and sped away, desperate to vamoose the Silk Road behind and return home.

As months passed, the three brothers couldn't shake their conceptions about the Silk Road. Eventually, their curiosity got the better of them, as they decided to return. Upon stepping out of the car, they were dumbfounded by the metamorphosis of the landscape. Flourishing markets and globetrotters thronged the place, and the air was filled with the mouth-watering aroma of scrumptious dishes with economical prices. As they ventured forward, they made their way to the very location where their past ordeal had unfolded. However, it was completely absent. The stark contrast between their haunting memories of the past and the lively present were utterly jarring.

The Last Travelers of The Silk Road

Diocesan Boys' School, Law, Tsz Lok – 13

The year is 1453 AD. China's Silk Road was once a vast network of trading routes, connecting the East and the West and allowing different cultures and religions to intertwine with each other. It was a titan of the past economic world. Until, it wasn't. By that time, the Silk Road was a shadow of its former self. The path became dangerous. Diseases like the Black Death spread throughout, causing the demise of many traders who walked along it; and with many nations now having access to gunpowder, nomadic thieves would pillage and attack. But despite all these dangers, one group of men were still brave enough to embark on this treacherous journey. This group of men were the Last Travelers of The Silk Road.

Yamal was a successful merchant in Egypt. At the time, Egypt was suffering from a major famine, and he and his family were starving. The pharaoh could not bear to see his land crumble before him. He pleaded to the gods, but they never gave a sign. Frustrated and helpless, he called in all of the successful merchants in Egypt and gave them an unfathomable task. They must trek through the Silk Road, travel towards China and trade their goods for rice and grains. They would be recognized as heroes, and would be promoted to a rank equal to that of the pharaoh. Some of the merchants, knowing what had become of the once grand Silk Road, immediately refused.

But Yamal knew that someone had to embark on this journey, and if no one else was willing to, he would be the one. After witnessing his patriotism, several merchants also decided to accompany him on this journey, even if they lost their lives. Yamal the Patriot, Eabathan the Stubborn, Kathir the Resourceful, Rieaya the Defender, Alsafa the Mediator and Busla the Navigator. As they arrived at the kingdom's outer gates, they looked back at the city they were fighting for, and solemnly vowed to save Egypt.

Week 1 of The Journey

So far, everything seems to be going well for the merchants. No threats have appeared, and they start to get to know each other little by little, all except Yamal. Before anyone questions him, he grabs a piece of papyrus from his satchel and writes on it, telling the group that he has taken a vow of silence and would only speak once the journey was over. The group respects this, but thinks the journey will become much more difficult with a silent leader. One time, the group had to do a quick emergency stop to refill water as they were lucky enough to come across a well containing water.

"Ah, look, a well. Seems like good fortune is upon us today." Kathir said elatedly, rushing to grab the buckets off the camels.

"Praise Ra! For he has blessed us with this well, though I will get rocks and pine needles to filter the water, who knows how long it's been there for?" Rieaya responded, but chose to act more cautiously. "Though your ways of thinking are correct, don't you think you're being too paranoid?" Eabathan replied, unsure whether to agree with him or not.

The group turns to Yamal for answers, who upon realizing this begins to write down his thoughts on the matter. They wait a while in silence, before becoming frustrated.

"Can you pass me the buckets?" Alsafa interrupted before everything got out of hand. "Here." Busla replied, passing the bucket to the other members as they formed a line. Yamal, seeing this, also goes and helps out the team. He feels grateful to Alsafa for intervening. Maybe the journey won't be so hard after all?

Week 5 of The Journey

It is the fifth week of their journey, and it is starting to take a toll. Their food supply was running low, and the flaws of the Silk Road began to show themselves: debris encumbering pathways, ruins of towns that lay along the Road, decaying bodies shrouding the road with the stench of death. Just when the group thought the chaos died down...

"HALT!" He sternly warned. "I see a group of people up ahead, it's best to stop moving and ready our weapons just in case."

"No. Let us continue forward. They could be travelers like us, too. We could trade with them for some food and water." Eabathan replied optimistically.

"Eabathan's right, grab the resources." Kathir agreed, caring about the resources more than his own safety.

"I wish that were true, but look closer. They're holding a long object... What if it's a spear?"

"Overthinking much? Just continue moving a bit closer to get a better look." Alsafa jumped in, hoping to ease the tension.

"NO!" Rieaya yelled back. "If they were bandits, we would die out here!"

"Oh really?" Eabathan challenged. "Well then, if they were merchants like us, we could actually survive longer and not die of starvation! Think reasonably, you nitwit."

Alsafa, sensing the tension in the air increasing rapidly, tried to play his lyre to calm everyone down. However, the extra noise seemed to make the argument even more heated.

"Oh, I'M the nitwit? I'll kill you before those people do!" Rieaya exclaimed, ready to attack Eabathan.

Yamal, seeing the argument about to escalate into a bloody duel, had to think quickly. If he didn't, it'd be the end of one of the group's members, or even all of them. And just as Rieaya prepared to plunge his spear into Eabathan, he knew what to do.

Without saying a word, he quickly pushed Eabathan away from Rieaya's spearhead, leading to Rieaya plunge straight into the ground.

"WHAT ARE YOU DOING?" Rieaya exclaimed in fury. Just then, he wondered what he himself was doing. In the process of trying to protect others; he ended up harming others instead. Then he picked up his spear, and walked back without saying a word, silently contemplating his actions.

"No time for all your shenanigans you lot, the people up ahead are approaching closer to us. Luckily, they're merchants just like us. We might be able to get some food or water from them." Busla explained. Just as they hoped, the merchants were quite hospitable and let the group rest with them for the night. Now, feeling refreshed, the group continue their long journey across the Silk Road, with a newfound sense of trust and admiration towards Yamal, as he prevented a conflict from escalating without saying a word.

Week 7 of The Journey

7 weeks have already gone by, and things seem to get a little more stable.

"Look, Rieaya. There are more people up ahead." Eabathan explained.

"How about this, you grab some of our valuables in case they are travelers. I shall hold out my shield and spear and stand guard behind the camels."

Rieaya asked Eabathan, compromising and giving the situation its best outcome. Unfortunately, it seemed that the people ahead of them weren't so friendly.

"EVERYONE, DUCK!" Busla shouts at the group, as Rieaya slowly begins to charge towards the enemies.

Suddenly, the members on the camels looked among themselves, and saw that there were only 4 of them on, when there should've been 5. "One of us is missing. Who is it?" Eabathan asked the group, panicking. The group turns in horror, to find Alsafa pinned to the ground by an arrow, piercing and nailing him onto the hard, rocky ground now turned into a pool of crimson. The group tries to pull him out, but the jagged steel tip pinned his body down like a picture on a pinboard. "They're calling reinforcements. FLEE, NOW!" Busla hurriedly commands the camel to run as Rieaya jumps on, the group never looking back. All besides Yamal, who outstretched his palm to Alsafa's diminishing corpse.

Week 19 of The Journey

After 19 long weeks, several conflicts, and the loss of a fellow merchant, China was clearly visible up ahead, and the group let out a sigh of relief. Though the group was exhausted, they all unanimously agreed to continue to march forward, as a tribute to their fallen member. As they approached the emperor's palace, they took out their best valuables and handed them to the emperor. Seeing their act of generosity and their exhaustion, the emperor agreed to their request and gave them full bags of rice and grains. In addition, he also had a large banquet prepared for the merchants, and ordered horse-drawn carriages for them so they could return to their homeland triumphantly. Yamal,

speaking for the first time in months, said 'We did it, Egypt is saved.' The group, initially shocked, burst into celebration. Egypt began to prosper once more, and statues were erected in honor of the 6 merchants, as they were the saviors of Egypt and the Last Travelers of the Silk Road.

Slayer of the Desert

Diocesan Boys' School, Pang Tsz Wai, Andy – 12

Greetings. I am Javid, one of the renown merchants that travel from the West to the East, connecting communities miles apart through the silk route. Sadly, I retired not too soon ago. However, you might know me as the “Desert Slayer”, a name people started calling me decades ago. That was when I was young and foolish, but let me tell you the story of how I became the famous so-called slayer of the desert, one of resilience and wisdom.

My father was an experienced merchant. He used to take me and my brother Farizan along on his trips, so I got to learn countless, valuable lessons following my father around the world. I was 17 when he first told me I was old enough to travel alone, and he gave me my first task to run a few errands. I had always longed to explore the world as free as a bird, so I soon set off, enthusiasm bubbling inside of me.

The desert, just like I remembered, was like a borderless sea of gold. The blazing ball of fire hung high in the empty, ember sky. It was as if the sun had melted the border between heaven and the earth, and as I rode my camel across the endless orange, the desert horizon seemed to vanish in a monochrome of molten lava, the sky and sand blending and fusing together into a single, burning panorama.

Out of the blue, my camel gave a sudden, sharp jerk against the reins. A rattlesnake residing under a cluster of pebbles slithered out from below. Before I could tighten my grip, my camel lunged sideways, letting out a hollow, booming cry. I fell onto the ground, sand grinding into my skin. The camel was soon at a gallop, its ungainly frame moving with horrifying speed, and I watched, paralyzed as my companion, became a frantic silhouette in the distance, with all my supplies on its back. My shouts were raw, useless sounds, swallowed by the desert at an instant. It was hopeless.

I stared at my stinging hands. The red mark the rope left on it was the only proof I had ever held anything at all. All my water, my supplies, my tent, all the things I needed to survive out there, on the back of my stallion, somewhere in the sea of molten brass.

I scanned the horizon. Nothing for miles and miles. The true terror spread over me. Why didn't I tie the knot of the reins tighter? Why didn't I see the cluster of pebbles earlier and suspected a snake would be hiding below it? Why did I choose to travel by this route? Why hadn't I travelled with my family? I shouldn't have accepted my father's request. I didn't have enough experience. I was just a naive kid of an accomplished traveller of the Silk Route, and now this could possibly be my grave end. I was going to die, and ruin my father's name.

I took a deep breath. I was on my own now, and survival was my only, pure goal. I had to stay calm. However, the panic kept scrabbling at the insides of my ribs. I tried to force it all down with another breath.

Then I remembered what my father had once told me – always make good use of what you have. I immediately retrieved and emptied my pack, turned it over and a shiver ran down my spine. I had two leather skins of water. One was only half-full. My knife was tucked in the pocket of my pack, its handle both smooth and familiar, along with a pouch with a few dried dates. A brass compass laid in the middle of the pack. That was all I had right now. And I had no idea how I was going to survive with these items until I found a way back to civilization.

I stood back up, taking a slow, deliberate turn in the shape of a circle. The merciless sun was past its zenith already, which should give me perhaps four more hours of brutal light and heat, and then it would be nighttime, where the world turned cold and gloomy, shadows creeping across the sandy ground. The needle of my compass pointed weakly towards the north, trembling. I took a deep breath and began walking, knowing that there was no time to lose.

I travelled on and on, for hours and hours. Who would have known how far I was from my starting point? It was like the entire desert was a large treadmill, and each dune I mustered energy to barely climb up just revealed another identical one ahead, as if even the landscape was making a mockery of my effort. Everything looked the same. Just... sand, and more sand, in every direction.

Soon, night came, and I was fully prepared for it. The sand beneath my feet, which had tortured me with its vengeful heat the whole day, became lifeless, leeching the warmth from my soles. Thankfully, I was familiar with the feeling of cold that nightfall brought with it. I continued walking on, until my body began to feel like a wet sack, with each step I took beginning to feel heavier than the one before. I had to rest, and my body was making sure I did. I collapsed onto the cold, hard ground.

I used my remaining strength to drag myself to a shallow scrape in the lee of a dune and smoothed the sand there, just as I recalled my father did it. I placed my cloak on the earth and collapsed on it, my mind unmooring from reality.

Just lying down was torture on its own. The cold was a blade that slipped through my robes, piercing my flesh. Nightmares filled my brain. The incident, the betrayal of my camel kept looping all over and over. I woke up in a cold sweat, despite the cool dawn weather.

I kept walking on after sipping some water from my waterskin. That was when I realised I had barely any water left. Sleep had done so little in helping my body recover from the pain I had endured the previous day. My body was beginning to show signs of its heavy toll it had already taken.

Still, I lurched on, like a vessel calmly riding the waves across the sea, no matter how fearsome or large the waves got, just that the waters were pure gold. Memories of my father flooded my mind, along with Farizan, and tears began to form in the edges of my eyes. I had to survive. I had to see them again. Each step I took grew stronger and more certain than the one before.

However, my determination didn't last long. I climbed up a dune, my feet aching and sore. I didn't know what happened. I gasped for air. My body had enough. The seamless orange in front of me became a gilded lid. Tiredness spread through me. I couldn't resist it, and my consciousness began to unspool, as if it was a thread lost in the tapestry of gold. My knees turned to water. Then, the world folded in half, and the soft, gentle touch of sand met my face. One moment it was just endless orange stretching on for eternity, the next, was just an abrupt cut to black.

I was in a dream before I knew it. If it could be classified as a dream, I was unsure. Was I dead? Light flashed. Flickered. Blinding me. I opened my eyelids. Then there it was, my father, in front of my eyes. Farizan behind him, his usual reassuring smile on his face. My father's familiar scar under his lips twitched, just as it did every time he talked to me. No, this was too familiar. "Father! Father! I'm here!" I told him.

My father only gently nodded at me. He didn't reply. So did Farizan. He reached his hands to me. I was shocked at first, until he touched my pack. He opened it, taking my compass out. I was bewildered. I asked, "What's going on?" Nod. Smile. That was all my father did. Then he began to disappear. "No! Don't leave!" I reached out for him. I couldn't lose him. I leaned forwards, trying to catch him in my hands, but landed on a pile of sand. I looked up. I was back in the desert. I gazed out. A wagon. Swimming across the distance. Hope. Desperation.

A sudden realization. My dream. My father. His teachings. The time Farizan laughed as I didn't know how to use the compass and ended up blinding myself temporarily from the sun's reflection on it. My eyelids began to grow heavier. I held up the compass. This was it. My father and brother's silhouette flashed in front of me. Light. The sun. Shimmer. I swear I saw some movement in the wagon. Then, an abrupt cut to black.

Centuries to Seconds

Diocesan Girls' Junior School, Chan, Isabelle – 11

"Ringggggg!"

I reached out, fumbling to snooze the maddening alarm from my tablet for the online meeting, but all I could feel was grittiness. Reluctantly, I forced my heavy eyelids open, only to find myself on a wide trail in the middle of nowhere. I squinted my eyes, trying to figure out my whereabouts, but all I could see was a boundless desert.

Before I could make sense of anything, a group of soldiers on horseback charged towards me. Their thundering hooves and glinting armour sent my heart racing, and I wondered what fate awaited me in this unfamiliar land as one of the formidable warriors approached me.

"Aloooo....! x#^U%&... !" He muttered.

I was swarmed with bewilderment and fear, and trials to communicate were in vain. Luckily a man in a colourful, sumptuous outfit came to my rescue. "Hi, I am Batu. Are you lost?" Relief washed over me as I finally heard words I could understand. It turned out they belonged to a trade caravan, and Batu, being European, served as the translator for the troop. I was pitied and invited to the troop, only to learn the astonishing truth: we were in the era of Han Dynasty, and were en route to a trade in Mongolia along the Silk Road!

This first-ever desert trekking was both exhilarating and exhausting, and I knew we arrived when I saw the felt-covered domes scattering across the vast desert like stars in the sky – the nomadic gers. Stepping inside, everything was exactly like what was portrayed in books – the central stoves, the colourful rugs, etc. Yet one object shattered the harmony – a bizarrely modern-looking closet glimmering with light in the corner. As I was staring, a voice snapped me awake. It was Batu. "I'm going out. Stay away from that closet! It will only do you bad!" I nodded half-heartedly, waiting for him to step out of the ger.

As he stepped out, my curiosity overcame restraint, and I sneakily crept towards the closet. Ensuring no one noticed, I opened the "Pandora's box" with trembling hands, and it gave such a creak that I almost screamed. To my disappointment, all there was a mirror, a buttoned control panel, and a tattered, rusted note. Before I could read, Batu's footsteps echoed nearby, so I stuffed the note into my pocket. The rest of the night passed in a blur as I dozed off amid small talks with him. Batu, I learnt, was born into a family of traders, and his fascination with oriental culture had driven him to venture into this new horizon.

From then on, I travelled with the caravan and had the privilege to witness some of the most breathtaking natural wonders. Khuvsgul Lake, the "blue pearl" of Mongolia, offers one of the clearest lakes in the world. Coupled with the surrounding pristine forests and rugged mountains, the tranquility and spectacular scenery had left me, who's so accustomed to polluted waters, in such awe. Meanwhile Gobi Desert fascinated me just as much – ignorant me never realised a "cold desert" existed! And "extreme" is only an understatement to describe the temperature variation there, where it ranges from -45°C to 40°C !

Throughout this trading journey, I served as a translator. First-hand experience witnessing book concepts, like bartering, was surreal. I watched with amusement as they heaped baskets of spices upon their shoulders, staggering under the weight, when a handful of coins would have eased the burden. The air was alive then with the gleam of freshly minted Sasanian silver drachms. Knowing how swiftly the age of barter would give way to the dominion of coin, I introduced them to the virtues of coins and commodity money – that could travel farther than any spice-laden basket, and endure longer than the fleeting bargains of trade.

Months slipped by swiftly with fresh inspiration each day. Batu and the troops treated me like one of their own. One evening, while I was packing, my hand brushed against something crumpled in my pocket – the rusted note. These months of adventure were so vivid and captivating that I had forgotten about it. When I unfolded the crumpled note, unmistakable letters were the words: “TIME PORTAL, NO RETURN”. Those words struck me like a bolt of lightning, reminding me that there is a decision which I had long postponed, perhaps even avoided, to make.

It was all dilemma that evening. As I lay in bed, my thoughts raced, torn between the comforting sense of belonging that I had found here, and the lingering realisation that I did not truly belong in this world. The struggle was relentless, leaving me adrift in uncertainty about what the future should hold. Part of me felt compelled to repay Batu and his companions for their generosity towards me. Yet the image of my disappearance weighed heavily: the confusion of my colleagues, the sorrow of my family, the void I would leave behind. That thought struck deepest and filled me with intense guilt. Clarity emerged – I cannot put everything at stake.

I moved with deliberate silence so as not to wake Batu up. Upon activating the control panel, two tabs – “past” and “future” – appeared. I chose the latter and entered the year 2026. Instantly, a dazzling beam of light descended, which then morphed into a swirling black and purple portal. Whispering the faintest goodbye to Batu, I stepped closer, drawn irresistibly toward its pull, until the spinning tunnel swallowed me whole.

"Thud!"

I felt my bedroom floor again. Everything felt uncanny yet achingly familiar. The rotating ceiling fan. The roasting aroma of coffee. My mind buzzed. Before I could make sense of anything, “Daddy, wake up! Sunday soccer time!” a familiar voice calmed my nerves. I hurried to the dining room and settled in, where my wife and kids greeted me with radiating warmth. As we ate, I instinctively reached into my pocket. There, my fingers brushed against something cold, carved and unyielding.

“Thank you, Batu!”

The Flower of Dawn

Diocesan Girls' Junior School, Chow, Hoi Man – 11

A small village at the northern tip of China was suffering from a dangerous illness as the winter season drew closer. The villagers thought it was normal at first, but then the illness began spreading further and further until even the emperor in the faraway city had caught it

"Quick! Sunghan, hand me the Wuweizi!" the village doctor said to his nurse as his patient started coughing violently. Sunghan's head dropped as he whispered sadly,

"We used it all while treating the Emperor."

"How about the honey? It can soothe the throat!" Yang Dafu yelled impatiently.

"Our whole supply is frozen..." Before Sunghan could finish, a woman burst in.

"How is my Shingyuan?" she asked, crying out when she saw her son hacking and gasping for air. The child's face was twisted in pain. The doctor ran to his side and pressed his ear to his chest.

"He can't breathe..." he murmured to himself. "There's something stuck in his lungs."

"How can there be something stuck in his lungs?" his mother demanded.

Shingyuan began coughing again, but this time, a stream of crimson blood shot from his mouth and splattered on the wall. Yang Dafu's eyes widened in horror. "No, it's the Bloodcough!"

"Save my precious son! Please!" begged his mother, pulling the doctor out of his trance.

"I can't. I don't have the kind of herb to cure Bloodcough. I'm sorry Madam Shing, I can't save your son." The doctor's voice was barely audible. "I only know of one herb that can cure this illness, but I don't have it in my stores. It is called the Hantian, known for its ice blue petals and the ability to survive in the coldest climates."

Just then, Shingyuan's laboring breaths stopped and he exhaled softly.

"Say goodbye to Shingzheng and Shingyong for me, Mother," and with that, he closed his eyes and took his last breath.

The whole tribe was frantic over the first death of the winter. Parents forbade their children to even step one toe out of their doorframe, pushing them to see the doctor for even the slightest hint of a cough. Emperor Han was terrified that this illness would destroy his kingdom, so he confided in his most trusted advisor, Yang Daifu and his nurse Sunghan. They came up with an idea, but they were reluctant to tell the villagers. This plan would be spreading an uncertain hope. The king wanted to send a group towards the western part of China to search for the Hantian. The emperor handpicked a few of his most trusted warriors to go on the trip including Shingzheng, Shingyuan's brother. The Emperor chose General Zhang Qian to lead the team, hoping that his excellent leadership skills would lead them into success. Zhang Qian was trustworthy, positive and resilient.

The next morning, Zhang Qian woke the group up before sunrise, wishing to start early to finish the mission as soon as possible, but the emperor ordered them to wait for the doctor's directions before setting off. They were told to follow the cities along the trail that leads to the rumored Hantian patch. After listening to Yang Daifu, Zhang Qian exchanged an uneasy glance with Shingzheng and asked, "Are you really sure that the Hantian will be there?"

"No, these are just rumours saying that the Hantian would be located in the west." The doctor's shoulders hunched with the confession.

"So...we're hoping on a rumour?" said Chunzhen, one of the teammates, after a long stunned silence.

"Yes, but it is the only hope that we can hold onto. It may be wavering, but it's there." said Shingzheng as his eyes clouded over with grief. "Shingyuan has passed away, but Shingyong is still young and may catch the illness. I must protect him."

Determination drowned away the sadness in his eyes. Shingzheng's confidence was contagious and the team of warriors faced the search with positivity and most importantly, hope.

As days turned into weeks, and weeks turned into months, the warriors started to lose hope that they would ever find the Hantian. When they settled for the night to make a temporary base, Zhang Qian confessed hopelessly, "Sometimes I wonder if we'll ever finish this mission...Maybe we should head back."

"No," Shingzheng said, shaking his head empathetically. His tone hardened, "We will never give up. We will find the herb and save Shi— everyone." Behind the sharp gaze, there was a hidden fear.

"But we aren't even sure if it's true!" Zhang Qian protested.

"We will find it! I thought you, of all people, believed that. I never thought you would be the first one to give up, I never thought you were this weak!" Shingzheng spat, disgusted.

"What is wrong with you? We are all exhausted and starving! Use your common sense and think clearly for once!" Zhang Qian shouted back.

Shingzheng's brown eyes were blazing firestorms. He threw himself at the team leader and punched him in the stomach. But Zhang Qian retaliated, throwing Shingzheng off of him and onto the grass.

"Come back when you calm down." Zhang Qian said, looking down on him. Shingzheng's head was throbbing with pain and as he turned it, he saw an ice blue speck beside him. He got up quickly and dug at the soil. Little by little, the earth fell away, revealing a smooth pristine ice blue flower.

Shingzheng looked over his shoulder and called, "Hey! I found something!"

Zhang Qian rushed over, his boots crunching on the dirt and saw the flower, staring at it in wonder. "I think we found the Hantian!" his voice rising with excitement. The other members ran over, their eyes widening as they saw the precious herb sitting on Shingzheng's palm. Finding the flower was like finding the sun, letting the team and the villagers see new light.

Galloping through History

Diocesan Girls' Junior School, Fan, Tsz Kiu Harper – 11

On a breezy autumn day, I was revising at the windowsill, clutching my humanities booklet. My teacher had just taught me about how the Silk Road came to be and I was trying to revise, before I could refocus, a bright light blinded my eyes and a horse was galloping faster and faster towards me. The creature charged for the cup filled with water next to me, slurping it all up in barely 3 seconds. It was a brown one, eyes black and misty. I patted it and refilled the cup for it to drink since it was panting heavily. Then, it perked up, and bent its long body, indicating that I should climb on him. He galloped towards the light and soon, we were in front of the Terracotta Army.

An armoured clay soldier stepped forward and told me that he wanted me to see something fantastic. He showed me the 670 horses and the 130 chariots made out of clay and described the others and himself in detail. The horse whinnied and bounded towards the Terracotta Army with lightning speed. I tried to stop him from going too fast since I was getting sick and...

Oh no! The horse fell into the Terracotta Army!

I was whirled into a pink tunnel and soon after, I appeared somewhere with a lot of sand. I saw Zhang Qian, (yes, Zhang Qian from my Humanities book) leading soldiers and horses walking to the west. I figured out it was the Taklamakan Desert. Also known as the Sea of Death, it was very dangerous to be on a trip like this. A blazing heat hit us hard when Zhang Qian and his team stopped to rest and drink a sip of water. The horse and I were wet from head to toe in a few minutes. As we couldn't stand it anymore, we asked for a sip of water from Zhang Qian and his team. They handed us the gigantic bottle and me and the horse gulped it quickly. Zhang Qian asked us to help them carry their things. I agreed since I was interested in seeing the Silk Road with the people who made it. The horse beckoned to me to sit closer to the back in order for him to help Zhang Qian carry their necessities. I patted the horse, it nuzzled me as we trotted on.

Zhang Qian informed me that the journey would be difficult with lots of extreme climates. His voice was determined even though his face was streaked with sweat. I asked him why he wanted to go on this trip. He told me that he wanted to do something good for his country and to please the king without a single bit of uttering. I felt that he also cared about the safety of his country deeply by the tone of concern in his voice. I nodded bravely and continued to ride on the horse, holding onto the reins. We arrived at the dangerous enemy area, the Han. Zhang Qian was ordered to travel to a far country in order for them to fight the Han alongside each other which meant temporary allies. But because we had to cross the Han's area to travel to the western country, we had to be extremely careful. Hang Qian instructed us to stay behind the big boulder ahead of us as quietly as we could. We tiptoed with the slightest sound. But suddenly, strong hands caught us on the back of our clothing and we found ourselves locked in a dark and scary room. I hid my tears in the horse's mane and the horse whined softly. We waited and waited for a chance to come for Zhang Qian, his team, and us to escape. Until one day ten years later, the Hun was having a war among themselves for the throne of the king and we secretly left because the door was carelessly left open by the Huns. I did not know that it was ten years already but we clamored out anyway continued through deserts, high snow mountains, and a lot more but Zhang Qian did not budge, he did not stop going and there was a spark in his eyes.

After a long time, our team finally arrived at the western country. I entered the western country court with Zhang Qian. He told the foreigners that he wanted to attack the Hun with their help, they shook their heads after that and offered us a stay. Zhang Qian tried to asked them day after day but still did not succeed.

About a week after our arrival there, Zhang Qian said that the foreigners did not want to help them attack Hun. "Nothing will change their mind," he said with a harsh whisper.

We didn't complete our mission; every other soldier was upset. We took some of the western country culture and products back to the Hun's area.

He didn't know it, but he was about to accomplish an extraordinary thing a few years later. I smiled inside myself and decided not to tell him. I knew that he would make the world communications better and easier, the horse whinnied with a hoof raised, pointing at another light tunnel. I knew it was time to go, I waved my farewell to Zhang Qian and hugged the horse tightly. The last thing I saw before I came to my senses was the proud toss of the horse's in the air.

Why was it so wet next to me? I saw the cup was tipped over, I looked at the sunset. I thought of the adventure I had.

Then I heard the shouting of my mother, "Get out there, you lazy girl, it's time for dinner!" I rushed to the dining table.

A Journey Through Time—The Silk Road Adventure

Diocesan Girls' Junior School, Lok, Ho Ching – 11

Hannah, Bailey and Ella went to the library to find a book about the Silk Road for their report. They beelined for the non-fiction section, and while perusing books on China's history, an ancient book fell from the shelves. It was wrapped in delicate golden silk and ornately embroidered in rich colours. Stunned, the girls looked on in confusion. Hannah reached for the book, gently opening it. A slip of yellowed paper dropped out. Bailey swiftly grabbed and read it. "Beware! Journey to the height of the Silk Road. History awaits."

Bailey muttered. "A book that will take us to the past? Quit joking!" Just then, they were suddenly surrounded by a swirling mist, then sucked into a spinning, magical tunnel.

The girls tumbled to their knees. The musty smell of the library turned into the crisp, cold air. They were stunned to find themselves in a marketplace. They knew they weren't in their own time. Their sassy clothes drew stares, pointed fingers and the suspicion of a soldier standing guard. "You, young girls! Don't move!" The girls panicked, their hearts racing. Before he reached them, a kind man came forward, bowing to the approaching guard. "Sorry Sir, they're my wards." The guard stared at them hard, but slowly backed away. The man, Master Ning, guided the confused girls to a lovely cottage. His wife, Mei, greeted them warmly, then fussed over the girls, arranging warm clothes for them to wear. Despite not having children, Mei was welcoming and kind. "You're safe here," she said gently.

Bailey whispered to her friends, "The book's gone! How do we get back?" Ella looked worried, but Hannah was distracted, admiring the warmth of the home, something she hadn't experienced as an orphan.

The couple asked them how they came to be alone on the Silk Road. Their earnest faces made lying impossible. Hannah took a deep breath. "We owe you the truth. We're not from here," she said.

"It sounds crazy, but we're actually from the future," Ella said. "Over a thousand years from now." Instead of calling the guards, looking scared or laughing, Master Ning looked intrigued and told them to continue. Bailey explained their experience at the library, finding the book, and getting sucked into the vortex. She continued sorrowfully, "We don't know what happened to the book or how to return home."

Mei grasped Hannah's hand. "Legends of such things have been told," she murmured. Mei glanced at her husband, "I suggest bringing them to the fortune teller, she shall have more answers." "Sounds promising," he agreed. "We shall depart tomorrow at first light." Hannah began tearing up. These strangers from another time have offered them help, without any question, treating them like their family, as a sense of belonging never felt before slowly seeps through her body. "Thank you," she choked out.

The journey was incredible. Mei taught Hannah to weave a scarf on a small loom, sharing their family secrets about it. Bailey and Ella, on the other hand, dragged Master Ning to question the merchants, asking if they knew any stories about time travelling.

Soon, they reached the next bustling marketplace, with carts filled with spices, fabric, pottery and more. The group walked towards a hut, nestled between stalls selling fruit and instruments. Inside, an old woman sat on a mat, eyes closed, with smoke billowing around her. As she lifted her head, her clouded eyes pierced through them. "You're not from this time," she said. The girls gasped.

The fortune teller, Mistress Shang, gestured for them to sit. “The book brought you here, however, your return won’t be easy,” she said. “You must collect three purple stones, hidden along the Silk Road. Each stone will appear when you do something that honors the Silk Road.” With that, she stood up and left the hut.

Over the next few weeks, the girls travelled from city to city with Master Ning and Mei. One cold night, Hannah spotted a young traveller shivering by the path. Without thinking twice, they shared what food and water they had with him, and Hannah handed him the scarf she had just finished weaving. The next morning, the boy was gone. In his place, a purple stone lay. “One down, two to go,” Bailey muttered.

As they were passing by a bazaar, Ella encountered a Chinese merchant who was having difficulties trading jade with a Persian one. Ella realized she could help translate, and successfully did so. The grateful merchant, whose livelihood she saved, gave her the purple stone, a token, for her assistance.

They were excited to have two stones. Yet, the third stone didn’t appear. They tried everything! Helping beggars, sharing meals, offering help to people, but no luck. One day, a desperate woman, who had been robbed, needed a ride home, which would delay their trip by five days. Frustrated and homesick, Bailey turned the woman down. Just then, the woman vanished, replaced by Mistress Shang. “You’ve failed. The third stone is gone forever,” she stated.

“No! I’m sorry!” cried Bailey. Mistress Shang shook her head. “Only two souls may leave. Who will remain?” Glancing at Mei and Ning, Hannah stuttered, “I... I’ll stay. I don’t belong in the world out there anyways... You two are the only family I ever had before I came here. Promise me please...just remember me after you get out. Ning and Mei will take good care of me here.” The moment she spoke, the golden book appeared. “We’ll miss you,” Bailey sobbed. Ella added, “We’ll never forget you.” The trio hugged, tears flowing down their cheeks.

Back home, Bailey and Ella discovered no one remembered Hannah, and no time had passed. They still had a report to complete. They ran to the library and found stories about Hannah, the beloved daughter of Ning and Mei. She was an artist, whose work was loved by royalty. Their friend had built an amazing life, and was where she belonged.

Marco Polo and the Journey of Silk and Aliens

Diocesan Girls' Junior School, Tang, Man Yan Audrey – 11

Marco Polo and the Journey of Silk and Aliens

Two thousand years ago, people knew Marco Polo as a merchant, a traveler, and a storyteller. His journeys along the Silk Road took him to the court of Kublai Khan, and his tales of China became famous. But hidden within his adventures was a secret no one ever knew—until now.

Marco was crossing the desert on his way back to Venice. He missed his father's voice, the smell of the Adriatic, and the noisy markets of home. In his bag he carried a small wooden box wrapped in cloth. Inside were silkworm cocoons that rustled softly when he walked. He checked on them often—not out of fear, but because they reminded him of China and the friends he had left behind.

The desert wind rose. The ground trembled. Marco stopped, confused—no caravan, no horses, only shaking sand. “Strange,” he muttered.

The tremor deepened. The sky darkened. A bright white light cut through the air, and a humming circular shape descended. A thin green head emerged, its huge black eyes reflecting Marco's fear.

He stumbled back, praying. The creature raised a delicate finger and traced a circle in the air. The sand around Marco turned crimson. His body lifted, the world spun, and darkness swallowed him.

Marco awoke on a cold metal floor. Green creatures stood around him, heads tilted like curious birds. One stepped forward and gently placed a small white pebble-shaped device near his ear. Marco recoiled. The alien tapped its own ear twice—tap, tap—then waited. Slowly, Marco nodded. The device hummed to life.

The alien handed him his silkworm box with surprising care. Then it pointed at its bare chest and shivered. Through the device, Marco heard: “We are very cold. We have run out of materials to make clothes. Can you teach us how to make—”

A pop.

A flash.

Silence.

Marco flinched. The device went dead. The alien froze mid-gesture, then tapped its ear anxiously and pointed at Marco's. Marco held up the lifeless device and shook his head. The alien touched it gently, then lowered its hand in quiet defeat.

With gestures and simple drawings scratched into the metal floor, the aliens led Marco to a room filled with strange fibers—shimmering strands that crumbled at a touch. They looked at him hopefully. Marco opened his box and showed them the cocoons. The aliens leaned in, fascinated, waiting for permission before touching one.

Marco acted out the steps: warm water, unwinding threads, spinning silk. The aliens watched closely. When he mimed needing heat, they brought glowing crystals. When he needed space, they built a whole chamber overnight—smooth silver walls rising like growing plants.

They offered him glowing fruit, mineral-rich water, and blankets that dissolved by morning. Their own materials were failing. They needed silk to survive.

Days turned into weeks. The translation device sputtered often, so they relied on gestures and a few shared words.

“Warm.”

“Spin.”

“Gentle.”

“Wait.”

The aliens taught him their own soft, whistling words. They called silk shaii and called him Marr—ko, ending with a rising whistle. Their children followed him through the corridors, copying his walk and tugging at his sleeves. The adults listened eagerly to his stories of Venice and showed him images of their world—green oceans, floating mountains, violet skies.

Marco felt wonder and affection, but homesickness grew heavier each night.

One evening, while he held an unfinished silk robe, an alien sat beside him and pointed at his chest.

“Home,” it said softly.

Marco nodded, eyes stinging. The alien placed a hand on its own chest. “Stay?”

Marco shook his head. The alien lowered its gaze, touched Marco’s shoulder gently, and walked away.

The aliens built a ship for him slowly, reluctantly, as if each piece brought them closer to losing him. When it was finished—sleek, silver, and powerful—they gathered around him. One placed a shimmering silk robe over his shoulders, colors shifting like northern lights, and pressed its forehead to his.

“Memory,” it whispered.

Marco bowed deeply, unable to speak.

The ship carried him across deserts and seas and left him near the gates of Venice. Sunburned and exhausted, he told his story, but no one believed him. Floating mountains and green beings sounded like madness.

So Marco kept the memory to himself. But at night, when he touched the shimmering robe, he sometimes heard faint, whistling voices calling his name.

A bond stretched across worlds—fragile, impossible, unforgettable.

A tale too extraordinary for history to believe.

The Feather of the Phoenix, Legend of the Road

Diocesan Girls' Junior School, Tsui, Sum Yin – 11

The wind rustled, the leaves of the only tree in miles blowing away in the relentless storm, its bark dry of leaves. Specks of sand flew into Sophie's eyes as she crouched down in a small, narrow cave. She could hear eerie cries coming from the desert. Her heart pounded in her chest, panic coursing through her body. She had been sent to explore the seemingly endless sands that stretched across as far as the eye could see.

The road connected what was now called East Asia, the Middle East, North Africa and Europe. There should have been an easier way... Sophie muttered, gritty little bits flying onto her lips. There were legends of savage tribes that never showed mercy in the least, that hunted through reckless weathers for the bird that shows the way...the phoenix, Sophie recalled. The storm left the cave and her thoughts seemed to drift away with it. Sophie quickly left the cave, her heart beating faster than the sounds of sand whipping away at the dry land. She seemed not to notice the silent footsteps of the phoenix whose feathers glowed gold like the morning sun. Her eyes were slivers of silver. Sophie continued to walk, dust forming a trail behind her. Still, the merciless deserts seemed never to end.

A voice, barely a whisper, giggled in her head. Sophie, you are entwined to the desert. The Silk Roads are your land, you can never leave.

Sophie stopped in her tracks, her raven coloured eyes widening as she looked behind. But there was nothing. Wings emerged from her back, elegant gradient black and brown wings that shone despite the colour. Her origins were revealed, myths once laughed at stories rising to life.

The deserts are your domain. You watched the caravans pull cartloads of treasures; you watched silk, fallen from the humans' grips, fall onto the sand and melt into the history of this Silk Road. We are the guardians of this place, these creations are the source of our creation. Where other humans shared stories and symbols, we were the ones to mark it. Sophie..remember..

Sophie's eyes were illuminating as she gasped.

I remember... With a final gasp, Sophie emerged from underneath her skin as a phoenix, dark feathers swirling with magic. She spread her wings and flew. The winds whispered in an eerie cry," Through the skies where crystal-like stars had remained throughout the night, she could see red eyes prying through the cover of the leaves and rocks, slipping stealthily, a deadly poisoned arrow pulled to releasing point, precisely aiming at her. But this wasn't new. It was a repetitive action, as if they were bots, aiming only to shoot at myths...a sharp pain gutted her in the wing. As she collapsed, she slowly faded.

A phoenix is a guiding light that our ancestors once saw. Yet now they are gone...

Sophie's mind, in her form of unconsciousness, seemed to recall the past, the empty shell of memories she, in her human form, had never remembered, gained life and filled with thoughts. Her life, her joy, her past...all of it ran through her mind. A lifetime of experiences which let her remember... She was a phoenix. A guardian of the sands, the warrior of the land. But that life had bored her. She wanted something more. So she prayed. Silently, to the stars that had brought life to their kind, for a phoenix must emerge from a star to be born. She had wished for a better life, a life that brought more adventures. Closing her eyes, she had woken as a human. Until then, she had forgotten her life as a phoenix...but now she remembered. The silent call that had drawn her back to what she was had been haunting her thoughts as a human, but now she knew who she was.

Meanwhile, through the dry sands of the desert, the silent call of the phoenix illuminates the land, and a single dark feather flies with the call of the winds, leaving hardly a trace of the myth that was there.

Sophie's eyes flew open, and saw Sahara tending to her arrow wounds. 'Hearts are connected,' Sahara, the guardian of the Sahara Desert, softly sighed. Her tail swished around in the sand as she spoke. Beautiful golden feathers that shone in the sun glimmered, sparkles seeming to form a sort of glittering, luminescent aura around her fluttering swings. Her voice illuminated over all, her feathers soft like silk. 'One cannot die if one is immortal.' The majestic phoenix tended to Sophie, Sophie's black feathers drooping. 'Your land has been deprived of the life that once tended to let the road live. As you can feel pain, the hearts of each living creature that calls and belongs to the desert connects with you. We are legends, the light that once guided the skies.'

'We watched...the first...' Sophie whispered. 'He saw us but never said, he knew us but never told...' The silkworms that once lay upon these roads –they live till today.

The first. The young man that walked step by step, the camels that accompanied him, his camels stretching out their humped backs, breathless with tiredness. They walked through the sands as their crew followed. They looked to the stars for guidance, knowing we were there but not knowing as well. We were like the stars themselves, a light when the travelers were lost. They carried this legend back home, and like most legends spread. But over time, into the modern world, we were lost. Forgotten and yet, we remained. Generation after generation we continued, the world was led by us yet we were never known. Sahara's voice, loud and pure, echoed in Sophie's ears.

The history I have never known...the legends that we once were...more of us roamed the earth...I remember...

Sophie's mind was filled with memories and her past, their kind and their culture. The protection they offered the earth...and the story that kept them alive. The story of the phoenixes.

Journey to the West on the High-Speed Rail

Diocesan Girls' Junior School, Wu, Yuet Hei – 11

Many years had passed since their last journey to the west. From the dust, four eccentric-looking travelers emerged, ready to take on the mission of collecting the new and updated versions of the Buddhist scriptures. Dust rose in clouds as Wukong, Bajie, Wujing and Sanzang passed Xi'an's western gate, their camels' bells ringing for the Silk Road trip ahead. Wind from passing cars whipped around the four, but soon they were off the road and heading for a place they had long dreaded – the Flaming Mountains. Flames licked hungrily at their sleeves, acrid smoke wafting through nostrils as eyes watered and throats were choked by the crackle and roar of fire burning rock and earth.

“Not this nightmare again!” groaned Wujing, wiping sweat from his brow. “If only we had better transportation than these old camels,” spat Wukong, receiving an angry nudge from one of the camels. Sanzang took a good look at their burning surroundings, then said, “We should see if there are any people around that can help us get rid of this heat. To get back on the path, we need to cross these mountains, but it looks quite impossible at the moment,” Wukong immediately shrieked, “I’ll go ask the Dragon King for help!” “And where exactly is he?” asked Wujing. “We’ll ask the Earth God,” said Sanzang. Wukong elbowed his way forward and pounded the ground. “Earth God, come out here this instant! Where is the Dragon King?” Unwillingly, the Earth God rose from the dirt. “He’s currently in Turpan enjoying some lovely tea,” he said grumpily, before sinking back into the ground. Wukong sniffed and soared upwards. Looking from the sky was not very helpful, since his vision was greatly obscured by the thick smoke billowing from the flames below. Suddenly, he spotted a long white snake gliding elegantly along a long, winding track. “That snake goes even faster than I can with my cloud somersault!” he cried in wonder. Despite his jealousy, he decided to take a closer look at the majestic snake – to find out that it wasn’t a snake. Instead, it was a new and extremely fast transportation named High-Speed Rail, which could beat even his amazing cloud somersault! Curiosity got the better of him, and he boarded the High-Speed Rail and headed for Turpan North Station.

Quick as a flash, he arrived in Turpan and explained their situation to the Dragon King, and he agreed to make it rain for a while so the flames would extinguish and let them pass. Wukong showed the Dragon King how the High-Speed Rail worked, which greatly impressed him, and they got to the Flaming Mountains and extinguished the flames promptly. After walking southeast for a while, the group came to a forest. Trees reached high, and the mist was thick, making it hard to see the path ahead. Bajie sat down, took out a cucumber and began to munch on it, fanning himself with his other hand. Drowsy and sleepy, he began to drift off. Unnoticed by the rest of the group, a face loomed out of the darkness and began to drag Bajie out of sight. “Oh no! Bajie’s being kidnapped!” cried Wujing, rushing forward and hastily putting his phone away. Bajie’s kidnapper laughed and said, “I am the White Bone Spirit, and I will use the new scriptures to help myself become stronger! And if you try to interfere, I will definitely hurt your friend...” And with that, she zoomed off into the sky.

Wukong clutched his head in fury, “Quick! We’ve got to beat her to the scriptures” “The Dragon King let slip that the scriptures are located at Hong Kong Port, which we will reach if we keep going southeast. But to get there we’ll need to cross an ocean, and that’s impossible for us!” cried Sanzang, frustrated. “Don’t you worry. Not far away is the Hong Kong–Zhuhai–Macau Bridge, which directly connects from here to Hong Kong Port! If we get on a taxi, we’ll be able to get there on the bridge.” Nobody disagreed. Soon, they climbed aboard the taxi of a very confused driver and arrived at Hong Kong Port. There, they saw Bajie and a woman wearing heavy makeup, which Wukong immediately recognized as the White Bone Spirit. “Don’t let her pass, she’s a kidnapper!” he shouted, startling the customs guard who was talking to the Spirit. “How do you prove that?” asked the Spirit in a high-pitched voice, grinning. Wujing showed everyone a picture on his phone. It showed the Spirit kidnapping Bajie in the forest. “I accidentally took this when I was running,” he explained. “I’m sorry, sir, but that doesn’t look anything like this lady here,” said the baffled guard, shaking his head. Wujing opened a system on his phone and uploaded the image. The system then showed “Recognized as: White Bone Spirit” and everyone’s heads whipped in her direction.

“What is this system?” cried the Spirit, angry that her disguise had been uncovered. “It’s a surveillance system that can compare faces from a database and recognize them. It’s part of the new Silk Road. It’s got a lot of useful projects, including the High-Speed Rail and the Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macau Bridge. Without them, we would not have succeeded in finding these scriptures and beating you.” Then Bajie held up a few books with the words “New Buddhist Scriptures” on them; Wukong, Wujing and Sanzang cheered, but also sighed with exhaustion. The White Bone Spirit, taking advantage of the momentarily distracted customs guard, flew away and escaped. “At least we’re all safe! And we got the succeeded in our mission!” smiled Sanzang. Wukong grinned and said, “It’s all thanks to what we discovered today: the new Silk Road, which made all these projects that helped us along our way!”

The Silk Road Woven with Love

Diocesan Girls' School, Chan, Cho Kiu Trinity – 12

“Ka, what’re you doing?” Mother asks, a soft smile playing on her lips.

“I’m finishing some silk scarves for Mrs. Li. I’m almost done,” I reply over the rhythmic creaking of the loom, eyes narrowed in concentration. “She promised this batch will cover three months’ rent.” Mother nods approvingly at my uniform stitches.

“You should get some rest,” she whispers, her words broken by a dry cough. “It’s freezing tonight,” her fingers weaving through my hair.

I glance up in shock, realizing that the azure sky has already deepened to an inky black. I tidy up my worktable, placing the finished scarves into a basket.

My fingers go numb against the frigid steel of the iron stoker as I extinguish the last embers gleaming like dull red eyes glaring from the ash. I slip into the bedroom, where my younger siblings are deep in sleep, and climb onto my bed. The scratchy quilt is no match for the winter night, I wistfully long for the warmth of one of the silk blankets I often craft for others. The wind screeches threateningly, shaking the windowpanes, making it a long and restless night.

When I wake in the morning, my eyes feel heavy from too little rest. Tugging the curtain aside, I am greeted by a landscape of white – a relentless snowfall has blanketed the world. I can barely see the mountaintops of the Himalayas in the far distance, which I dream of traveling to one day. As I watch the swirling snow, my mind drifts. I close my eyes and feel the desert sun beating down; the breeze caressing my face. My gaze follows the path that I know to be the Silk Road – a place said to be paved with gold. I dream of seeing bustling groups of merchants exchanging exquisite goods, to travel to cities of trade, and to discover treasures beyond my imagination.

After a quick breakfast, I bundle up in my only coat and hurry to the shed beside our house – a shelter that stands strong, resisting years of harsh weather, built by my father’s sturdy hand. Inside, the small interior has walls lined with insulating layers to keep the silkworms snug through the winter’s chill. Stacked within are bamboo tanks, each filled with some twenty silkworms, and classified by age.

‘Good morning! Did you all stay warm? Be strong and healthy, so you can spin the best silk!’ I murmur gently.

I carefully transfer the tank’s inhabitants into a spare tank, as if moving the most precious jewels in the world. I wipe the tank clean, ensuring they have a cozy environment as some will be cocooning soon. I line the bottom with soft scraps of paper, creating a plush nest for them to thrive in, along with fresh mulberry leaves for breakfast. Peering through the little windows in each tank, I feel satisfied as I watch them flourish.

‘You’re doing well taking care of them, just as I taught you,’ a weak voice echoes through the room. I see Mother’s smiling face, though her skin is pale and drawn.

‘Mother, tell me about the Silk Road!’ I beg, my eyes alight. ‘Are the merchants really from every corner of the earth? Are the markets as endless as people say?’ I have so many questions in my mind that I am overly excited.

She laughs softly.

‘Yes, it’s amazing. There’re groups of merchants along the road, and with so much trading going on, it’s like a huge bustling market.’

‘Ka! Are you in there?’ Upon hearing Mrs. Li’s voice, I immediately head out of the shed. Mrs. Li is not only our landlord but also runs a silk product stall in the town market. ‘Are the scarves ready yet? So many customers keep asking me about them!’ she laughs amiably.

I beckon her to come inside and place the basket in her hands.

‘I hope your customers will like my scarves!’ I smile.

‘Don’t worry, they’re more than worthy,’ she grins, her eyes kind. ‘Here, I brought you some vegetables. Make a nice stew tonight, more snow is coming,’ she sets a hamper filled with produce on our table.

A few days later, Mrs. Li returns, leading a group of foreigners to the village. The children playing outside in the snow look curious, while the dogs bark and sniff suspiciously at the newcomers.

'Excuse me? May I speak to Ka, please?' Surprised, I step out of my house and see a tall man standing beside Mrs. Li. The man has dark skin, brown eyes, and a high nose. He is clad in an ivory-coloured thick wool jacket; with tapered trousers that are smooth and perfectly ironed. A flowing silk cloak wraps around his shoulders, secured with a golden clasp and topped off with a woollen hat atop his head. My gaze falls to what he is holding in his hand: a scarf that I meticulously crafted.

'Hello, young one.' He stretches out his hand, and I shake it, acutely aware of how rough and callused my hands are compared to his. 'My name is Alavi and I'm from Pakistan. I am amazed by the beautifully crafted scarves and intricate designs you make! I've never seen such a young lady that's able to craft such high-quality silk products. That's impressive!'

As he speaks, appreciation shines in his eyes and a smile crinkles the corners of his bearded mouth. I can hardly believe it – a trader from the Silk Road is praising my handiwork!

'T-thank you.' I stammer, my cheeks growing warm.

'Please, I want you to join my team. Teach us your unique techniques to produce silk textiles. I'll pay you whatever you need – be it gold or silver, more than enough for your family. I believe your products could be known across the Silk Road countries and showcased in nations.' His eyes gleam with enthusiasm, and I can also sense the excitement in his voice. I am still unable to process such a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity that has knocked on my door – quite literally.

I want to chase adventure and follow the Silk Road I have always imagined. But when I look at my young siblings peering at us from the doorway, wearing their old jackets and too-small hats, their cheeks flushed rosy from the chill, I see them shyly turn away as Mr. Alavi glances toward them.

Back in the house, my younger siblings immediately throw themselves upon me.

'Ka, you won't leave us, will you?' Their voices tremble with a mix of fear and hope. I stroke their heads gently.

'I... I don't know,' my voice falters, and my heart races as I meet their hopeful eyes.

They retreat to the bedroom, whispering among themselves.

'You should go. You could see all the sights you've dreamed of, meet new people, experience the wonders of the Silk Road.' I turn to see Mother sitting in her chair. Her smile is gentle, but I catch the sheen of soft tears glistening in her eyes.

'But Father is still stationed at the border.' I murmur.

'Ka, are you okay?' My youngest sister, Fan, stands at the bedroom door, her face etched with confusion. I look around, and realize Mother is gone, just as she has been for three years. I look at Fan, and the fragile world I've built for myself begins to shatter. She looks so innocent, but her face fills me with determination.

'Ka, it doesn't matter if I get new dolls or clothes. I just want you to be home with us! I want us to be a family and have fun together!' Her cheeks are rosy, and when she speaks, she tilts her little head, emphasizing her earnestness.

The offer burns like a dying star – beautiful and brilliant yet fleeting. I could go and see the world. I could follow my dreams. But when I think of my young siblings and Father, who was forced to serve on the dangerous border, offering his blood and body, his last words echo in my mind: he promised to return and urged me to take care of my family.

Picking up the handkerchief that Mother made for me when I was born, I trace my fingers over my embroidered name chosen by my parents, 'Ka' – meaning 'family' in Chinese, each stitch woven with love. A single tear traces a path down my cold cheek, landing softly on the worn wood floor.

I realize this is my Silk Road – not a path of gold and luxury, but one of support and love, paved with patience and sacrifice. I trust this is not an end to my dreams. I will wait for the right time to come – for the day Father returns and when my siblings grow older. Together, we will fill our home with joy and laughter once more. My family is indeed the noblest road I will ever travel.

The Lost Ancient World

Diocesan Girls' School, Chow, Cherlin – 14

His heart raced as he gazed at the array of dinosaur fossils, which were meticulously displayed within the glass cases of Lufeng Dinosaur National Geological Park Museum. Each fragment of bones whispered tales of ancient epochs. As Mingyu leaned closer, his breath fogged up the pane. The contours of the long-extinct bodies of dinosaurs danced in his imagination, vibrant in a way that only a true aficionado could appreciate.

“Alright, Mingyu, it’s closing time. See you next week,” the museum manager chided gently, gesturing toward the exit. Mingyu shared excitedly, “I’m going to be away for a couple weeks. I heard that a group of palaeontologists are heading to Hubei as there have been recent reports on the discovery of new dinosaur fossils. I must go find out for myself!” A smile broke across his face, and he left the museum.

As a child, Mingyu had already fostered his love for dinosaurs. He lived a simple life in the mountainous terrain of Yunnan Province with his parents, who were hard working farmers. It was one day when he dug up a tiny fossil in his farm that unlocked his interest in dinosaurs. That tiny piece of fossil was placed in the very same museum exhibit that he visited almost every week. Ever since his little discovery, he was hypnotised by these prehistoric artifacts and developed an immense passion for learning more about dinosaurs. He diligently studied nearly every book and article he could unearth about dinosaurs, immersing himself in a treasure trove of ancient lore. Through years of self-learning, he had nearly transformed himself into a skilled paleontologist.

With newfound determination, Mingyu set off for Hubei Province. He packed his limited supplies, including a camera, digging tools, a flashlight, and just enough money for a train ticket to Hubei, joining the group of professionals as they embarked on their journey.

After enduring a lengthy and arduous journey, Mingyu finally set foot in the breathtaking Shennongjia region, nestled in the scenic northwest of Hubei Province. Upon catching up with the group of dedicated paleontologists who were ahead of him, “Hey there, you’re the young man from Yunnan, right? Come and join us on this expedition!” a voice rang out, warm and inviting, laced with the thrill of adventure, “We’ve just stumbled upon some reports on the discovery of fossils. We are confident that they belong to some undiscovered dinosaur species!” With the assuring words of the paleontologist, a surge of exhilarating energy coursed through Mingyu, washing away the exhaustion that clung to him like a heavy shroud.

Shennongjia, a name full of wonder and intrigue, spoken about in hushed tones, was considered one of the Mainland's most enigmatic regions—a region that remained mostly unexplored and undeveloped for millennia of human civilisation. Its distinctive natural setting supported a vibrant biodiversity and diverse ecosystems.

As he ventured deeper into this remote region, Mingyu was captivated by the stunning scenery that resembled an untouched paradise. The mountainous terrain was a tapestry of rugged beauty, characterized by rolling hills that twisted and turned, with jagged outcroppings of sedimentary rocks of the Paleozoic era that had been deposited and lithified over hundreds and millions of years ago.

Mingyu was gently carried away by the tranquility of nature. Slowly, he lost sight of the palaeontologists and gradually walked off to an overgrown path. He tried to catch up with the team, however, the more he trailed, the more certain that he’s detached from them. Mingyu realised that the path in front of him grew steadily steeper! His heart skipped a beat, but he still persevered.

As day surrendered to dusk, Mingyu grasped his flashlight, its beam slicing through the gathering dusk. However, fatigue from a full day excursion weakened his energy and concentration. He suddenly lost his footing and fell through a hidden drop at the end of a cliff. Luckily, he landed on a pile of wet mud and dry leaves that saved his life and broke his fall. He fell into a deep valley hidden below the cliff.

Mingyu breathed heavily as he slumped over. Every fiber of him seemed to ache with exhaustion. His now-weak and wobbly legs refrained him from continuing his journey in the dark. Mingyu decided to sleep in a small cave he found nearby with the hope to start fresh the next day.

When the first rays of morning light filtered through the cracks of the rocky ceiling, Mingyu blinked, allowing his surroundings to come into focus. The darkness of the cave was receding, and he could see the faint outlines of the rocky edges.

As he walked out of the cave, he was astounded by the vast panoramic view that greeted his eyes, leaving him in awe. Towering cliffs encircled the valley and waterfalls tumbled gracefully into crystal-clear pools below, glistening like diamonds in the radiant sunlight. Lush ferns carpeted the forest floor, with wildflowers that dotted the ground, painting the scene with splashes of color. The air was filled with the gentle roar of the falls and the sweet scent of wildflowers, creating a symphony of nature's beauty that enchanted the senses.

Mingyu's ears perked up at a rustling sound that shook branches nearby him. Then, a sudden, unusually loud swishing noise thumped on the ground. Mingyu's pulse quickened as he noticed a looming shadow that was only metres away from him. Would it be a 'Bigfoot'? The idea flashed in his mind as there had been occasional reports on the sighting of Bigfoot in Shennongjia. However, as the creature, the size of a motorbike, advanced in his sight, Mingyu spotted its remarkably long tail, adorned with vibrant patches of orange and rich brown. The creature was covered with a coat of soft, downy feathers in a striking deep russet hue. While its front legs were short and stout, its powerful hind legs were long and muscular.

Mingyu's breath was caught in his throat as he took in the magnificent sight before him. He squinted and rubbed his eyes. He pinched himself on the arm to make sure he wasn't dreaming. From his knowledge, those were exactly the features of a *Sinosauropteryx*, a birdlike dinosaur that was the new species recently identified from the fossils in Liaoning Province a few years ago.

It's A REAL-LIFE Dinosaur! "This is going to be the greatest discovery of all mankind. My paleontologist friends would be thrilled to find out this. It will be the key to help resolve the mysteries surrounding the extinction of dinosaurs..." Mingyu could not stop thinking to himself of all the possibilities and changes that would rock the world by the discovery!

Instinctively, Mingyu whipped out his camera to take photos of this historical moment. Just as the camera flashed and clicked, Mingyu suddenly sensed the movement of the dinosaur towards him. He was discovered by the *Sinosauropteryx*!

With one great leap, the *Sinosauropteryx* soared into the air, stretching out its powerful wings, unfurling and slicing through the air like sails catching the wind. Each feather glistened in the dappled sunlight, the layers shifted with raw grace, rustling leaves and swirling dust in its wake.

Mingyu's heart dropped in terror as he instinctively scrambled to his feet to escape. But to his surprise, instead of chasing after him as its prey, the *Sinosauropteryx* headed for a small burrow that was hidden beneath a bundle of leaves and twigs. Petrified, Mingyu hid behind shrubs and observed what was going to happen. Underneath the bundle of leaves and twigs were four deep bluish green eggs, with their size as large as watermelon! The dinosaur sat on the eggs protectively and swivelled its head around cautiously, trying to look for any signs of Mingyu.

Mingyu instinctively recoiled, a profound realization washing over him like a warm tide. The *Sinosauropteryx*, rather than being a fearsome predator, stood proudly as a loving mother, fiercely protecting her precious clutch of eggs from any encroaching dangers. Its deep amber eyes held a blend of vigilance and gentle warmth, reflecting a motherly love. This scene warmed Mingyu's heart and moved him deeply. Mingyu's eyes filled with touching tears.

He began to unfold the secret of the presence of this ancient being, probably with its herd. The deep valley, a secluded sanctuary, untouched by the chaos of human encroachment, had been sheltering them, allowing them to thrive in peace for eons. Mingyu also realised that the relatively small size of *Sinosauropteryx* was advantageous for their survival in the valley, concealing them from the outside world.

With a profound sense of respect and understanding, he believed that the dinosaurs deserved the chance to flourish in their natural habitat, undisturbed by humanity, untainted by the prying eyes of observers. Mingyu felt bittersweet as he retreated, yet grateful for the momentary glimpse into the life of this surreal creature. As Mingyu ascended uphill, he silently deleted the photos from his camera, knowing that the memory of the magic encounter would forever be etched into his heart.

Jade

Diocesan Girls' School, Huang, Cho Kiu – 13

“Some many years ago, in the very last days of the China Silk Road, a courier called Li Wei was travelling with his faithful assistant along the famous Silk Road. He was an accomplished courier, having a unique charm for people, and he had carried many messages across even the most dangerous parts of the Silk Road successfully. He knew all the paths by heart, and the stars were his compasses—his guides—taking him from country to country, from culture to culture, bringing messages, building a starlit bridge between countries. Fireflies accompanied him, too—golden specks of light: tiny little blobs of ink splattered across a scroll of parchment. They lit his way for him, bringing light, warmth and hope. Now, he had been sent. Sent on one of the last missions of the old Silk Road. A message. A dangerous one. If he succeeded, he could create peace. If he failed, well... he’d probably be dead. He shivered in the dark night, and clutched the jade in his pocket that had been given to him by another merchant he helped on his way to Persia. His heart thumped tightly against his ribcage and he took a deep breath, believing that the mission would go well. This night, there were no fireflies. None at all. It seemed as though they had vanished midair, disappearing and fading away like dew in the morning sun.”

The remainder of the page had been torn out. April had been trying in vain for the last two hours to find the rest of the story. A cloud of dust floated into the air, as April reached for the ancient brown bag and she sneezed. She had come to her grandparents’ home for the summer holidays, and once she expressed that she felt terribly bored, someone had suggested she to tidy up the attic, and here she had been, sneezing and groaning at the amount of settled dust, until she found that fateful torn out page and read it, then began to search for the rest, groaning and sneezing again.

April carefully unwrapped the brown bag and, groaning as she wiped her hands on her trousers, peeled open the last piece of paper. There it sat, a half-piece of jade glimmering in the last rays of sunlight that shone through the attic windows, wrapped in a smooth, whole piece of cloth. Looking closer, she gasped. It was a real piece of ancient silk... but it was also cut in half, just like the jade.

Before April had time to dwell on this mystery, a voice rang out quite clearly, “Hey, April. Guess who’s here!” April spun around, and hearing the sound of Great-aunt Marcy’s footsteps, she stuffed the piece of jade (still wrapped tightly in the silk) in her pocket just as Great-aunt Marcy wobbled into her room. Great-aunt Marcy was a plump and ridiculous woman who smiled way too much and put on even more makeup than movie stars who have to look older. She had long loose dark brown hair piled on her shoulders, and brandished a sparkly pink blouse with frills at the edges, and a ridiculously bright yellow cardigan. April fought the urge to roll her eyes at her hugely smiling and rather ridiculous Great-aunt Marcy, who was showing all of her pointy white teeth (which April liked to compare to a white-faced monster with too much makeup), and battering a long eyebrow at her. Still beaming, she gave April a bone-crushing hug. She covered April’s eyes with her fat fingers and screamed in a horrifying high-pitched voice, “Guess where Auntie Marcy is bringing you! Guess!”

April cringed inwardly and as she wished rather wistfully that her great-aunt would stop treating her as a two-year-old, she muttered quietly, “Umm, where?” Great-Aunt Marcy finally released April and shrieked, “The Chinese museum!” Flinching slightly, April resisted a groan.

The journey had been a seemingly endless hour of Great-aunt Marcy’s ridiculous stories on how she got her makeup and random stories of whoever did what, and April felt quite sure that she was slowly turning green to the effort of nodding and smiling. Her face seemed to have frozen, and her face muscles had never quite worked so hard, so it was a relief to finally arrive at the museum.

To her horror, Great-aunt Marcy chattered on even as they walked from exhibit to exhibit, and April was beginning to feel sleepy and exhausted when she saw the half-piece of jade, lying on the exhibition display table, covered also in a half-piece of ancient silk. Glancing around to make sure no one noticed, she slipped quietly into a corner, and took her own piece of jade out, and looked at the exhibit again. It would definitely fit. April’s stomach seemed to give a sudden jolt. She couldn’t help it, she gasped loudly, then covered her mouth to stifle the noise.

“What are you doing?” a sharp voice called out. “What’s that?”

For the first time in April's memory, Great-aunt Marcy looked both shocked and alarmed.

"I, erm," April stammered.

Great-aunt Marcy sighed. "I guessed someone would find the jade after all. You saw that page, didn't you?"

April nodded, feeling butterflies flutter nervously in her stomach.

"I should never have left that page out...but perhaps, it's for the better. Let me show you the full story. It's time Li Wei's tale stopped hiding in attics." Without another word, she tucked her hand into her pocket, and handed over a long roll of paper. April's eyes lit up with excitement, and leaning forward with anticipation, she began to read.

"He was ambushed by bandits, the exact ones he had hoped so terribly not to bump into, and they yelled at him, threatening knives and arrows. A lead bandit with a patch covering his eye and a bruised cheek glared ferociously at Li Wei. The bandit reminded Li Wei almost systematically of a tiger reaping before attack, the bruises and patches being the stripes. 'Give us the scroll. Give us the message,' snarled the bandit, pointing a sharp knife right at Li Wei's heart. 'Or else...' A nasty smile formed on his lips, showing his yellowish teeth that reminded Li Wei forcibly of a snake preparing to attack. A shiver went down his spine. He racked his brain furiously. There was no way to escape. He looked at his assistant pitifully trying to escape from the bandit's hands. An idea suddenly came to him and his heart beat furiously at the possible risk of dying. Well, you can't win if you don't play, he thought.

Hands trembling, he tried to steady himself. Slowly but carefully he put his hands into his pockets, and broke the jade in half. 'Hey, look there!' Li Wei pointed at the dark night sky, and all the bandits looked that way, giving him a second to run. He jumped free of the bandit, rushed up to his assistant, plunged his bleeding hand into his long robe, took both the scroll and the half-pieces of jade out, threw them at him, and pushed him away onto one of the horses, hissing, 'Run! The jade's for you and my family, just take it and—'

Before he could finish his sentence, an arrow flew at his heart. A sliver of moonlight cut through his face just as he fell; a few strands of hair glinting under the pale moonlight, just as he gasped for the last breaths of his life; his face was a mirror, reflecting the full moon hanging up in the sky like a lantern lighting the way. But there was no way for the lantern to light up. No way. No way without Li Wei. It seemed like time had stopped. An eerie silence passed through the trees and a slight breeze made the hairs on the assistant's neck stand on edge. A rasping noise brought him back to his senses.

'Go, go—' Li Wei gasped. Every word was like an enormous effort. 'Ru—' and he spoke no more.

The bandits charged, and the assistant rode for his life. The assistant bit hard down on his tongue as he glanced back for a last glimpse of his master, and tasting blood, tears ran down his face, his hair flying in the wind.

The next morning, the assistant arrived safely in Persia and delivered the message successfully. When he arrived back home, he faithfully returned the half-piece of jade to Li Wei's tearful family, and kept his own piece on the desk of his study at his house. On full moon nights, the tip of the jade would glint in the moonlight, an uncanny resemblance to how Li Wei's hair caught the light in the last moments of his life.

One day, this exact half piece of jade would sit in a museum, waiting for its twin. And one day, hopefully, they will reunite."

And they did.

Woven

Diocesan Girls' School, Lau, Tsz Yi Stella – 14

In the grand tapestry of the fourteenth century, the Silk Road had been ebbing much before anybody acknowledged it. It started falling out of favor unobtrusively—slack business, nervous traders and little collapses, like cracks in old ware.

The Dragon Trail wound through the bitter deserts and mountains, and the Passage of the Lunar Serpent, a maritime route of vast, became hazardous. Ships were sunk in storms and pirates took control of new waters and the winds became unreliable. All ways were unsafe, all expeditions hazardous roll of dice.

Everyone felt the shift.

No one knew how to mend it.

And in the large market of Samarkand, where all the wealth of the world crashed together in dazzling colour, the rupture was expressed in one deafening crackle.

An Italian cart loaded with Venetian glass broke its axle under the weight of its load.

The beam of wood snapped as though it were struck with lightning, and the whole weight swayed, as though in a forward direction. Glassware—blown so much carefully in other distant shops across the water—smashed upon the ground, and scattered in a constellation of sparkling fragments. They caught the morning sun and reflected it back, as though a thousand ruined futures were broken up on the sand.

The camel driver cursed the mountains for their cruelty.

The Venetian captain cursed the sea for its deceitfulness.

Up they soared, in the air—two worlds colliding in an instant: land and water, delay and danger, tradition and risk.

But two people saw something else.

Dimitrios was amidst the chaos, as the others were, but his attention was not on the broken glass itself—rather, on the shattered world it represented. He grew up in the desert, yet was sea-bound, windblown, sand-covered—a man of contradictions.

He had towed shipwrecks and caravans through monsoons and droughts, and now, gazing at the cart's load lying there in pieces, he felt a silent conviction:

This was not an accident.

This was a warning.

His memories awakened—implicit and unavoidable.

Then a wave of nostalgia overwhelmed him:

He was a boy again, standing beside his father on the docks of Hormuz. A wrecked vessel was crawling into the port, its hull torn open, its sailors barely alive. His father had placed a hand on his shoulder, with shadowed wisdom learned from loss. “The sea gives with one hand and takes with ten.”

Those words were deeply rooted in Dimitrios's heart and grew heavier with each passing year. He felt the old fear in his bones as he observed the traders' arguments. The sea was failing. The old world was unraveling under its own contradictions.

Then Lin stepped into the scene.

She was an engineer of the Dragon-Trail—keen, steady-handed, soot-covered in the mornings—she had to repair the broken caravan wheels. While the others raved, she dropped to her knees beside the snapped cart and traced the fractured axle with her fingertips.

“The wheel isn’t the problem,” she murmured.

Her voice was calm, so calm that it cut through the rising arguments like a blade of clear thought.

“Every travel is independent, she continued. Each ship—load, each caravan, comes on alone. No flow. No continuity.”

Dimitrios blinked, startled by how clearly she voiced what he had felt but never dared articulate.

A chain of excessive weak links, said he to himself.

Lin shook her head and took her wax tablet. In quick certain strokes she drew a thing that was not yet anywhere in the world. Then she turned the tablet round to him.

The drawing was simple.
Revolutionarily simple.

Two continuous grooves carved into the earth, like rails, between station and station, and carried the carts on in an uninterrupted line. There will be no more independent caravans. No more isolated ships. One, twisting labor of motion.

Not a caravan.
Not a fleet.
A river of motion.

Dimitrios felt his breath catch in his throat.

“A road that never stops,” he whispered. “A road that carries the world.”

Nothing more, it was a sketch, one thought drawn in wax in the midst of a disorderly market, but it was at this time that the future changed.

And neither of them looked away.

It was not the labor of months that followed but the development of destiny. The news was spread easily among the people who were desperate to change. Artisans, blacksmiths, mathematicians, woodcarvers, mapmakers and architects began to gather. The proposal was impossible according to the old—world reasoning, but too tempting to those who had tried the sourness of a breaking system.

Together they carved grooves into the ground and ran tests of angle, depth and curvature. They constructed high wind—pulleys which caught the desert winds and converted them into motion. The waterwheels were fixed in the mountain streams and rotated the gears hewn out with great care. Relay stations sprang up like stepping stones all over the land, and by these never—ending rails they joined each other.

The work was slow.
It was grueling.
It was dangerous.

But it never faltered.

Everybody came, because all were in the same silent belief: craftsmen, traders, porters, scholars.
This road was common to them all.
This was their salvation.

And so the Silk Road began to breathe again.

The first test came at dawn.

Dimitrios was standing on the new track, the air still cool with the retreating night. There was fear and wonder as he touched the wood, which made his hands tremble. A cart full of rock was brought up on the rails, and its sails were made of canvas, as brown as the sunset. In case it crashed, the stone alone would be broken.

Lin raised the signal flag.

The breeze was blowing across the desert, seizing the sails.

Gears tightened.

Ropes strained.

And then—

The cart moved.

Slowly at first. Tentative. Testing its new world.

Then with one graceful move, sliding along, as no caravan had known, gracefully.

No jolt.

No fight.

No struggle against sand or storm.

Only flow.

The onlookers gasped. Many had never seen such effortless motion, and had traveled their whole lives either across deserts or oceans. A camel jockey who had thirty years of the Trail wiped his eyes. A sailor accustomed to the restless sea whispered in awe, "This... this is steadier than the ocean."

Something inside him shift, something was loosening up, and Dimitrios had wished it to happen without knowing it. The storm that had dwelled in his mind, the sound of the waves, the horror of drowning, appeared to subside. For the first time, there was no battle in travelling through mountains and deserts.

It felt like a connection.

Lin walked up beside him with triumph in her eyes.

"This is not a road built by one empire," she said softly. "Or one people. It belongs to all of us."

The cart flew by, sliding on as silently as a thought on the wind.

It did not drag itself across the land.

It moved with the land.

It breathed with the land.

And to Dimitrios, in a sense which he could never describe to anyone, it dawned upon him that they had invented something the world had never heard of.

In the evening, when the sun was setting itself behind the horizon and had tipped the rails with molten gold, Dimitrios was standing alone by the track. Desert wind swept against him, and aroused the memories he had long kept in hiding.

Another memory rose unbidden—

It was like a storm around him, as he clung to a broken spar of wood, when he was young again. Waves were as much as living animals. Lightning carved the sky. The flavor of salt filled his lungs reminded him of the time he felt like the sea had swallowed him forever.

Many years later on, he had been under the opinion that the world was split: land versus water, security versus peril, good versus doom.

However, now, when the Silk Express was present, something changed.
He knew that the world had never been divided.
They had simply lost touch.

And the highway which they had constructed was no struggle with nature, but communion with it, unity of wind and of forest, of water and of mill, of man and of the magnificent landscape, with which it loved to be united.

His father's old warning echoed again.

"The sea gives with one hand and takes with ten."

But here, to the first time, Dimitrios caught an unsaid fact behind the words:

If the sea takes, build where it cannot reach.
Should the world break apart, mend it up.

The Silk Express was such weaving.

Another Silk Road is emerging, and this time, it was not conquest that bred it or empire, rather it was a combination of the need to work together, necessity and imagination. A vein of intertwining reach was made between old divided lands.

A highway which had made disorder sanity.
Distance into connection.
Fear into possibility.

And as Dimitrios touched the warm rail he said, this is where it begins all over again, the world.

Because now he knew:
The Silk Express was not any road.
It was a rebirth.
An avenue that would unite the world.

The Unexpected Love

Diocesan Girls' School, Leung, Tin Yi – 12

In a vibrant town teeming with life, Jasmine's father, a respected silk and tea merchant, fell gravely ill. The whispers of his condition spread quickly, mingling with the chatter of merchants haggling over goods and the laughter of children playing in the streets. Despite his illness, he insisted on embarking on a crucial journey to the Silk Road. "If I don't go, we will lose everything," he said, his voice strained yet resolute. Jasmine, fiercely protective of her father and filled with worry, could hardly bear the thought of him facing danger alone.

"Please, Papa! I can't let you go without me! It's too dangerous!" she implored, her heart racing at the perilous road ahead. After a pause, her father's expression softened.

"You are strong, my dear, but this journey will not be easy. Are you sure you wish to accompany me?"

With determination, Jasmine replied, "Yes, I want to help you, whatever it takes."

As they prepared for their journey, Jasmine meticulously packed a bag with essentials: water, clothes, dried fruits, and a cherished necklace her mother had once worn. The necklace, a delicate string of pearls, symbolized her mother's memory, lingering like a sweet fragrance that filled their home. In China, it was rare for a young lady to accompany her father on a business trip, especially since family businesses were typically patrilineal. After her mother's death and her brother's untimely passing, the responsibility of caring for her father weighed heavily on Jasmine.

Setting off from Changan, excitement mingled with anxiety. The road was long and fraught with challenges, but a spark of hope ignited within Jasmine as they traveled through bustling markets, where colorful stalls overflowed with silks and spices, and the air was thick with the scent of roasted meats and sweet pastries.

Days turned into weeks as they journeyed south, the landscape shifting from lush fields to arid deserts. "We need to borrow some camels. The sand here could be deadly," her father said. They knocked on the doors of camel owners, but were often met with rejection.

A maid eventually explained, "Lots of thieves from China stole our camels; that's why they don't trust Chinese merchants." Jasmine felt miserable, thinking of how far they had come and their need for a camel. Looking at the sky, she sang a mournful song, not noticing the tears streaming down her cheeks.

Just then, a boy tapped her shoulder. "You're a wonderful singer!" he exclaimed.

"Thanks!" Jasmine said, wiping away the tears from her cheeks. "What's your name?"

"I'm Sahar," he replied, bright-eyed with a mischievous grin. Drawn to her voice, he had been captivated by her beauty and the emotion in her song. After a brief conversation, Sahar learned of Jasmine's predicament. "My father has camels, but he doesn't trust the Chinese," he admitted.

"Isn't there something we could do?" Jasmine asked, hope rekindling.

"I could steal one for you," he said, a mix of excitement and hesitation in his voice. The idea startled Jasmine.

"Steal? But that's wrong!"

"I know, but I want to help you!" Sahar insisted. Torn between her morals and the thrill of possibility, Jasmine pondered.

“If you do this, I will owe you a great debt,” she replied cautiously.

“Then it’s settled! Meet me here tomorrow, and I’ll bring you a camel!” Sahar promised, excitement dancing in his eyes.

That night, Jasmine couldn’t shake thoughts of Sahar’s bold proposal. Would he go through with it? The next morning, her heart raced as she approached the lake to find Sahar waiting, a nervous smile on his face. “I did it! I brought you a camel!”

Jasmine’s eyes widened in surprise. “You really stole one?”

Sahar nodded, pride mixed with guilt on his face. “I couldn’t let you down.” As they admired the sturdy camel, Jasmine felt a pang of conscience.

“We can’t keep this camel. It’s wrong,” she said firmly. Sahar looked confused.

“But what will we do? You need a camel to travel.”

“I can’t accept something that was stolen,” Jasmine replied. “Let’s return it.”

Disappointment washed over Sahar. “But we’ve come so far…”

“Trust me,” she insisted. “It’s the right thing to do.” They mounted the camel and rode back toward Sahar’s home. Anxiety twisted in Jasmine’s stomach at the thought of potential repercussions. “It’s too late to think about that now,” she told herself.

Upon arrival, Sahar’s father stood tending to other camels. Surprise washed over his face as he saw them approach. “Sir, I must confess. I took your camel without permission,” Jasmine said, stepping forward. Sahar stood beside her, admiration and fear in his eyes.

“I helped her, Father! I thought it would be the right thing to do.” His father’s brows furrowed.

“You stole from me, Sahar?”

“No, Father! I wanted to help her father!” Sahar pleaded.

Jasmine took a deep breath. “I cannot accept something taken from you. I’m truly sorry for what happened.” Her honesty moved Sahar’s father.

“You are brave to admit your mistakes. And you, young lady, are honorable. I respect your honesty.” Relief washed over Jasmine.

“Thank you for understanding. We just want to continue our journey the right way.”

“I see you are both determined,” he said slowly. “I will allow you to take a camel, but it must be done properly. Let me help you.” Gratitude surged within Jasmine.

“Thank you, sir! We won’t let you down.” Jasmine instinctively broke into a lullaby her mother had taught her, her voice filling the air with joy.

Sahar’s father smiled and insisted, “You must sing for us before you go.” With a flutter of excitement, Jasmine sang a heartfelt melody under the open sky. Sahar and his father listened, captivated by the emotion within her voice. When

the final note faded, Sahar's father said, "You have a gift, young lady. You honor your mother's memory with your song." Tears glistened in Jasmine's eyes.

"Thank you. Music helps me remember her." Surprisingly, Sahar's father made an offer.

"I will give you this camel as a gift, and when you return, I would like my son to marry you." Jasmine's heart raced.

"I—"

"Think about it," he interjected gently. "You've shown great strength and integrity. Sahar cares for you deeply." Jasmine glanced at Sahar, who looked hopeful yet apprehensive.

"I will think about it," she promised, a smile breaking through her tension.

With their new camel ready, Jasmine and her father set off once more, excitement bubbling within them. The road ahead was filled with possibilities, and they felt renewed hope guiding their journey. As they traveled, they traded silks and tea leaves, meeting merchants from distant lands.

One evening, as they camped under the stars, Jasmine shared her dreams with her father. "I want to create a legacy, to carry on our family's name through music and trade," she said, her eyes shining with passion. Her father nodded, pride swelling in his heart.

"You are destined for greatness, my dear. We are storytellers, sharing our culture with the world."

Throughout their adventure, Jasmine often thought of Sahar, wondering about his life and how he was faring without her. Each time she sang, she felt a connection to him as if their hearts were entwined through her melodies. As the days passed, anxiety washed over her. Would Sahar still feel the same? Finally, after many months of travel, they began their journey back home.

Approaching Sahar's village, memories flooded back as she smiled at the thought of reuniting. When they arrived, Sahar was waiting near the lake, his face lighting up at her sight. Staring at each other, Jasmine noticed the changes in him. A tear rolled down her cheek as Sahar hugged her tightly. "You look even more beautiful than I remember," he said, his voice deeper.

"I have so much to tell you!" Jasmine finally blurted. They spent hours catching up, laughter echoing across the lake. Sahar listened intently as Jasmine recounted their adventures, admiring how he had matured during their time apart.

As the sun set, Sahar's father approached, a knowing smile on his face. "I see you two have found each other again," he said warmly. Jasmine felt a rush of anxiety.

"Sir, about the proposal..." Sahar's father raised a hand to cut her off.

"I believe you are meant to be together. You have both shown courage and integrity this past year." Jasmine looked at Sahar, his eyes filled with hope.

"I would be honored to marry your son," she said, certainty swelling in her chest. Sahar beamed, joy palpable between them.

"Then it is settled," his father replied, grinning. "You will be wed at the next full moon." As the stars twinkled above, Jasmine felt a sense of peace wash over her. She had embarked on a journey filled with challenges that led her to a new beginning, a beginning where she could cherish her mother's memories with music, support her father in his business, hand in hand with the boy who had captured her heart.

The Hidden Secrets of the Silk Road

Diocesan Girls' School, Li, Sum Yuet Gwyneth – 13

Rays of sunshine illuminated the classroom as Nova flipped through her history textbook. On the summer afternoon, she gazed outside, white cotton candy clouds decorating the sky blue paint, nearly missing the teacher's instruction to read about the Silk Road.

Nova read, "The Silk Road was a network of Asian trade routes spanning six thousand four hundred kilometres, facilitating economic, cultural, political interactions between East and West. Forgotten tales say hidden mythical creatures guard its secrets."

Nova's jaw dropped. Miles, her seatmate, frowned at his own textbook. "Is there a printing issue? Mine doesn't..." He paused. "It says we should read the enchantment."

"Let's read it out!" Nova grinned.

Miles groaned. "Bad idea—"

Stubbornly, Nova whispered the enchantment. A flash of light obscured their vision, and a fast wind whisked them away.

After Nova and Miles gathered their bearings, they stared at their sandy surroundings. They were in the desert, with the sun burning their skin and their stunned shock began to wear off in the heat.

"Where are we?" Nova questioned, a sliver of panic in her voice.

"We're on the Silk Road," Miles replied. "How? The Silk Road was destroyed ages ago—"

"Look! There are travelers here, and they don't think it's absolute bonkers that the Silk Road is back. It has to mean we traveled back in time."

"If so, then how do we get out of here? We don't have the textbooks with us, and the travelers won't have a single clue to help us." Miles responded.

"We don't have a choice," Nova made her way towards the travelers, "let's ask them where we are first."

Miles trudged behind Nova as they observed the travelers' sacks bulging with goods, porcelain clinking as they drank water and rested beneath thin fabric tents.

"Excuse me," Miles asked, "do you know where we are?"

The travelers blinked at Nova and Miles, bewildered there were two kids with them in the incinerating heat. An old man said, "We're on Kyzylkum Desert, between the Amu Darya and Syr Darya rivers. Are you lost?"

"No, we...fell asleep inside that caravan over there," Nova gestured at the caravan. Nearby, the camels flicked their ears in amusement. "We didn't realise until we woke up and found we were in a desert. We're sorry."

"Can we tag along?" Miles added.

The old man smiled. "Of course. We're heading to Samarkand to trade. You can help us carry supplies."

Grateful, Miles and Nova lifted heavy sacks of dried fruits, nuts, salted meats, and water in animal-skin containers.

The travelers packed their tents, and the camels snorted as they pulled the caravan. Nova and Miles hurried to keep up with the old man.

"Where is Samarkand?" Miles asked.

"It's the centre of the Silk Road, a trading hub of silk, paper, and other trades. It's a beautiful city, with gardens, canals and markets." The old man explained.

"That's amazing," Nova smiled. Suddenly, another group of travellers rushed past, the camels huffing wearily and travelers heading towards the north-east.

"They look stressed," Miles observed. Nova noticed two more travelers lingering behind, whispering in hushed tones. She leaned in and heard the conversation in snippets.

“We trapped them...underground... convince the merchant to follow us...”

The travelers hurried forward. “Their conversation was so confusing.” Nova crinkled her nose.

“Maybe we’ll find out when we get to Samarkand. They’re heading the same way,” Miles grunted, staggering on the sand.

Hours later, the heat cooled as the sun set, just as they began to see Samarkand on the horizon.

The buzz of Samarkand seemed to grow louder, the travelers walking past market stalls that sold spices and carpets.

The villagers hurried to settle in for the night.

Whispers trailed past Nova’s ear and she jerked her head towards it, spotting the previous group of travelers bumping past everybody.

“We sent the merchant into our underground chamber. Get the Phoenix and Dragon in position. Bribe that person for all we need like before.” The traveler that was leading the group instructed.

“Follow them!” Miles said as they broke into a run, tracking the travelers’ directions and found themselves in a desolate place, seeing the travelers nudge open a secret underground tunnel, the entrance covered with a clump of sand.

The travelers climbed into the tunnel. Just before the entrance shut, Miles stuck his boot under the entrance, letting him and Nova follow the travelers underground.

Nova and Miles’ hearts beat wildly as the travelers went through the door in the tunnel, walking past a pathway on the right. They picked up their pace until they saw a large chamber, with prison bars everywhere, the mist hiding the children from sight.

“You, merchant!” The lead traveler yelled. “What do you have to trade?”

“I have all these items,” The young merchant trembled, gesturing towards the floor. Precious stones like silver and jade, laid beside fine fabrics, Chinese porcelain and a stack of coins glimmered in the dark chamber.

The travelers’ eyes gleamed with greed.

“Perfect. We’ll be keeping this for ourselves! Put it with the others in the vault!” The leader barked, and the merchant cried out. Nova and Miles glanced at each other with fury etched in their faces.

“You can’t! I’ll tell the others—”

Shrieks thundered through the chamber, sand falling from the ceiling. Gusts of wind swept across the travelers’ faces. Nova and Miles turned toward the source of noise.

In the shadows, two pairs of piercing eyes blinked. A phoenix with golden feathers shrieked in distress, a dragon with emerald scales roared in fury. They were both trapped in a pearly cage, the bars opal in colour.

“Wow,” Nova and Miles gasped. A surge of power swam through their veins, their hearts pulsing with the magic as their bodies vibrated with energy. The mythical creatures’ power had passed on to them.

“Fail to follow our orders, and you will be burned alive.” The leader dragged each syllable, backing the merchant to the corner. The phoenix cried, the dragon spat out emeralds in rage.

“What do we do?” Nova stuttered. “The travelers are stealing her resources, if not the travelers will force the Phoenix and Dragon to kill her!”

“We have to save them. The magic the Phoenix and Dragon are blasting out isn’t working against the bars, which means the opal bars resist magic.”

“But how?” Nova asked. “Is there a key we can use to free them?”

“Of course! The leader mentioned a vault. The key must be in there!”

Nova’s brain started to whirl. “Yes! I remember seeing a narrow pathway just before we went into this chamber. It must lead to the vault!”

They crawled back, turning sharply left and into the pathway. A speck of light guided them, the shimmer acting as a beacon.

“There.” Miles whispered. Flames ignited in his hands, a fireball blasting the silver vault. It burst open, treasures spilling out—and a rusty key.

They raced back. The merchant sobbed as the travelers prepared to haul the items away. Heads snapped toward Nova and Miles, horror dawning when they realised intruders broke into the chamber.

“Get them!” The leader roared, and the creatures shrieked. Miles and Nova sprinted towards the cages, the travelers chasing close behind. Miles fumbled with the key, unlocking the dragon’s cage.

The dragon burst free, columns of fire blazing from his mouth. Nova rushed to the phoenix, which shrieked as golden feathers rained down, exploding on impact. The travelers screamed, cornered as the creatures soared above, shielding Nova and Miles from blasts of magic.

The leader backed toward the exit. “Don’t come any closer! We’re going to destroy the Silk Road!”

Nova advanced angrily. “Don’t you dare try to escape! Return to all the traders of what’s theirs!”

The leader sprinted in panic towards the exit. Nova’s hands flared, golden chains whipping like a lasso to trap him.

The travelers were defeated, and the mythical creatures roared in triumph.

After the fierce battle in the chambers, Nova and Miles called the travelers that they came to Samarkand with, gathering villagers to return the stolen treasures back to the traders. The phoenix and dragon lurked within the shadows, and as Nova and Miles’ eyes locked with the creatures’, flames whisked them away, back into the present day.

Nova and Miles blinked, the history teacher’s bored voice ringing as clear as a bell, back into the classroom. Out of the blue, a soft feather fluttered onto their table.

“What...?” Nova mumbled as she picked up the feather, words engraved on the feather: ‘*Thank you for helping us protect the Silk Road. Until next time.*’

Nova and Miles grinned at each other before turning to the history teacher, their passages about the textbooks returning to normal as the feather flicked across them, magically erasing any trace about mythical creatures or silly enchantments.

The feather shimmered with sparks as Nova and Miles murmured, “Until next time.”

The Bird on the Road

Diocesan Girls' School, Lo, Elis – 14

Jiuquan 138BCE, winter

“They’re hunting the birds.”

Her quill scratched against parchment; his brow furrowed. “Who?”

“The god in need of sacrifice. He who roams the battlefields with wine in his hand” The feather quivered under her breath. “War.”

As if answering her statement, a clatter of hooves and metal footsteps passed by outside. Somewhere, a gunshot shattered tranquility.

“That’s it. Sober up now.” Huan swiped the bottle of rice wine out of her grip, yet her irises, albeit hazed, still danced with fervor. Silence engulfed their hut, broken only by the faint writing and Huan’s restless shuffling. Liquor, he thought, would be the death of her creative fire.

“I’ve been wondering,” Qing murmured. “How far south would the birds fly to escape their shackles of cold? How long will they fly to escape war?” Glinting pupils met his clear ones. “Would their mate accompany them?”

Her ominous question finally settled in Huan. “You plan on escaping southward to god-knows-where?” A weary sigh. Internally, he acknowledged staying was a dead wish. Xiongnu troops were encircling the Great Wall border of Jiuquan. Sooner or later, they would become another war casualty. Taking Qing’s hand, he replied softly. “You know wherever you go, I’ll be with you, right?”

As if she hadn’t heard her husband, Qing’s gaze fixed on the faraway mountains. “Out of the cage is the only way birds can be...” Qing paused, setting down her quill. “Free.”

—

By Qing, #11

a pocket full of nothing

a heart heavy with hope

can bring you on the road

where youthful dreamers go

my mind’s a canvas

my soul made of air

when you take my hand in yours

what more do i have to fear

—

Amne Machin of Kunlun Shan (20,610 feet) 138BCE, winter

The cold was a merciless tormentor. After slipping past the Great Wall and trekking south, a crisis struck within days. To the eye, the mountains were a sight to behold: magnificent ombré slopes—snowy transitioning to umber—looming over olive-green land. Pale azure skies and ivory peaks reflected off mirror-like lakes in the shape of a beast’s teeth. Every breath of exertion created a dancing small cloud in the breeze.

The serene terrain would be a gorgeous haven if not for the inconsistent temperature changes and scarce water source.

"I need a break." Qing crouched against the mountain, chest heaving as her lungs struggled for oxygen in the thin atmosphere. She chugged away the last quarter of water in her bottle.

By the next day, both their throats were dry and cracked; words were seldom exchanged. When spoken, they were as hoarse as sandpaper. The high altitude also proved to be an immense challenge: the sun scorched; the night froze.

"Huan.. I can't go on." Qing gasped, desperation clawing at her voice. Woozy and thirsty, she clutched at the rocks around her, trying to find her footing.

"Just hold on!" Huan lifted her up by the arms. "We'll find water. We can do this, remember?" But the promise was as hollow as their gourds. "We can do this." Huan repeated, as if convincing himself. "Together."

By Qing #12

*His body is hers; he owns her flesh
Tied by generational norms to build the next
God forbid the blood of my heart
be thicker than the water of the womb
Truthless love is the modern fever
And I refuse to fall sick to it.*

Kongur Tagh of Kunlun Shan (25,095 feet) 137BCE, spring

"How are you?" Huan asked on a bleak morning; Qing had just recovered from sickness after drinking from an unclean pond.

"Feels like I'm six feet under," Qing muttered from the ground. "You?"

"Jolly. But look alive! It's the final mountain. It's high but there's a chance of finding a village on the other side." Huan patted her back consolingly.

Despite their best attempts, Qing's past crept up on her. One midnight, right under Huan's nose, the bottle she stashed at the bottom of her satchel for 'precautionary measures' whispered temptations. As her figure staggered back from the shadows, the stench of alcohol reeked heavily from her moist lips.

From that day on, the urge won over every night. Huan could only watch helplessly as the spark in her eyes faded; the woman he loved unraveling, slipping, falling out of his arms, and into liquor's embrace.

Nights where they used to curl together and share warmth became a rare occurrence. The distance between their bed rolls gradually increased and so did the distance of their mental bond. The chill of the night crept into their hearts; the jagged mountain edge cracked their relationship. Thick tension strung in the air, ready to snap. The only time Huan ever saw a glimpse of the woman he adored was the nights she hunched over her parchment, writing.

By Qing #18

*the mind's a graveyard of memories
that seeks closure and redemption;
the heart cradles haunted cries
where the terrorized seek an unreachable heaven;
the body pays tribute to the blood in wars
rows, columns and walls of loyalty that cost their all
they say all's fair in love and war
But what's fair in the lives lost?*

Taklamakan Desert (“the place of no return”) 137BCE, spring

Overcoming the KunLun mountains was only the beginning. Unlike Huan’s prediction, there was no village on the other side. Only a golden sea of sand with no water in sight.

The conversations of laughter and wistfulness at the start of the journey turned into frequent bitter arguments. For the first time since their steady marriage, the serpent of doubt began slithering through Huan’s mind.

“I know which way is west!” Qing snapped after they strayed off—course.

“You led us off again because you keep drinking!”

“Irrelevant!”

“Is not!”

Days became a blur of heat and fatigue, Qing’s poetic rambling happened often and her grip on reality slowly, but surely, tethered off the edge. While walking, the horizon would fade into a mirage and sand shifted under her feet. Voices faraway called for her and she lost all sense of direction. Eight days in the desert robbed them of their water supply, along with Qing’s last fragments of sanity.

One night, their argument reached a fever pitch.

“I can’t take it anymore! You pull me out of my home and into the unknown with no plan, no research, only your whims. Now we’re stranded in the desert with no water and you’re wasted!” Huan shouted, chest heaving, heart pounding.

“Fine! Then I’ll do it alone!” Qing screamed, tears screaming down her cheeks, trickling on her lips, a mix of saltiness and bitter liquor. “Maybe I’ll be free from you too!” Gourd in one hand, quill in another, she disappeared into the shadows.

By Qing, #9
as quietly as i came
like the spring breeze embracing the first clove of leaves
as quietly as i’ll leave
leaving behind the skeleton of your mistakes and undying greed
God forgive my imprudence
But I pray your corrupted rage will drown in grief

Jiquan 137BCE, winter

She was gone. Huan spent days desperately looking for Qing, but footprints were smothered by the wind. The only visible trace being where they came from. Defeated by heartbreak, Huan turned to the other direction and began his journey home.

Grief drowned every step, he had nowhere to go other than the only place he had ever known. Breezes whispered Qing’s name, singing a haunting melody that followed him. His head spun dejectedly and his chest ached with loss. Shaken with sorrow, he replayed the journey in his head. Gradually, every moment with Qing formed a lively tale in his head. He escaped into the words to forget the pain, creating a story of an impossible journey and the poet’s ghost traversing a barren land, forever lost in ‘The Place of No Return’.

Back at Jiquan, Huan shared the myth of ‘The Road’, captivating hearts with the legend of a poet haunting an unpassable desert. The word spread and soon reached the emperor, whose curiosity was piqued by the possibility of new allies and land. In 130BCE, the emperor set off for it himself, renaming it ‘The Silk Road’. It became a path for traders from China, Russia, Italy and more, transcending borders and creating new stories.

As for Huan, his heart remained in regret of what he had and had not done. As he watched the next caravan set off for the horizon from his window, winter—numbed fingers flipped to the final parchment of paper from Qing's scroll and began reading the last poem she wrote.

By Qing, #8

*Dreams bloom in midnight's embrace
Light blossomed from the crescent's face
Snow fluttering, flying, floating down
Around the hills, casted a silver crown
A hollow shine burning out in her eyes
Blurry mist fogging up her sight
The night was young, the sparrow just a babe
Sunrise greeted the bulb, sunset took the dead
A bird once casted free, never returned
He sat by the window, mourning an empty urn*

Maps of destiny

Diocesan Girls' School, Mak, Ka Kiu Sonia – 13

Ravi's hometown rested peacefully at the edge of the ancient Silk Road and was often overlooked by travelers rushing between major cities and busy streets. But for her, it was a treasure trove of tales waiting to be unfolded and rediscovered.

On a misty Monday morning, she found herself stepping hesitantly through the doors of the town's small museum, which had recently reopened an old exhibition showcasing Silk Road artifacts. The exhibit had once been popular decades ago but had since fallen into neglect, becoming a forgotten corner of the museum, dust-covered, hiding away in the shadows, only for true enthusiasts such as Ravi to take notice of.

As a young girl with too much time on her hands, she always liked to discover new things, things that were mysterious and too complicated for her age. So when she finally discovered the history of the Silk Road, which was absolutely mind-blowing, she started to devote her life to finding out more about its artifacts.

This reopening wasn't grand. A modest display of relics accompanied by faded photographs and yellowing letters, which were on the edge of crumbling into pieces. But one object caught Ravi's eye: an odd fragment of a map laid behind thin glass, its edges charred with age, symbols scrawled all over it in a mixture of fading ink and carvings. The fragment had been dug up in a recent archaeological dig just outside the town and put on display modestly, almost as if it were an afterthought.

Curious, Ravi noticed a figure nearby. Dr. Kadie Jensen, a historian from a nearby university, was examining the map with furrowed brows. Dr. Kadie was known for her strict skepticism. Her high level of criticism and unconvinced demeanor was enough to make any other rookie scholar cower in fear. But Ravi was different; she had a goal, and she wasn't going to let a few judgmental glares and criticizing words get the best of her.

Summoning her courage, Ravi approached Dr. Kadie. "The map... it looks like there's more than just locations and coordinates. Those symbols seem like clues or riddles, things that need to be deciphered," she said.

Dr. Kadie glanced up, skeptical but intrigued. "Many maps have legends and symbols, but treasure hunts? That's usually folklore, created for entertainment in this boring little town. Folks love it."

"Maybe, but this fragment tells part of a story, one that was kept secret. I want to find the whole map. Will you help me?"

Dr. Kadie hesitated. Her duty was to remain impartial and dubious of anything that came her way. But the map seemed to attract her eyes like a moth to a flame; she couldn't look away. For the first time in a while, she was interested. After a moment, she nodded, mind still unbelieving as always but willing to listen and lend a helping hand. "Alright. But only to uncover the truth, not to fuel fantasies and rile up the townspeople.."

Over the next few days, she found herself lost in the archives alongside Dr. Kadie. "This fragment once belonged to a merchant's secret journal," Dr. Kadie explained, her voice brimming with cautious excitement. "The journal was hidden during the time when Silk Road cities were not just bustling trade hubs but were strongly fortified by rival factions and secret societies, determined to protect their cultural treasures. Why riddles, though? Why so mysterious?" asked Ravi.

Dr. Kadie smiled softly. "Legend tells us merchants buried valuables—ancient manuscripts, rare textiles, and artifacts—hidden from invaders. The riddles engraved on these maps were puzzles only the worthy could solve, safeguarding their legacy."

As she traced the faded ink on the fragment, its cryptic phrases emerged: "Where the dragon drinks the river's breath, where stars collide with the earth, beneath the velvety road where we lie."

With Dr. Kadie's historical expertise and Ravi's local knowledge, they identified potential sites stretching across the Silk Road's ancient path: a dried-up riverbed snaking through rocky desert, a canyon nearby echoing the wind's song, and a remote mountain peak.

Their journey began at dawn. The desert sun painted shadows long as they followed the first clue. "Where the dragon drinks the river's breath," Ravi murmured, recalling her grandmother's stories of a cunning and sly river serpent legend tied to the great Amu Darya river that she told her when she was still a child.

At the river's bend, half-buried under sand, stone, and everything that had piled up over the years, they uncovered an ancient stone seal bearing more riddle fragments. Each clue putting the puzzle together, piece by piece.

Days passed with challenges that were uncalled for. Treacherous terrains, cryptic warnings, and wary nomads. The duo met traders, descendants of ancient Silk Road families, and guardians of secrets willing to test their worth and will.

As days went on, Dr. Kadie's skepticism softened into belief. "Many dismissed these as mere legends," she said one evening by their campfire. "But these riddles preserve history and remind us of the very people who built this road we walk on."

Their biggest test awaited at the whispering canyon. Wind carved haunting sounds through the rocks, as if whispering secrets that no one could decipher. Solving the next riddle required translating an ancient dialect, something only Dr. Kadie, with her years of experience, could decode after nights of study.

In the canyon's heart, they found a hidden grotto. Inside lay a buried chest, decayed but intact. As Ravi uncovered the treasure, a collection of priceless manuscripts and guild relics, she realized it wasn't gold or jewels but knowledge lost to time.

"It's my fate," Ravi whispered, understanding her role as both the discoverer and protector of these forgotten tales from long ago. "We were meant to find this, meant to let everyone know about this."

They swore to work together, to teach others about the hidden secrets and lives behind the yellowing maps, to rekindle the ancient legends, and to keep the legacy of the Silk Roads burning on.

Blood of the Covenant, Water of the Womb

Diocesan Girls' School, Pang, Yuet Wing – 14

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

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

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

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

The leading camel's steps faltered.

Minyun's eyes flew open. Now.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Ballast for the Soul

Diocesan Girls' School, So, Yui Ka Clara – 14

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"This is Ballast for the Soul."

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

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

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

"What else have you been up to all these years?"

Gan Ying: The Lost Journey to Rome

Diocesan Girls' School, Tung, Wing Kiu Elizabeth – 13

“They’re hunting the birds.”

Her quill scratched against parchment; his brow furrowed. “Who?”

“The god in need of sacrifice. He who roams the battlefields with wine in his hand” The feather quivered under her breath. “War.”

As if answering her statement, a clatter of hooves and metal footsteps passed by outside. Somewhere, a gunshot shattered tranquility.

“That’s it. Sober up now.” Huan swiped the bottle of rice wine out of her grip, yet her irises, albeit hazed, still danced with fervor. Silence engulfed their hut, broken only by the faint writing and Huan’s restless shuffling. Liquor, he thought, would be the death of her creative fire.

“I’ve been wondering,” Qing murmured. “How far south would the birds fly to escape their shackles of cold? How long will they fly to escape war?” Glinting pupils met his clear ones. “Would their mate accompany them?”

Her ominous question finally settled in Huan. “You plan on escaping southward to god-knows-where?” A weary sigh. Internally, he acknowledged staying was a dead wish. Xiongnu troops were encircling the Great Wall border of Jiuquan. Sooner or later, they would become another war casualty. Taking Qing’s hand, he replied softly. “You know wherever you go, I’ll be with you, right?”

As if she hadn’t heard her husband, Qing’s gaze fixed on the faraway mountains. “Out of the cage is the only way birds can be...” Qing paused, setting down her quill. “Free.”

—

By Qing, #11

a pocket full of nothing

a heart heavy with hope

can bring you on the road

where youthful dreamers go

my mind’s a canvas

my soul made of air

when you take my hand in yours

what more do i have to fear

—

Amne Machin of Kunlun Shan (20,610 feet) 138BCE, winter

The cold was a merciless tormentor. After slipping past the Great Wall and trekking south, a crisis struck within days. To the eye, the mountains were a sight to behold: magnificent ombré slopes—snowy transitioning to umber—looming over olive-green land. Pale azure skies and ivory peaks reflected off mirror-like lakes in the shape of a beast’s teeth. Every breath of exertion created a dancing small cloud in the breeze.

The serene terrain would be a gorgeous haven if not for the inconsistent temperature changes and scarce water source.

“I need a break.” Qing crouched against the mountain, chest heaving as her lungs struggled for oxygen in the thin atmosphere. She chugged away the last quarter of water in her bottle.

By the next day, both their throats were dry and cracked; words were seldom exchanged. When spoken, they were as hoarse as sandpaper. The high altitude also proved to be an immense challenge: the sun scorched; the night froze.

“Huan.. I can’t go on.” Qing gasped, desperation clawing at her voice. Woozy and thirsty, she clutched at the rocks around her, trying to find her footing.

“Just hold on!” Huan lifted her up by the arms. “We’ll find water. We can do this, remember?” But the promise was as hollow as their gourds. “We can do this.” Huan repeated, as if convincing himself. “Together.”

—

By Qing #12

His body is hers; he owns her flesh

Tied by generational norms to build the next

God forbid the blood of my heart

be thicker than the water of the womb

Truthless love is the modern fever

And I refuse to fall sick to it.

—

Kongur Tagh of Kunlun Shan (25,095 feet) 137BCE, spring

“How are you?” Huan asked on a bleak morning; Qing had just recovered from sickness after drinking from an unclean pond.

“Feels like I’m six feet under,” Qing muttered from the ground. “You?”

“Jolly. But look alive! It’s the final mountain. It’s high but there’s a chance of finding a village on the other side.”

Huan patted her back consolingly.

Despite their best attempts, Qing’s past crept up on her. One midnight, right under Huan’s nose, the bottle she stashed at the bottom of her satchel for ‘precautionary measures’ whispered temptations. As her figure staggered back from the shadows, the stench of alcohol reeked heavily from her moist lips.

From that day on, the urge won over every night. Huan could only watch helplessly as the spark in her eyes faded; the woman he loved unraveling, slipping, falling out of his arms, and into liquor’s embrace.

Nights where they used to curl together and share warmth became a rare occurrence. The distance between their bed rolls gradually increased and so did the distance of their mental bond. The chill of the night crept into their hearts; the jagged mountain edge cracked their relationship. Thick tension strung in the air, ready to snap. The only time Huan ever saw a glimpse of the woman he adored was the nights she hunched over her parchment, writing.

—

By Qing #18

the mind’s a graveyard of memories

that seeks closure and redemption;

the heart cradles haunted cries

where the terrorized seek an unreachable heaven;

the body pays tribute to the blood in wars

rows, columns and walls of loyalty that cost their all

they say all’s fair in love and war

But what’s fair in the lives lost?

—

Taklamakan Desert (“the place of no return”) 137BCE, spring

Overcoming the KunLun mountains was only the beginning. Unlike Huan’s prediction, there was no village on the other side. Only a golden sea of sand with no water in sight.

The conversations of laughter and wistfulness at the start of the journey turned into frequent bitter arguments. For the first time since their steady marriage, the serpent of doubt began slithering through Huan’s mind.

“I know which way is west!” Qing snapped after they strayed off—course.

“You led us off again because you keep drinking!”

“Irrelevant!”

“Is not!”

Days became a blur of heat and fatigue, Qing’s poetic rambling happened often and her grip on reality slowly, but surely, tethered off the edge. While walking, the horizon would fade into a mirage and sand shifted under her feet. Voices faraway called for her and she lost all sense of direction. Eight days in the desert robbed them of their water supply, along with Qing’s last fragments of sanity.

One night, their argument reached a fever pitch.

“I can’t take it anymore! You pull me out of my home and into the unknown with no plan, no research, only your whims. Now we’re stranded in the desert with no water and you’re wasted!” Huan shouted, chest heaving, heart pounding.

“Fine! Then I’ll do it alone!” Qing screamed, tears screaming down her cheeks, trickling on her lips, a mix of saltiness and bitter liquor. “Maybe I’ll be free from you too!” Gourd in one hand, quill in another, she disappeared into the shadows.

By Qing, #9

as quietly as i came

like the spring breeze embracing the first clove of leaves

as quietly as i’ll leave

leaving behind the skeleton of your mistakes and undying greed

God forgive my imprudence

But I pray your corrupted rage will drown in grief

Jiquan 137BCE, winter

She was gone. Huan spent days desperately looking for Qing, but footprints were smothered by the wind. The only visible trace being where they came from. Defeated by heartbreak, Huan turned to the other direction and began his journey home.

Grief drowned every step, he had nowhere to go other than the only place he had ever known. Breezes whispered Qing’s name, singing a haunting melody that followed him. His head spun dejectedly and his chest ached with loss. Shaken with sorrow, he replayed the journey in his head. Gradually, every moment with Qing formed a lively tale in his head. He escaped into the words to forget the pain, creating a story of an impossible journey and the poet’s ghost traversing a barren land, forever lost in ‘The Place of No Return’.

Back at Jiquan, Huan shared the myth of ‘The Road’, captivating hearts with the legend of a poet haunting an unpassable desert. The word spread and soon reached the emperor, whose curiosity was piqued by the possibility of new allies and land. In 130BCE, the emperor set off for it himself, renaming it ‘The Silk Road’. It became a path for traders from China, Russia, Italy and more, transcending borders and creating new stories.

As for Huan, his heart remained in regret of what he had and had not done. As he watched the next caravan set off for the horizon from his window, winter—numbed fingers flipped to the final parchment of paper from Qing’s scroll and began reading the last poem she wrote.

By Qing, #8

Dreams bloom in midnight’s embrace

Light blossomed from the crescent’s face

*Snow fluttering, flying, floating down
Around the hills, casted a silver crown
A hollow shine burning out in her eyes
Blurry mist fogging up her sight
The night was young, the sparrow just a babe
Sunrise greeted the bulb, sunset took the dead
A bird once casted free, never returned
He sat by the window, mourning an empty urn*

Separate Roads

Diocesan Girls' School, Wong, Gabriella Emma – 13

“Ina, look what I got,” a skinny orphan, Fei, nudged her friend as she produced a piece of cake from underneath her khaki-coloured sack. She grinned at her friend, her face beaming with triumph.

“Now this is something worth stealing,” Ina exclaimed, her eyes directed at the frosting of the luxurious piece of dessert. Her mouth watered as she rubbed her thighs, shivering with anticipation as she waited for Ina to cut the cake into two slices.

Both orphans loathed the idea of stealing, but cake was something they rarely got to taste. Any chance to skip a disgusting meal of rock-solid bread was a way of saying it was a day worth living.

Master Gao glanced their way, and the two girls sat upright in shock as Fei hastily shoved the cake back into her sack. Ina clenched her fist to stop her fingers from trembling while Fei tried hiding the frosting stuck on her fingers. Gao furrowed his eyebrows. He approached the two orphans. They stared as their master slowly paced towards them. Then Gao presented a sudden whip of his wooden stick at both girls, and Ina whimpered.

“Great way to start the day, Fei. Pulling your friend into stealing goods that were meant for me? Oh how great, this definitely deserves a celebration in *the room*.”

“The room” was where orphans were punished, and most orphans had experienced being inside, except when the master was livid with rage that day. The orphans knew the punished ones wouldn’t be able to see daylight again.

Fei knew they would be thrown into a dungeon and would likely starve to death before freeing themselves from the chains attached to the door. Fei shuddered at the thought – there wasn’t a more brutal way to die, especially in the hands of Gao.

Gao spat at Fei, “You,” he pointed at her, “you better bring back something good tonight, or there will be consequences.”

Fei nodded, her face calm. Nothing could break her stoicism. But Ina saw the storm building inside of her. Fei

had been distant lately. She spoke of the beautiful houses, golden cities and opportunities that awaited them.

The orphanage sat atop the boulders of Yellow River Stone Forest, along the Taklamakan Desert, also known as the Sea of Death. Sometimes infants were left on the side of the road. This is where Gao found Fei, then Ina.

As Master Gao gave orders for the next raid, Fei sulked towards the main ambushing spot. Today, Fei’s eyes focused on a drifting cloud, and Ina’s stomach lurched. They brought back something good that night. While the orphans were snoring soundly in their beds, Ina heard a rustling sound. She opened her eyes. The single oil lamp flickered, the shadows casting on the cracked walls as the soft snoring of the children echoed through the quiet dark.

Fei was stuffing her two shirts into the robbery sack she uses daily. She looked up at Ina. She began, “I’m leaving,” her voice was a whisper, but still fierce, “Tomorrow maybe, or the day after that. I’m not going to be Gao’s thief forever, rotting under his thumb.”

Ina’s pulse quickened. She sat down, her body trembling as she lowered herself to the floor. “Fei, you can’t leave. Where would you go? The desert will probably swallow you whole, or a sandstorm might stop in your way, or — what about me?”

“We’re safe here, Fei, at least for now. We have shelter, a roof over our head, food to eat. We can survive here, wait for a couple more years,” Ina started.

Fei cut her off, looming over her. “Safe? Survive?” Fei’s whisper cut sharp, her eyes blazing at Ina. “This isn’t surviving, this is waiting to die. How are we safe?”

Fei wasn't wrong — the room was suffocatingly hot. The bare room with only torn sheets of which were replacements for beds, were far too small for the orphans. Each child had two pieces of clothing, only a mossy scrub for showering and a small gooey rock filled with herbs to clean their teeth.

"This isn't the life I desire, and this isn't yours either," Fei said.

"You've heard the stories about runaways — Gao always finds them in the end," Ina said. "He will hunt them down and do whatever it takes to make sure his little tricks don't become rumours."

"Ina, it's a prison, and you know it, too!" Fei said. She clenched her fist as Ina stared at her, dumbstruck. They'd never fought. Fei's face softened. "Come with me then, Ina. We'll find a way to live together. I can't stay here, I'm not going to be Gao's thief forever, you know what happened to the older ones."

"I can't," Ina whispered, shame burning her cheeks. "I'm not brave like you."

The argument stretched on. Fei spoke of freedom; Ina pressed on about safety. The lamp's flame diminished, and exhaustion pulled them down.

They fell asleep on the same mat, Ina's hand clutching Fei's, her dreams heavy with dread.

The following morning, Ina found Fei beside her, awake.

Ina sat up, pulled her legs into a cross as she whispered, "Fei." Startled by the sudden calling of her name, Fei turned to her friend, pulling herself together as she faced Ina.

"About the previous night... I thought about it, and—" Ina shuffled uneasily as she picked up a twig that was blown off a tree and into their window. "I know you're not my sister, by blood, but you're everything else — I won't leave this place without you. We'll make this place more... bearable, and we'll try figuring out how to survive together..." Ina's voice cracked as fear edged her voice, chaining her to the familiar misery of the orphanage.

Fei's face twitched for a little while, and fear slipped into Ina's heart as she awaited her friend's reply.

"You're right, Ina," Fei reached out to grip Ina's hand.

The knot inside Ina loosened as she heaved a small sigh, relief washing over her.

That morning, the orphans crouched behind their ambush spot, watching a caravan rumble by. Camels snorted, their bells tinkling as merchants barked orders to their guards. Ina and Fei scanned the merchants' faces for a target. Ina's stomach churned. Fei's movements were mechanical, her eyes distant, fixed on a slow-moving cart at the caravan's rear. The driver was distracted, arguing with a guard, the canvas cover flapping loosely behind them.

But Ina saw the way Fei stared at the cart's path west, and not the bag of goods, but towards her dream.

Ina's heart raced. She hissed Fei's name, urging her to focus, but Fei didn't respond. The other children whispered their plans, unaware of the thoughts brewing in Fei's brain. Ina had awoken that morning with Fei's words echoing — "I'm leaving" — and now, every glance Fei cast at the horizon felt like a step closer to her escape.

But Fei said she wouldn't go.

Suddenly, Fei moved. Silent as a shadow, she slipped towards the cart, her skinny figure darting between the dunes. Ina froze, her breath shuddering. She knew what was happening. She wanted to call out, to stop her, but fear kept her silent. From the ridge, she watched Fei climb into the cart, blending into the bundles of cloth.

Then Ina cried out — "Fei!" She whizzed through the sand dunes and chased the caravan like a maniac. Her heart pounding, she screamed her friend's name again, her feet cramping in agony as she threw herself towards the caravan. She shouted, her hair flipping against her neck as the caravan rumbled away. Ina would not stop running, she would not stop shrieking until she was on that caravan. She would do whatever it took to get on it, even if it meant death.

The sand kicked Ina's face as she gave all her strength, running with all her might. With one final scream, Fei

peeked out of the caravan and saw her friend running frantically at her. She said nothing, and turned her head.

Ina tripped on a rock and fell face down into the sand. The merchants heard her thump onto the ground as jumped off the caravan and ran towards her. They banged their swords onto her head. Ina's vision blurred, then came a *thrawk!*, and she blacked out.

Alone in the dungeon, much later, in the middle of the night, Ina wondered if Fei would find her golden cities, or if the sands would claim her like so many others.

For now, Ina had only the weight of staying behind – as weight heavier than any treasure ever stolen – and her own death nearing.

Fair Trade?

Diocesan Girls' School, Yeung, Audrey Hei Yu – 12

There are two ways that can lead you to be grounded for life. First and foremost, not cleaning your room. And secondly? Taking a time machine back in time.

Everyone dreams of travelling back in time, which is why I'm here to tell you, don't do it. Stop. Slam those brakes. Think it through. Because you do not ever want to end up in 13th-century Guangzhou, with zero experience on how to trade with shady salesmen.

Problems always started with my brother Felix, because everything starts with Felix. The project was simple, really: a poster on China's Great Achievements. The moment Mr. Quintus announced that students had to have first-hand experience, Felix started grinning like a clown at the carnival.

"We're gonna go to China and make the most amazing poster ever! Guess what?"

"We're taking a plane?" I half-heartedly guessed, knowing in my gut that it definitely wasn't.

"Nope! We're taking the time machine! We're going to go back in time and see the Great Wall being built! It's going to be epic! We're going to be the top of the class! Straight A's, Fortune, imagine that! Besides, I have a plan and it's foolproof!"

I knew breaking into a highly fortified lab, hijacking a time machine, and taking it back in time just to do a poster was probably wrong. But I was curious—I mean, how many times do you get to travel back in time? Besides, the straight A's weren't a bad deal either. And so I didn't stop him, which, looking back, was a huge mistake on my part.

But before the chaos starts running wild, let me introduce you to our parents: dedicated scientists, brilliant inventors, and neglectful adults. They're probably the only humans who've ever built a working time machine shaped like a teacup. Yep, you read that last sentence right—a teacup. Not just any teacup, a teacup with blue patterns like clocks that runs on silk and spices. Because whenever you think about time machines, you think blue teacups, silk, and spices.

Midnight—the prime time of ghosts, witches, and horrible decisions. Felix and I were in our parents' lab, standing in front of an enormous blue teacup. Felix was holding nothing; I was holding the instruction manual, a telescope for sightseeing, and a notebook. As usual, I had to be the 'adult'.

We clambered in after much shoving and grunting. I was feeling like a caveman by the time we got in. Felix ran up to the main controls and slammed the start button like he was playing whack-a-mole, yelling, "The Great Wall of China!" The machine shook and rumbled, and then with a sudden BAM, exploded into smoke.

As the smoke cleared, I took in my surroundings. We seemed to be in a market, where there were stalls with vibrant stripy colours, salesmen who looked like they hadn't washed in years, stinky camels, and huge wagons everywhere. Somewhere, there was a person drumming and music playing, making me feel like I was an actor in 'Aladdin'. The problem was, I was on the wrong set—there wasn't a wall in sight!

I turned to Felix, who was frowning at the instruction manual. "Felix," I said in my best annoyed-warning tone, "where are we?"

Felix bit his lip and replied so fast the Flash would've been proud, "Silk Road, Guangzhou, 13th century, Yuan Dynasty. We're out of silk apparently."

I was so shocked I couldn't speak. Fibroin extracted from silk is the only thing that keeps the time machine on track, so it was no surprise that we had spun off course. I took a deep breath. "So we're stuck in the past, with no way back to the present, and no money or knowledge about the Chinese."

"Yep," replied Felix, unbothered. "Hey, look on the bright side—we're on the Silk Road! There's probably a trillion bits of silk! It's like a treasure hunt now!" He continued, already moving away to peek at the stalls. Reviewing my life choices, I followed him, wondering how on earth I was related to this reckless human being.

We were halfway across the market with no luck when we bumped into Qian. Qian was a middle-aged dude with greasy hair and dirty robes. He had small pouches on his belt and was pulling a donkey loaded with silk. Silk! If it were any other salesman, I might have tried my luck, but Qian looked seriously creepy. He was like those

shady drug dealers you might encounter in an alley—the kind your mom warns you about. He looked like them, but thinner and scrawnier. Besides, he was basically radiating used-car salesman vibes.

Before I could back off, Qian swooped down on us like an eagle on an unsuspecting squirrel. He smiled at us, displaying several crooked teeth, and proclaimed, “Welcome to Guangzhou, the biggest Silk Road port of China! I am Qian, a master trader. You look lost. And rich.” He shot a look at our clean clothes before grinning at us again.

“We’re doing a school project!” Felix winked at Qian as if he were our oldest friend.

“A...what?” Qian blinked.

“We’re here to learn about the Silk Road, for educational purposes,” I amended.

Qian’s eyebrows immediately shot up, and a crafty twinkle glimmered in his eyes. “Then you have come to the right place, my friends! As I have many talents, I happen to know a lot about the Silk Road.” He gave a dramatic bow before adding, “Ask away, kind sirs!”

“Okay...” I replied, and jumping right to the task, I asked, “So what is the Silk Road? What’s the use of it?”

Qian’s eyes glittered like diamonds. “Ah...the Silk Road, the magnificent road that connects the East and West like magnets. With all the bandits, it used to be as dangerous as hell, but thanks to the Mongol Empire, it’s safer than a toddler’s cradle now!”

Felix was nodding so quickly I was surprised his head hadn’t fallen off yet. I took notes.

“The Silk Road was founded by the great Zhang Qian, my namesake. He proved that travelling from the East to the West was possible, which probably blew the people’s minds when he got back. He drew the first blueprints for the Silk Road we have now!” Qian finished.

“So the Silk Road is like our Amazo—” started Felix.

I clamped my hand over his mouth before he could finish his declaration that we were from the future. “So, what do you trade?” I questioned Qian, hastily covering up for Felix.

“Oh, loads of things. We, the East, trade our tea, spices, jade, gunpowder, and of course our biggest seller: silk.” He patted the many rolls of silk on his donkey. “And the West trades their horses, glass, precious metals, and occasionally their strange gadgets.” He eyed my telescope like a hungry snake.

I hugged it tight and glared at him. “It’s my birthday present and it’s for school.”

“It’s for history,” he answered in a sing-song voice.

“We need the silk,” whispered Felix, “like really, really need it.”

I glared at him, too. “It’s my telescope!”

Qian pulled out a roll of silk—strong, thick, and perfect for Fibroin extraction. I stared at it greedily, knowing it was just the thing we needed. Felix looked from me to the telescope clutched in my hands to the roll of silk, then stood up on his tiptoes and whispered, “Mom said tomorrow’s breakfast is waffles.” That sealed the deal. I loved waffles and was not about to keep a telescope if it meant getting back to the present and eating waffles for breakfast. My resistance crumbled. I handed over the telescope.

Qian snatched it and held it close to his eyes, gazing at the beauty of it. Copper with brass decorations, a clear glass for looking through—it was a magnificent specimen.

“What is this magical tube thing?” Qian breathed in awe.

Felix stood up straighter proudly, “It’s a telescope! It lets you see far away—like really, really, really far away.”

Qian laughed in manic delight, “I shall sell this to a man who will sell it to another man, and it will eventually end up with the government. This shall be the beginning of the first Chinese telescope ever made!”

We blinked. “That’s... oddly specific,” I concluded.

Qian shrugged and handed us the roll of silk.

We were out of there as soon as the roll of silk touched our hands. We leapt into the time machine, stuffed the silk into the panel, tossed a handful of cinnamon into the spice energy burner, smacked the start button while yelling, “Hong Kong, 2381 AD!” The machine whirled and spun and shook. Felix whooped loudly as I screamed, “Please don’t explode!”

We landed back in the lab, covered in cinnamon-smelling spice and face to face with our angry parents. They were not impressed.

Two minutes and thirty seconds later, we were in our room, grounded for life.

And the worst part? Mr. Quintus gave us a C.

The Unexpected Journey of Ivy Lee

Discovery Bay International School, Dash, Anvika – 12

Years ago , an orphan girl & her elder brother lived in an orphanage in Jiaohe. At the age of nine and twelve both of them got adopted but to different families. Still , her brother wrote her letters every week until he was eighteen and said he was joining the Chinese Imperial Army. Still no matter what , he had said he would write his letters every month , but it's been a month since he wrote her a letter. Ivy started to worry but her parents said he's probably busy training, and Ivy guessed he probably was.

Ivy still lived in Jiaohe near the silk road with the hustling & bustling markets. Her adoptive family owned a tea & silk business; her dad's assistant would always take the things and go trading through the silk road.

Fifteen year old Ivy's job was to weave silk , and she was pretty good at it. She rather found it relaxing. But she always wanted to go through the silk road herself, meet new people , learn new ideas and cultures. But due to societal norms , no woman ever did anything except weaving silk or taking care of the household. These things always bothered young Ivy, she knew that one day fate would take her through the silk road and make the experience unforgettable.

But little did she know her fate had decided to make her wish come true this early...

One day, Ivy caught her parents whispering that few of the silks Ivy weaved were sold to some of the people as gifts for their relatives for the Mid-Autumn Festival. The relatives who got the silk had high fever but as soon as they wore the woven silk felt better than ever in an hour.

Coincidentally, Ivy got a letter , not from her brother but her brother's friend , which informed her that her brother has been hurt by crossbow bolts during their battles and he has not been conscious. Ivy read this again hoping it was a misunderstanding but it was all true. Ivy's eyes felt blurry; she started walking backwards and she tripped and fell down. Bruised from the fall, Ivy thought that if she tried to weave it would relax her so she started weaving and her hand started shining at the place where the bruise was and in four seconds the shining stopped and there was no sign of her injuries.

Then in that exact moment , Ivy realised what she needed to do and she needed to do it now.

Ivy decided she would go through the silk road , and trade with their tea & silk and use it to go to the imperial army camp near north of Vietnam and use her silk to heal her brother.

But she first had to do something important. She tiptoed to the antique room at the back of their house. She opened the door and coughed because of all the dust and cobwebs in the staircase. Her cough echoed in the antique room like a banshee wailing her sadness out. Ivy quietly went down the staircase , and looked at all the paintings on the wall , wearing their ancient dresses and their eyes following Ivy as her eyes jumped from one thing to another. Then she found it , her eyes glimmered bright with the sight of the map , and her heart fluttered like butterflies. She took the map right in her hands and glanced with her eyes going wide. The map said : “ Ni Hao Ivy Lee !” She thought her imagination was just flooded with excitement but it was not. Ivy clutched hard onto the map and sprinted to her bedroom and studied it , her first stop was Turpan. She would have to take Xiao Long – her Bactrian camel with her. But she would have to leave first thing tomorrow evening.

Ivy couldn't help herself but wonder , how did her hand heal that day as soon as she started weaving? How did the people feel better after using her silk? Was this magic? Ivy wondered if this was genetic and she got it from her family , did her brother have it or was she the only one and slowly her questions stopped as she steadily fell into her deep , dark blue sea of dreams.

Ivy woke up early in the morning , she quickly got the silks , and one silk that she had weaved which hopefully will heal her brother. She also packed a lot of tea. After all , she was going to trade so she better be ready. A pinch of excitement filled Ivy's heart thinking she finally was going to trade. She packed it in her dad's brown saddlebag which sat quietly , smiling and ready.

It was now evening , Ivy took the saddlebag and she set it on top of Xiao Long. She wrote a small note for her parents who were at the shop. Then, Ivy vanished into the dark , moonless night.

Ivy rode through the dessert , the humid making her smell droplets of sweat , a waterfall. Finally , she reached Turpan , and got off Xiao Long and got a water bag from her saddlebag and gulped all of it, unsure what's coming next. Slowly, she went into the markets and saw a caravan and thought she should join them.

So Ivy slipped a note to the caravan's leader and was welcomed by Master Lian, a weather-worn trader.. "A girl with silk and a camel? Rare sight," he chuckled, handing her a piece of naan. The caravan rolled out at dawn. Xiao Long padded beside the wagons, his humps swaying like a metronome for Ivy's thoughts.

Traders move from Jiaohe to Turpan , then east along the Gansu Corridor to cities like Dunhuang & ultimately Xi'an.

Gansu Corridor was a vital artery if the ancient Silk road as the only practical land passage connecting China's heartland to central Asia & the "Western Regions" From there , the path branched south , through inland trade networks passing through the Sichuan & Yunnan regions , before reaching Northern Vietnam.

Later they had a night stop near Dunhuang, Ivy couldn't close her eyes so thought she might as well make some use of her free time so she unrolled a strip of her finest silk and started sewing but she felt like she was being watched , the hair on her neck stood up. She instinctively turned around. She saw a wise monk glancing at her silk , with his eyes widening. Then, the monk slowly walked towards her and tenderly said "Your weave.. Has a gentle glow" he smiled kindly and disappeared into the night.

The caravan finally entered Xi'an, a crowded hub where traders from Persia & India swapped their ancient stories , myths over tea. Ivy suddenly felt lost in the crowd until she saw a man with a thick , bushy black mustache , with a white dhoti , a vibrant orange kurta & a burgundy turban with a bright grin on his face. Who was waving at Ivy for her tea , she pushed through the crowd with slow whispers of sorrys. She traded a packet of tea leaves for some Indian spices. Before it got lost , she tucked it into her saddlebag.

Leaving Xi'an, the route twisted into misty mountains. The path grew narrow, the air thick with pine scent. In a village near a cliff, an elderly Egyptian woman taught Ivy a chant to which Ivy sang it softly as she passed the piece of silk through her hands, feeling a slow vibration flowing through her fingers.

Finally, the caravan reached the border town of Liangshan, where the road turned to red-earth trails leading straight to Hanoi. Ivy's heart hammered. Ivy followed her map and it led her straight into the camp. Then , she saw a bunch of sand coloured tents and she knew somehow that she had arrived.

Ivy slipped off Xiao Long, the camel's breath fogging in the cool dawn. She unwrapped the silk she'd woven in Dunhuang, now shimmering with a faint amber glow. She sprinted into the camp and surprised soldiers eyes were on her but she stormed to the infirmary camp. Then as she reached and went inside , she saw her brother on his bed. Her tears just came out of her eyes like a river. She walked towards him and knelt beside her brother, she pressed the silk onto her brother's wounded shoulder. The fabric seemed to melt into his skin, a soft hum rising as the amber light spread, knitting the torn flesh. Because of the light , soldiers gathered inside the tent with whispers of "what is she doing?" Then , slowly her brother opened his eyes "what is happening?" and Ivy just smiled and hugged her brother and her brother simply hugged her back.

In this journey through the silk road , she learned new cultures , ate new food , met unique people but also realised the true power of her gift—silk not just as trade, but as healing.

Ah-mi's Adventure

Discovery Bay International School, Gerrard, Iona – 11

Ah-mimi lived in Luoyang, and though very near to Xi'an her mother never let them visit, she had heard too many stories about losing children, so refused to let her go. After many years of begging, on Ah-mi's 20th birthday, her mother finally let her go, not only that but she had sneakily gained her first job as a journalist working for the Luoyang local paper! They still had not realised her true identity and this allowed her the chance for her long-awaited adventure. As they crossed the border, she entered the city of Xi'an, she left the horse behind and started strolling into the city! She stood amazed with her new leather bound notebook in her hands, gazing at the incredible city looking over her, whilst the hand-cut wood buildings watched her every move, she was ready for a new adventure and ready to write a thrilling article for the paper!

Ah-mi set off on her journey, she started roaming through the markets, interviewing locals, and starting her article. She was trying to seek different opinions on how the Silk Road affected people, she wanted to draw a picture to the Luoyang locals who weren't as lucky as her to visit. Ah-mi saw everything from Chinese silk, spices, precious gemstones and furs, but her favourite was porcelain! The mat, clean clay, was shaped into amazing hand cut pattern designs. The warm sun tickled her skin, as she thought, this is my calling! She stayed at a local cabin, simple and small, but more than enough for one night. After a night of peace and rest, her energy was fulfilled, ready for yet another day of adventure.

She set off bright and early, the morning sun waking her as she started her journey. Ah-mi rode a horse to Lanzhou and started roaming through the markets and experiencing the culture. After lunch at a local restaurant, Ah-mi found a quiet wooden bench in the park to sit and write at, she was happy to escape the chaotic atmosphere and have a moment to herself to really suck in all the information. Ah-mi sat writing, as the fresh breeze gave her goosebumps and the light blue sky twinkled, it was as if she was in her own bubble!

As the warm afternoon turned into the evening, she set off for the next part of her adventure, before she was ready to move on she wanted to visit the markets one more time! The local people sat at their stalls intensely bargaining, selling numerous hand made items, as a vast amount of people from different cultures mixed, this was a special place, she couldn't wait to write! Just as began to leave she heard loud thumps, tumbling towards her quicker by the minute, Ah-mi turned to see a police horse galloping behind her with lots of police towering over her!

The police were screaming! 'Find safety before it's too late...'

The Journey of One's Soul

ESF Discovery College, Lam, Isabel – 13

Above me, the incandescent blanket of stars shone brightly, showcasing a stark contrast to the inky blackness it lay upon. My cheeks, tinged rose – raw from the cold is frozen in place. I sit there, oblivious to this marvellous expanse of starlit firmament. Zhonglu village in the Danba county, Sichuan province has been my home, and always will be, but I knew there was more to life, than just the harvest of white pear blossom trees during the spring, and the cultivation of corn in the winter. The stars, covering every inch of the black sky, twinkled down at me, as if urging me on the journey I soon had to set off on. I inhaled deeply, this cold crisp air, how I will miss it. The time was nearing for me to leave the place I call home and venture on a dangerous, lonely journey on the southern silk road, visiting provinces nobody in the village dared to make the journey for.

It is not until I hear the sound of heaves clattering on the hard pavement in which I bring myself together. I stand up, climb down the ladder of the rooftop and straighten my shirt. A sack of hard corn, two liters of water, a sack of peaches and figs, a small pouch of mantou and a bag of brick-tea for trading is all I have on this journey. People stand at the side of the road, with bright – but longing expressions, as I mount my caravan. As the caravan started to move, I received words of encouragement, reassuring smiles, but my ignorance of these signs of empathy only served to intensify my apprehension of the journey. I started by heading Northeast. I've spent all my life in the mountainous regions of Danba, but climbing these mountains – proved to be a challenge, I left my caravan with another merchant I met who would drive it towards the edge of the Sichuan region, I wanted to take the most efficient route, though trekking these mountains required optimal physical strength and energy, I was blinded by my desire, my desire to experience the outside world, my desire to travel the southern silk road. Steep mountain paths wore off the soles of my shoes, I stopped at river crossings to drink and rest, and the rugged terrain made me trip, slow to a heavy walk, and falling off this path would mean certain death. This initial part of the trip was the most physically demanding, and carrying on required my every last will. After trekking through the mountains, I finally reached the cross intersection connecting these treacherous mountains and my village – to the Shaanxi Gansu tea horse road. From here on, the journey would streamline.

I followed the river valley path along the Dadu river, occasionally dipping my toes in the cool stream while the sun's rays burned down upon me. By dawn, I had reached a peaceful river valley, somewhere along the tea horse road, in which I decided to stay the night. The soft, occasional trickle of the stream was the only sound in the distance as the sun began to set, I settled near a flat rock in which I placed my belongings, and set a meal for myself. I made a fire and boiled the hard corn, I warmed up the mantou and had a nice, hearty meal of corn, bread and the sweet, juicy fragrant peaches from my village. I see that the peach to other fruits ratio in my pack is substantial, the people in my village ensured that I could trade our traditional peaches for something greater that I could bring home. The sky darkened, and very soon, the night sky was scintillating with magnificent points of light. I lay down, prepared to get some sleep, with the soft bed of grass underneath me, the faint trickle of the crystalline stream, the fragrance of peaches still lingering in the air, I drifted off into a deep, heavy sleep.

Birds chirped as the rays of the sun flickered before my eyes, my eyelids fluttered open as I'm greeted to a warm, breezy day. I sit up, help myself to some of my leftover corn and continue my journey. Back in the village I always admired the sun, the sun's effect on our people always comes down to two types when it's out, the first was when the sun was so astonishingly scorching, people could barely keep their eyelids open, beads of sweat would roll down our faces, and by the end of the day, we would all be sunburnt and drenched in sweat and dirt, the second, however, was when the sun came out, and it emitted a soft, golden glow onto our village. When facing the sun, it emits warm, golden brown rays to our faces, and provides a comforting warmth that we all so long for during the cold winters. I spent the next 6 days following the river valley and the outline of the Dadu river, resting, eating and enjoying the scenery. By the time I reached Kangding – having met the traveller and receiving my caravan once again, my face was tinted slightly from the sun, and a soft scatter of freckles had emerged across my nose. As I descended the last

mountain, the city of Kangding came into view. Kangding is the premier trading hub of the Sichuan–Tibetan region, and as I entered the village, I discovered the raw, bustling nature of this place. In contrast to the peaceful valleys and the villages I journeyed across, people here were crowded and the sounds all around me were thunderous.

I headed over to the local hub, I was only planning on staying here to trade for some goods I could bring back. I met a nice trader who was trading pots of hearty meat stew, and using the little money I had, I ordered a nice big pot of stew. It was a delicious meal, the meat was soft and tender, and there was a complexion of carrots and radish in the stew. The soup was warm and hearty – perfect for this cold weather. Halfway through the meal, I felt a tingling sensation on my tongue, and realised, it was a round, shell-like thing that was the source of this sensation, I soon found out this was a type of numbing pepper, called peppercorns (花椒). I then bought spicy cold noodles (凉面) and sweet butter tea (酥油茶) to bring with me on my journey. I spent the next 3 and a half weeks venturing north, around the midpoint of my journey I finally entered the Shaanxi–Gansu branch of the tea horse road. According to the traders, this route was particularly used for traders from the south to exchange tea with traders from the north–west. This route was relatively flat and stable, making it a relaxing, smooth journey. Along the road of the northern branch, I entered the mountains of Gansu, and soon descended into the Hexi corridor.

After a few weeks, I was officially nearing my destination – Lanzhou. Lanzhou is a vital crossroad on the yellow river where the southern roads meet the main silk road. After weeks of travelling, my eyes are finally met with the infamous ‘golden city’. The mighty yellow river, so profoundly known across the region, gleamed in the golden sun; it flowed directly right through the linear city, showcasing an intersection – gateway-like passage between two worlds. Astonished, I take in the sight of the dramatic, natural setting of the city, and its vibrant streets buzzing with life. As soon as I enter the local trading hob, I order what the locals tell me to be Lanzhou’s signature food. Lanzhou lamian (兰州拉面), its a traditional, iconic – hand pulled noodle said to be fresh, and stretchy, hand pulled by chefs with years of skill and work. As someone pushes the bowl of noodles in front of me, I take sight of the chewy, neat noodle organised in a fashion in the bowl in front of me, submerged in a clear beef broth with chilli oil mountained on the side. I dig in, the chewy, soft noodles explode with flavour as I bite into them, the chilli oil numbs my tongue and adds a tang to the savoury, hearty beef broth in which it is submerged in. The journey back was more peaceful than the journey there, and as I enter back into the river valleys I call home, it’s already mid November, and I notice something I never noticed before, how the golden sun gleams onto the wide expanse of yellow and green mountains, showcasing a stark contrast in color, the beauty of the sun and how it illuminates the golden leaves is something that will always mesmerise me. Sometimes – it is the hardest journeys – that take you to the most beautiful places.

When the Silk Road became extraordinary

ESF Island School, Fung, Mirella – 13

Retracing time to 130 BCE, the Silk Road emerged as a remarkable network of ancient trade routes that forged connections between the rich lands of China and the vibrant cultures of the Far East, Middle East, Eurasia, and North Africa. Originating from the Han Dynasty, the imperial envoy Zhang Qian travelled westwards in 138 BCE, opening trade routes and fostering territorial expansions.

The true magic of the Silk Road not only lies in the bustling exchanges of silk, spices, and precious goods but also in its role as a vibrant artery of cultural exchange, nurturing the spread of innovative technologies and diverse religions across the world. It was a *key* tapestry of *revolutionary* transformation and development, intertwining through time and space. The thriving web of connections formed the backbone of global interactions, enticing us to delve into the moment of history that had been calling.

In Xi'an, Wang Xizhi, a Chinese calligrapher from the Jin dynasty, takes a step, smelling the spice-scent mingling in the air of the bustling street markets. The laughter of merchants selling exquisite silk robes and intricately crafted ceramics fills his heart with joy. The sound of a distant philosophical debate drifts through the air, compelling him to turn around. He spots an ancient, wizened man in a white turban, framed by silver eyebrows and a snow-white beard. Their eyes make contact as they each recognise a fellow philosopher.

Wang approaches first, “Ah, greetings, esteemed philosopher. Your presence is as refreshing as the breeze on this fine afternoon. What brings you to this market?”

The philosopher replies, “Greetings, I’m Al-Farabi from Persia, here to discuss philosophy and governance with scholars from distant lands.”

Wang continues, “Is this your first visit?” He introduces himself: “I am Wang Xizhi, a fellow scholar and Chinese calligrapher from the Jin Dynasty. The brush is my instrument; through ink, I express life’s flow and nature’s rhythm.....”

Their conversation unfolds, each word spoken unlocks a key in their hearts, to a foreign land, painting vivid connections and opening to each other’s past and achievements. It is in these serendipitous moments that the ‘ordinary’ becomes ‘extraordinary’.

Walking down an aisle of the bustling street market, Wang invites Al-Farabi to halt; it is his stall. He spreads out a sheet of paper, its surface gleaming like a pond ruffled by spring breezes—delicate yet ancient, placing a small pot beside the paper, filled with silky, smooth liquid, black in color. Briefly dipping the brush into the liquid, he moves his delicate strokes across the paper, flamboyantly displaying the tradition of Chinese calligraphy; the essence of each stroke breathes through the spirit of ancient culture.

“福 (fú),” Wang claims, symbolizing luck, “because it is my luck to meet you!” Al-Farabi smiles, and their embrace seals their newfound friendship.

“Can I take you on a tour of our famous temple? The Giant Wild Goose Pagoda—a place where the histories of China unfold,” Wang asks.

“Intriguing, what an offer of your time,” Al-Farabi replies gratefully.

Embarking on a journey towards the temple grounds, Wang stretches his arms wide, showcasing the surroundings, “This pagoda was built during the Tang dynasty, symbolizing spiritual devotion and cultural exchange.”

Taking a few steps to the left, gently picks up a sutra, an ancient medieval text brought from India by monk Xuanzang—a testament to ancient craftsmanship. “This sanctuary bridges East and West, where ideas and faith from distant lands found a home.”

“Astounding,” Al-Farabi remarks, He can not believe how close he is standing against the soaring pagoda’s ancient bricks, feeling dwarfed beneath its tiers that stretch skyward like a stairway to history itself.

Wang senses the depth of connection blooming between their cultures. “Here, the soul of the Silk Road breathes.”

The silence between them inspires an atmosphere of respect.

“Tell me, Al-Farabi,” Wang asks, “How does your knowledge of philosophy connect with our writings?”

Al-Farabi ponders for a moment, “Similarly to the graceful strokes in calligraphy, my teaching emphasizes the unity of knowledge and virtue. Everywhere I travel, I witness how language can lift and enrich our minds. Amongst the writings of different countries, I read the same principles too.

Together, they notice a group of scholars in front of them, seated on sophisticated woven rugs, engaged in conversation. Al-Farabi feels a pull to join in as the scholars welcome them. “Ah, travelers from distant lands! What wisdom brings you here to share?” one scholar exclaims.

Wang responds, “We seek to understand how language shapes our connections.”

Settling into the conversation of the evolution of language, one scholar, adjusting his spectacles, begins, “Language is like a river, flowing continuously to convey our thoughts and needs. Rivers gather new streams, involving new words to express ourselves.”

Al-Farabi agrees, “Language acts as a mirror to our cultural and societal changes.”

“During my travels, I witnessed how language adapts to diverse cultures. In Xi’an, I encountered merchants speaking various dialects, each infused with its own stories. This fluidity deepens our relationships, allowing emotions and ideas to cross geographical borders.”

Wang leans in, “How does this play out in moments of conflict or misunderstanding?”

Al-Farabi replies, “Conflict often arises from miscommunication; without a shared understanding, dialogues can devolve into arguments. My personal perception is to understand each other’s intentions, developing a communal theme we can agree upon.”

“Language evolves around intention and interconnectedness,” he affirms.

As the sun dips low, illuminating their faces, they discover common ground that weaves together the fabric of human connection.

Soon, the night falls into darkness, packed with stars that shimmer like shiny pearls. One of the scholars offers a place to stay, “Several beds are free at the moment, and the clock has run far.”

Wang and Al-Farabi appreciate his consideration with a bow and 'Thank you'.

Settling around a rustic wooden table, fragrances of cultural dishes filled the air, mingling with the soft glow of lanterns that cast flickering shadows against the table below. Wang glances at a scholar holding a piece of paper. "Ah, this parchment you hold is such a simple yet revolutionary innovation."

The scholar replies with a soft smile, "Surely, it flutters across Imperial China like a gentle breeze, allowing scholars to document insights. The invention is truly a treasure."

He continues, Papermaking assists in strengthening communication across the world. This lightweight medium allows scholars to share internal thoughts, inferences, and discoveries, like the lights of lanterns glowing across the darkest street. Letters and manuscripts travel from China towards the West, bridging gaps between distant lands."

Changing topic slightly, the learned scholar continues, "Another invention that brings us a similar functionality is navigational tools; they serve as a celestial guide, allowing seafarers to seek unknown areas, guiding them to new places and cultivating trade routes that stitch distant lands into a diverse patchwork quilt."

Mei instantly agrees, "Yes, navigational tools like the compass and astrolabe have emerged as lifelines for merchants traversing the treacherous expanse of the Silk Road. With these innovations, traders carve new paths across deserts and seas, nurturing and propelling ideas and goods into new territories."

As dinner is served, the conversation flows effortlessly, each technology infiltrating their lives and turning the mundane into a dance of ingenuity. Each advancement spreads like waves of the ocean, making attachments to us.

Al-Farabi exclaims, "Technology is like a sculptor chiseling away at marble, revealing breathtaking forms that transform how we live and connect. I truly believe the world as we know it today will constantly change, develop, and evolve. My true hope is that humankind will still see the value of relationships and learning from each other."

The night deepens as the clock approaches '12'. Wang, Al-Farabi, and the scholars recline in their beds, bringing an end to this day. Slumber begins to claim them. Al-Farabi, whose bed is near the window, hears the sounds of heavy hooves stumbling across the road, realizing they are camels marching down the road, stumbling on the particles of sand that offer a crusty sound.

"Are those followers of Buddhism?" he asks.

Li, a scholar lying nearby, awakens groggily. "Yes, merchants travel day and night along land and sea routes to exchange goods," he explains. "They convey the ideas of beliefs, weaving a rich tapestry into local cultures."

"Buddhism flowed along the Silk Road, carrying teachings of compassion and karma as it blended with local traditions. Christianity, too, spread through these routes, adapting to new cultures and influencing art and belief. Together, these faiths reveal how the Silk Road shaped societies through shared ideas and spiritual exchange."

Al-Farabi is amazed; he cannot believe how those merchants allow these religions to integrate, like roots quietly spreading beneath the soil, shaping the societies it touches.

Through their nocturnal discussions beneath the twinkling stars, the timeless Silk Road revealed its enduring magic. By bringing Wang and Al-Farabi together, it became a meeting place for scholars, ideas, and innovation. Evoking a truly extraordinary moment.

The Broken Promise

ESF Island School, Joy, Chan – 13

“Goodbye Dad!” said Ann.

My child ran over and hugged me tight as I stepped out of the door, her hazel eyes reflecting the sun as it stared through my soul. Before I could reply, my wife walked over and placed her hands into mine, hoping that I would just stay with her. “Rafe, how long are you going to leave for? Our child needs you, and so do I.”

Speaking softly, I said, “Look, I won’t be gone for long, I’ll come back.”

I knew Rose was worried about me but our child needs to see her strong when I’m gone.

Below me, a small voice spoke. “Dad, will I ever see you again?” Hearing Ann’s gentle voice broke me. I couldn’t bear listening to it, as if she was begging me to stay.

I tried my best not to shed tears but my crackled voice exposed my emotions, “Of course I will, I promise. Now, I want the both of you to take care while I’m gone. I’m still here, in your hearts. Okay? I love you.”

“We love you too.” Their voices softened, each time they spoke.

Finally, I soaked up my last bit of courage and left our isolated rusty home. I looked back one last time, my head filled with memories of Rose and Ann, ones that would last a lifetime.

Rose looked at me with anxiety, but this wasn’t a choice. Winter was coming and if I stayed, we wouldn’t survive because we hadn’t collected enough resources. But I never told this to Ann because I knew it would break her. And even though it hurts, deep down, Rose knew this was the right thing to do. And if the roles were reversed, she would do the same.

Every step I took, I had to convince myself that ‘this wasn’t forever’. So for the first time, I left my home, my family, everything I once owned, gone.

After walking many miles, nothing seemed to be in sight. No human beings, no cities or towns, no nothing. I was in the middle of nowhere. The silence stretched across the parched land, peaceful filling in the space, and you could only hear the soft wind blowing. I laid down on the hard rocky ground, the sun blinding my eyes. I closed my eyes and for the first time in forever, I let my thoughts run freely around my mind.

Before leaving home, I gave a promise to my family. And there was a question that kept me awake every night, ‘What if I never go back and all this was for nothing?’. I’ve trudged through every route, every passage that crossed my way, but still nothing.

The feeling of culpability, regret, guiltiness followed me like my shadow. Leaving a 6 year old behind while being lost, where the only living thing around me were my dark thoughts looming over me.

Taking care of Rose and Ann was supposed to be my responsibility. But I had already failed them. And I will never stop regretting it. Minutes passed and I began to fall asleep, a tear running down my cheek.

I woke up to the sound of murmuring and chatter. Leisurely, I opened my eyes and saw hundreds of people crowding around me. Their expressions filled with confusion, fear, and anger. Suddenly, I realised. These people were the help I needed. I slowly got up off the ground. Heart pounding rapidly, eyes widening, I jumped up with joy.

The crowd shuffled in closer but was stopped by a mysterious man.

Before I could think, I was dragged by a bundle of soldiers into the town. The streets were bustling with friendly people and a sense of hope built up inside me.

Instantaneously, the guards halted. In front of me, a humongous sophisticated temple staring back at me.

As I entered the temple, I noticed the immaculate designs. Every wall had patterns engraved in them, all matching with red or gold colour. Then I stopped in front of a man. He sat in a high chair with armed guards beside him. His eyebrows were furrowed and his royal gold outfit almost matched the temple exactly.

For a while, the room was silent. The atmosphere was tense and no one dared to speak. Until a strong voice spoke, "I am Zhang Qian. Ruler of this town and village. And who might you be?" His voice was powerful as he addressed his subjects.

"Good afternoon your majesty. My name is Rafe. I come here for your help. I have travelled a long way because my family is in need of supplies to survive. So I ask for your help and guidance."

I tried sounding confident but deep down, I was frightened. So I prayed under my breath, every part of my body shaking.

"Rafe? I have never heard of you. You say you seek help. But how would I know if you weren't an intruder. Many come to this place and act innocent yet do betrayal acts. How are you any different?" stormed Zhang.

"I am just a man in need of help, for my 6 year old daughter and wife. Which is why I need to keep them healthy." I stuttered, the words plopped out of my mouth, one stop at a time.

As the emperor debated among his men, the room was silent once more. After what seemed like eternity, Zhang decided.

I held my breath, fearful of what's about to come next. Because the next few words coming out of his mouth, determined my everything.

"As the ruler of this town, I have decided to lock you into the dungeon until further notice."

My jaw dropped to the floor. Every hope I had was shattered.

"NO! I am begging you, my family needs me, I can't be locked up." I knew my begging and crying were no use. His decision was made. In his eyes, I was worthless. And just when I was about to give up, an idea clicked.

"WAIT!" my voice boomed, voice clearer than ever. "What if we make an arrangement? I can do something for you, and in return, you set me free."

"What sort of arrangement are we talking about here?" he asked, showing a hint of interest.

This was my chance.

"I was looking around your temple," I explained, "and realised something. Your supplies are limited, and you reuse the same materials, again and again. But how will you survive if you restrict yourself from fascinations out there? You can stay in your temple forever, but your town, your people will never develop. And soon enough, it might just get dominated."

"Are you trying to say that my way of treating my people and town is substandard?" raising his voice louder and louder as he spoke.

“Of course not your majesty. But what if there was a way you could make your village 10 times more successful? My idea, one route. One route that connects your village with other towns and countries. Instead of a remote island, you join others and trade. Think about it, everything would change, for the better.”

“I’m listening...in fact, there is a way I can make that happen. Hmm, I have had the same things for centuries. It’s time my people try something new. It’s a deal. And in return, I can give you your family with necessities, but you won’t be free. After all, you thought of this idea. You have the power to persuade others to attack us. Luckily, I keep my promises. So, you’ll live here...till the day you die.”

A rage of anger rushed through me. That wasn’t the deal I thought. I tried protesting with all my might and strength but all hope was lost.

Escaping was my only option. So I tried, everyday for weeks, but nothing worked. The outside world was out of reach. And no matter how wonderful this place was, it was just a prison in disguise. Because I just wanted my family. The whole reason I came here was for them. And everyday, I wondered if Ann had grown up to hate the father who left her.

Many years later, I’ve grown to quite like this place. Making new friends and fitting in with others. And for quite some time, I’ve moved on from the ‘incident’.

But from time to time, the thought of it still crosses my mind. Wondering if I had tried harder, would it all have worked out differently. Would I still be with my family now? And although the memories fade, the guilt still lingers, hanging tight on my throat. Breaking my promise I gave Ann and Rose wasn’t meant to happen. It haunts me every night, thinking that I have disappointed my own kin. And unfortunately, I have almost forgotten how they both looked like.

But I could never forget Ann’s hazel eyes I left behind that shone through my soul.

Ju's Journey Along The Silk Road

ESF Island School, Narayanan, Praveen – 12

In ancient China, a poor yet content farmer named Ju Wei lived in the outskirts of a village called Yuang Dui. The village was home to a mere 15 families all deep in poverty, looking for a way to escape their hunger and misery. Ju was burdened with the pressure of making enough for his family. With two young children to take care of, Ju often went hungry himself just to see his children content. Alas, Ju was one of the privileged ones, for entire families had been wiped out during the drought.

Ju's only remaining asset was a patch of land. He had sold all his belongings, furniture and even his wife's gold just to provide for his family. A ground drowned with weeds, covered by heaps of neglected leaves and pests filled the land end to end. Ju felt ashamed of its upkeep; it had been passed down from generation to generation and had once been the pride and soul of his ancestors. He had tried to save up for its maintenance but with two children to care for it seemed impossible. Although he tried numerous times to sell the land and move to a habitable place he had no success. For the land was far too remote for any merchants to even think about trying to come and start a business here. With so much of the population in poverty no one even looked at his farm. Ju didn't know what to do with all his wheat and soybeans, to make sales he sometimes went on expeditions to distant villages in hope of selling his staples. However, travelling was not only expensive but also exhausting leaving him with a few mere gold coins which he had to spend for his children's education and his family's daily necessities. Ju sighed as he thought over his miserable situation, then he got to work with his tools and started digging. For if he didn't have enough pits he would miss the harvest. He dug with a somewhat renewed sense of enthusiasm though he wasn't entirely sure why. Digging each hole, putting a few seeds in and finally closing it with a small prayer hoping the seeds would bring his long awaited fortune.

He had decided a long time ago that this was his fate; six months of back breaking work, for ten hours a day all in return for no one to buy it. Bringing the need for an exhausting journey haggling with each customer all for a few measly gold coins. Absent minded he continued digging when suddenly he saw a group of people surrounding the new road. The new road was some project the emperor had ordered a long time ago. Workers came each day to make fences and had been paving it for ages but it was all done without much publicity. Li wasn't too excited about it as the sand and dust that came along when constructing often spoiled the crops. However, he was fascinated by the crowd so he went up to check. He didn't recognise many of the officials at the front who were lecturing the villagers but he did understand it was something important when he saw the village's wise man. He sat down and took a seat under the cool shade of the tarp shielding them from the scorching sun. As he turned his attention to the officials he quickly grew more excited as he realised that the road was actually the same as the rumor he had once heard, about a road that connected China to different countries around the world – and it ran right through his village! The official lectured them about the possibilities the road which was called “The Silk Road” opened up for them, he told them that the Emperor highly encouraged villagers to sell their goods to travellers not only helping weary travellers but also to display Chinese goods to different parts of the world like Europe and Asia.

Ju ran excitedly to his house to tell his family about the good news that more travellers would allow for more business. Maybe his dream would come true, maybe he could finally provide enough for his family. His heart full of dreams, imagining all the things he could finally buy. His wife, Liang, was pleasantly surprised to see him back so early but was suspicious so she started pestering him on why he was back so earlier the minute he stepped in.

“Ju, what happened? Why are you back so early?”

“Liang, you wouldn't believe what happened while I was digging today!”

“Ju what? Did you sell anything!”

“Not really! But, our wheat and grains are going to be selling a lot soon!”

“How? Are more people moving into the village?”

“No, but apparently the rumor was true. The road is coming through our village, it’s called “The Silk Road”. Additionally, the Emperor encourages us to sell our goods. Just imagine Liang, we’re going to be rich!”

“But what if it doesn’t work out? What if no one buys our goods?”

“It doesn’t matter, we have to try it. Moreover, we are the only village in miles, our goods will be a great help for weary travelers.”

“Okay, I trust you. Go now or we won’t be ready for harvest!”

Ju took up his tools and set off to go back to his farm. He started digging with a renewed sense of energy. He started to clear up all the abandoned leaves and trash of the land and enjoyed the sweat from all the hard work. Even the satisfaction of a good day’s work didn’t satisfy him so he decided to consult the village’s wise man for some guidance on how to sell his crops. So he locked his tools in his farm’s shed and walked on the path to the wise man’s house. Everyone knew the wise man, he had lived in Yuang Dui ever since the building of the village. Yuang Dui had once been a big merchant village with many farms with plenty of water. But, all the water had dried up and the drought caused devastation with the dry spell wiping over a dozen families. The drought caused many families to move to the inner city near the Emperor’s kingdom, making it hard for merchants to run businesses. Ju could hardly believe that the wealth that once disappeared would come back and flourish in the village.

Soon he arrived at the wise man’s house and knocked on his door. The wise man, old and fragile, arrived at the door and served Ju a cup of fresh hot tea. Ju told the man about his plans to start a stall near the road to promote his goods helping assist weary travellers with low supplies. The wise man told him that it was a great plan and he could even think about hosting travellers for a low price to provide further support. He also told him that the Emperor would be making a grand trip across “The Silk Road” to experience the journey himself and he would be pleased and would reward helpful merchants and farmers who were willing to provide not only goods but be a compassionate and kind hosts.

Ju was thrilled about the help from the wise man and the opportunity the Emperor gave him from “The Silk Road”. As the weeks flew by Ju made more sales and hosted many travelling merchants and finally made enough to provide his family with a happy life. Ju never forgot about his roots, instead of indulging in his luxury he invested in his community. Building homes and helping families who needed it the most. Every evening, he could still be found in the fields, tending to crops alongside his neighbours. Ju’s heart remained rooted in the values that shaped him and he never forgot to be helpful and kind to those around him.

Ju’s story was one of many, “The Silk Road” wasn’t just a road, it connected people, families and more importantly communities. Spanning over 6,400 kilometers, it played a central role in facilitating economic, cultural, political and more importantly religious connections between the East and the West.

The journey of Ju Wei was a testament to his resilience and the power of hope, an example that hardships always leads to prosperity, friendship and a sense of belonging in our everchanging lives.

Yesterday's Silk, Tomorrow's Echoes

ESF King George V School, Chan, Ethan – 12

The day started well, PE first period. “Ethan! Let’s play catch together today!”

Gavin yelled across the gym seats.

“Sure, I guess, but throw accurately this time,” I sighed.

“I will!” he replied enthusiastically.

Whoosh! Smack! Whoosh! It was gone again. Every throw, I needed to prepare myself for a goalkeeper dive, so I didn’t need to go and get it again. And again. And again.

“I’m sorry! I’ll throw it better next time!” he begged.

“At this point, just toss it to me. You’re making me run laps.” I replied, annoyed as I ran to get the ball.

It was inside a big tree. There was a massive tree with a hole in it beside the gym, which no one dared to go in because there were rumours about missing people. But we went in regardless.

Gavin followed behind, freaking out like a cat in water. We went to get the ball, but then heard a crack.

The floor collapsed. We fell bouncing around as if we were a basketball.

I finally saw the end, but it was shiny.

We tumbled down and fell onto hard ground.

“Hey Gavin! Stand up, we gotta get out of here. Use your geography brain. What does that gate say!?” I shook him, heart pounding.

“Khanbaliq? Mongol? We’re in Beijing!” Gavin said in shock.

“Great, how on Earth are we supposed to get from Beijing to Hong Kong?” I asked. “It must be a trap by someone!”

Gavin replied, “No, it’s a real portal. We travelled back in t—”

“Stop the arguing!”

We jumped and turned around. A Chinese teenager stood behind us. He was wearing long robes, but what shocked us most was that he spoke English.

“Come with me,” he said.

We didn’t know what else to do, so we followed him through narrow streets filled with strange smells and sounds.

In perfect English, he said, “I am Tristan. In the class of 2024. I’m assuming that we’re from the same school, fell into the same stupid tree. I felt a little dizzy, but then the next day there were no special symptoms.”

He looked around. “I learned how to blend in and survive in the past, but I can’t find out how to get out. This is why I need you guys to help me escape.”

“Just like us!” Gavin and I said together.

Soon, we were wearing long Hanfu robes. We used heavy old coins to buy food. We ate plain meals: steamed greens, turnips, and bowls of cabbage soup. Sometimes there were radishes or spinach, flavored only with garlic and salt.

That’s when it finally hit me.

We weren’t just lost.

We were stuck in the past.

“Argh!” I shouted as I stumbled backward, crashing into a man who was running straight at me. I shoved him away, and as my hand slipped, my finger scraped against something cold and sharp.

A knife.

My heart jumped. A thief.

Tristan stepped forward, shouting and waving his arms, which got the attention of the public. Then we ran away when people started surrounding him so they wouldn’t notice.

We darted into a busy market district, where the streets were packed with people. Merchants shouted over one another, selling vegetables, cloth, and bread. The air smelled of cooked food and smoke, and the noise swallowed us as we disappeared into the crowd.

We decided to travel the Silk Road. It was a combination of many small roads that stretched from southern Europe to East Asia. The width of each path was only about 2 car widths and was packed with caravans, merchants, explorers, and monks.

We travelled on foot, and the desert's heat tasted like copper. Our Hanfu were frayed.

But then it hit: the Bubonic Plague.

The bustling Silk Road turned silent. Men coughed up blood.

We were hopeless.

A fortune teller sat near the market gate, holding a bundle of bamboo sticks. He called out to passing strangers, promising luck, safety, and answers. Coins rattled in a small bowl at his feet as people stopped to listen.

"This is our chance!" said Gavin.

We stood in front of the fortune teller.

He picked up the bamboo sticks and shook them gently until one fell onto the table. Then another. He studied them carefully.

The fortune teller dropped three coins onto the table. They clinked softly as they landed. He leaned closer, lowering his voice.

"You are far from where you began," he said. "Very far."

"You have crossed a door that should not be crossed," he said. "Time bends around you like smoke."

"How do we get out then!?" I asked.

"There is a door in Constantinople that you can cross to go back; however, no one has dared to go in, as nobody can."

"Then who's stopping us?" I asked.

The fortune teller replied, "Time itself repels you from the portal. Right now, you are still in the future. But the border is around you, so you are looking, hearing, smelling, tasting, and touching the past."

"The portal will remove the time barrier; however, 1 in 3 people are estimated not to make it through the portal due to the high pressure inside."

"One of you will make it through with peace, one with doubt, and one has already waited too long. And once it takes over one of your bodies, time will vanish with it."

Tristan's eyes froze.

"This is what happened to us!" we said altogether.

But then we spotted something: a lesion! It was a spot on the right side of Tristan's neck. Tristan felt really energetic at first, but then slowly felt nauseous and low on energy. We rushed to a healer, but weren't prioritized since it was just an early symptom of the Black Death.

We begged but were ignored.

We decided to carry Tristan on horseback as we had to get to Constantinople as quickly as possible. We kept walking through the Himalayas, the Delhi Sultanate, and the Ilkhanate.

We tried new food, cultures, and lifestyles.

We persisted through snow and desert and finally ended up in a port in Persia.

Ring! Ring! "The boat to Constantinople has arrived! If you want to get on, you'd better hurry!"

We looked up, awaiting a mid-sized wooden boat and tons of people on the dock. There was no way we could get on. But this was our only chance.

Gavin sprinted towards the dock, me following closely behind. We squeezed through stalls and people, enraging some middle-aged man.

But we eventually got on board.

Tristan's body was getting weaker, but we needed him to stay alive on this journey.

We went around, asking for medicine or a cure. Anything would help at this point.

As a group of plague-ravaged Mongols ran onto the ship, pushing everyone away, Tristan collapsed. Then everybody started collapsing on the ship, like a series of dominoes.

We were scared for our lives, not knowing what to do.

Suddenly, we couldn't feel any of our body parts, and I saw a flash.

Gavin and I were teleported to this new dimension, which looked stunning, with yellow skies, blue grass; it was nature, but everything had the wrong color.

I heard “ЭНЭ ЮУ ВЭ?” in Ancient Mongol. “What is this?”

“Attention all subjects of time, you are now in the Chronosphere, where all past, present, and future subjects of time lie.”

It was a familiar voice.

“I am Tristan Wang.”

Gavin gasped.

“I am the gatekeeper of time, and you all will be awaiting a good tomorrow. Everyone in this world has a flow, or their fate. Everyone's flow here is time. It will slowly take over me, you, and everyone here. Until it consumes you whole and brings you to the abyss where there is no time, and you are stuck forever.”

“As it is my responsibility to deal with this, I will take all the time with me, and let you be free of time. You can go have normal lives ... while I stay here.”

“Go across the gateway of dimensions in Constantinople and be free. Don't look back. Every one of you deserves it.” Something flashed.

We were all back. Even Tristan.

“Goodbye.” I heard from behind me.

I turned to see that Tristan had died willingly to save our lives.

Everyone started paddling to try and get the boat to Constantinople. It was challenging, with the harsh tide, but nothing could stop us.

I looked back, and everything had stopped. All we could see were subjects of time.

Once we arrived. The portal was waiting right in front of us. Since time isn't with us anymore, nothing is repelling us from the portal. Everyone rushed in. My face with hope. Gavin's in doubt.

Epilogue:

Wind blew past our faces, not a second passed.

“What just happened?” Gavin asked.

I stood there with nothing to say.

“Gavin! Ethan! Come back, stop messing around!” I heard.

We smiled and ran back.

Beyond the Palace Walls

ESF King George V School, Chan, Yau Ning – 11

Prologue – A Month Ago

I tossed and turned in bed. Restless and unable to sleep, I slipped quietly from my chambers. The palace lay hushed, broken only by the soft footfalls of the guards on their rounds. I knew the secret passage behind the paintings in the eastern corridor. It was the one the servants pretended did not exist. I had discovered it years ago while playing hide-and-seek with no one but shadows.

I moved like a ghost through the halls until I reached the Imperial Chambers. The heavy doors were ajar, just enough for a slender girl to press herself against the wall and peer through the narrow crack.

There, at the center of the room, Xie sat before the Emperor, tracing invisible threads of cosmic energy, or Qi, in the air.

“Well?” Father asked impatiently, his hands slowly curling into fists.

Xie smiled, a sad and knowing smile.

“Your Divine Majesty, within the time of three full moons, a treasure will be born. Guard it with your life, for it will either grant immortality or bring an end to prosperity.” He bowed deeply.

The Emperor needed no further explanation.

“Who will betray me, Xie?” the Emperor asked, his knuckles whitening against the armrests.

“The one you love most.”

Xie turned and left, abandoning the Emperor to the lengthening shadows across the marble floor.

His words landed like stones dropped into still water. I clapped a hand over my mouth to stifle a gasp and fled back through the passage. The prophecy echoed in my mind all the way to my chamber.

Who did Father love most? Mother, the Empress? Me, his daughter? Or someone, or something, else entirely?

I did not know then that the answer would one day cost us everything, and give the world something far greater.

The Present

“Mei? Are you there? Come down now!”

I hurried down the stairs into the Inner Palace. Jade statues gleamed in the afternoon sunlight, and decorated pillars rose proudly from the palace walls. My mother sat at a low

lacquered table beside a jade-toned vase, flanked by golden cushions. Two cups of tea rested between them.

She rose and smiled. “Fancy some tea, Mei?”

I glanced at the cups. “No, thank you.”

“A pity,” she said lightly. “Why don’t we go for a walk instead?”

As we strolled through the gardens, the sky softened into sunset hues.

“Let us sit beneath that mulberry tree,” she said. “Do you remember it? We planted it together.”

I smiled, remembering my seven-year-old self proudly patting soil around its roots. We sat beneath its shade, grateful for the cool relief after the sun. My mother sipped her tea slowly.

“How are your studies?” she asked.

Surprised by the sudden interest, I stuttered slightly. “I am doing well, Mother.”

Silence settled between us. Just as I rose to return to the palace, my mother gasped.

“What is it?” I asked, turning back.

“Oh! My tea.”

I peered into the cup, feigning interest.

“A cocoon has fallen in,” she sighed. “Nothing special.”

“Well, it’s ruined now. Let us go inside.”

She glanced once more at the cup, as though mourning it. Her fingers reached in to pluck the cocoon out, but stopped short.

“One cocoon,” she murmured, “with a thread this long...?”

Something flickered in her eyes, but it vanished as quickly as it appeared. She closed her fingers around the cocoon.

“We will speak of this to no one, Mei,” she said quietly. “Come. Let us go inside.”

But I could not forget it. Mother brushed it aside, yet I had seen that glint in her eyes when she noticed the thread. I tried to bury the question beneath scrolls and palace games, but at night it gnawed at me relentlessly.

What was so special about that tiny thread?

One afternoon, when the palace lay still and the guards wilted in the heat, I slipped to the far edge of the gardens. In secret, I gathered fallen cocoons from beneath the same mulberry tree. In my chamber, while the palace slept, I dropped them into hot tea and watched the threads unspool—endless, delicate, and impossibly strong.

Night after night, I collected them, twisting the fibers into yarn with trembling fingers. I wove them on a loom I found abandoned in the old servants’ quarters.

One evening, Mother caught me.

I braced myself for anger. Instead, she sat beside me in silence and gently guided my hands. When we finished, I stared at the fabric spread before us. It shimmered like flowing water, light as air yet warm to the touch. I draped the small piece over my shoulder. It was softer than hemp or wool, softer than dreams.

At last, my mother spoke, her voice low.

“I learned fragments of this knowledge long ago from foreign traders at the western border. Even then, it was forbidden, suppressed by imperial decree.” She paused. “We must show this to your father. Come.”

We presented the fabric to Father. His reaction was thunderous joy.

“A gift from the heavens!” he proclaimed. “Fit only for the most prestigious, those deemed worthy by the gods. We must protect it at all costs.”

He wrapped himself in the first robes we made.

“No one outside the palace must know of this gift!”

But as the moons passed, joy curdled into fear. Silk became a state secret. Maids and guards were questioned, patrols doubled, especially around the imperial mill. While we luxuriated in silk, beyond the walls the commoners wore rough hemp that chafed their skin.

One cold afternoon, I climbed to the palace’s highest terrace and looked down upon the farmers’ market below.

Children shivered in thin, patched clothes while I wore the finest fabric the world had ever known. I touched the silk sleeve of my dress. Soft, warm, miraculous.

And then memory struck me like lightning.

Xie’s prophecy.

A realization took hold: a treasure locked away is no treasure at all. It is a curse.

I went to Mother beneath the mulberry tree, tears already falling, and told her everything. She listened without interruption.

At last, she spoke.

“Mei, your father never chose me for love. He chose me for what I represented, peace with the western borderlands. I secure his rule. You are the one he truly loves most. It seems you have a destiny to fulfill.”

At dawn the next day, she helped me escape.

Disguised as a common maid, I slipped through the palace gates. In my bundle I carried silkworm eggs wrapped in leaves and mulberry seeds. For many moons, I traveled in secret across misty mountains and raging rivers, driven by a purpose I could no longer ignore.

In every village I reached, I taught the people how to plant mulberry trees, tend silkworms, and weave fabric from their threads. At first they feared sorcery. Soon, they wept with joy as soft robes replaced their coarse ones.

Word spread like wildfire along the trade routes, and before long, the Empire’s name became synonymous with beauty and wonder. I never revealed who I was, only where I came from.

Years later, I returned to the palace unannounced, older and sun-browned. The gates stood open. Guards, maids, and commoners alike wore silk in every color imaginable.

I found my father beneath a mulberry tree, its branches heavy with cocoons. His eyes, once sharp with paranoia, softened when he saw me. He reached out, and I stepped into his embrace, tears burning at my eyes.

“Thank you, my daughter,” he whispered. “Thank you for saving us all.”

And for the first time, the silk against my skin truly felt right.

Years later still, wandering the palace archives, I found an old scroll. It was Xie's final divination, written in his fading hand. As I read it, understanding finally dawned.

The prophecy had never been about the silk itself. The treasure born within three moons was not cloth, but knowledge that could not be contained. The betrayal foretold was not theft, but the choice to release what could have been hoarded.

In spreading the eggs and the wisdom along forgotten paths, I had unknowingly given birth to something far greater: a web of caravans and wonders that would one day be called the Silk Road.

Xie had seen it all.

And in that quiet moment, I finally understood. The prophecy had been fulfilled the instant those threads left the palace walls.

China's Silk Road

ESF King George V School, Kattela, Gourangi – 12

In 138 BCE, the sun rose in the distant mountains of the Western Han Dynasty as a young merchant named Li Wei stood on the edge of his village, his heart pounding with excitement. Today was the first day of an adventure that would change his life and the course of the world's events. With glittering bolts of silk and a mind full of ambition and dreams, Li Wei set out for the mythical realm of the West.

Their departure was full of tension and expectation, a mixed bag of merchants, scholars, and travelers, as they embarked into the valleys of the Loess Plateau, where the land undulated like an eternal wave of mountains and blue heavens, and into the dry terrain of the Gobi Desert, each new step meaning new discoveries, from the aroma of exotic spices carried from distant bazaar, tales of gods and beasts passed down in the glow of campfires, to the lure of precious treasures and fame waiting to be claimed.

Days passed into weeks, and the road to Rome was fraught with danger. Sandstorms concealed their view, and bandits lay in wait to strike down the unwary traveler. But Li Wei did not falter; he had heard tell of a land where money flowed like the rivers of his own China, of a place called Rome where he might sell his precious silk to gaping merchants with eyes aglow.

Finally, after all the travel, the caravan arrived in the bustling city of Samarkand. The city thrummed with the hum of activity, filled with the sound of merchants calling out their goods to the crowd and the playful chatter of children in the streets. Li Wei's soul sang with pride as he spread out his piece of silk. To his utter surprise, the natives of the place were entranced. The fine fabric winked in the sunlight as the colors danced in the depths. People of all stations had gathered, each one vying to lay hands on this luxury. And in that instant, Li Wei realized just how wrong he had been when he thought that silk simply made the journey. Silk, in fact, was a connector.

As the caravan headed back to China, filled with commodities from the West, like toys, glasswares, and the alluring aroma of saffron; Li Wei was no longer the same man. He had experienced the rest of the world, and in return, the rest of the world had experienced a part of China. Back in Chang'an, the home he loved had suddenly acquired the element of possibility. The marketplace was abuzz with activity and anticipation as businessmen brought out their acquisitions. Li Wei laid down trade routes, and before long, he was hailed as an inspiration to many. Silk had become the hallmark of wealth and power, initiating a historical transfer of thoughts and art.

Artists from Greece and Persia also started to impact Chinese artists, while storytellers from India brought news of their deities and teachings. "The Silk Road is no longer just a route for trade," it was said. "It is alive with cultures cross-linking in ways that had never before been contemplated." One evening, Li Wei was listening to his friends in his home when an elderly monk from another part of the world came into their midst. "In the West," he said, his voice barely above a whisper, "there exist countries where the sun never sets, while star-filled heavens convey the wisdom of the past." There, they believed "that every strand of every piece of silk not only creates fabric but also creates the fabric of our souls."

Fast forward to the 15th century. This is a period when the Silk Road is slowly disappearing into the annals of history. It is a time when the trade routes that had prospered are now a shadow of what they used to be. Now the sea routes are offering a more optimal route, leading the once active land routes to become desolate. It is in a small village, which is somewhere near the final remnants of the Silk Road, that a young girl by the name of Mei had a longing for adventure. This is because she had heard the stories that had been passed down by her grandmother. One day, she presented the young girl with a piece of silk.

"With this silk, you can take our stories everywhere you go," her grandmother said, her eyes shining with memories. "You must find a way to reclaim the spirit of the Silk Road for yourself." Inspired by her words, Mei rallied a group of friends and embarked on a journey back through the forgotten routes of the Silk Road. Through the ruins of ancient cities, they sought out what remained in places forgotten, a spice route, a temple, and with each step, they could hear the whispers of the past urging them on towards reclaiming a spirit of connection.

Their travels brought them to a deserted caravanserai, where they found scrolls of knowledge and other items of the old travelers. Among these items was a map, which held secrets of unknown pathways. Mei and her group of friends wanted to revive the caravan, so they called on skilled craftsmen from other parts of the world. In 2013, a modern form of the Silk Road was birthed, a road that brought nations together in a different way. The old routes were restored, not only to serve as a trade path, but a means of cultural exchange. Musicians, artists, and innovators from all over the world gathered together, sharing their gifts.

Mei is now the leadership figure behind this new wave and was the organizer of the celebrations that honored the culture diversity along the Silk Road. All these celebrations were the epitome of all that the eyes and ears could see and all the taste the world was known for. Every individual danced and laughed and shared the stories of what they knew and shared the stories of the past that they knew and shared and shared and shared until the sun set one evening at one such festival. "This is the spirit of the Silk Road," said Mei to a crowd of thousands. "It is the journey that never really ended but something greater!"

With the cheers of the crowd behind her, she felt the power of history coursing through her veins. The ancient fibers of silk had knitted a fabric of human bonding which had no boundaries of time and space. The Silk Route had become more than a path; it had become a tradition of passion, adventure, and the indomitable nature of mankind. Time Unfolded, and the New Silk Route prospered. The New Silk Route had become a beacon of hope and teamwork, a living testament to the potential of oneness in diversity. Children were taught about the Silk Routes in school, and the legend of how their forefathers had dreamed while crossing the boundaries of their horizons had inspired them.

Li Wei's Odyssey had unleashed a legacy that was to live through the ages, reminding all that trade was more than mere merchandise; it was all about understanding, empathy, and friendship that could cross the sands of time. The Silk Road, in all its manifestations, was a living testimony to the fact that the world was a large fabric, with every strand counted and counted for. Mei, standing in the marketplace of Chang'an, felt a deep connection to the generations that had passed by, so many years ago. The spirit of the Silk Road was very much alive, thriving in the hearts of dreamers, explorers, and connectors.

And deep within her own heart, she knew that as long as people kept sharing their stories, there would be no end to the journey. The world may have become a small place indeed, but its colors were more radiant than ever. The ancient Silk Road of trade and artworks had transformed into a living canvas of cultures; each strand in the fabric of the canvas symbolized a story waiting to be unfolded. When Mei looked around at all the people bustling around her, she knew that the heartbeat of the Silk Road would live on for generations to come.

The Tales of the Silk Road Murder

ESF Renaissance College, Chan, Blair – 12

Joel

It was December 29th. The streets teemed with crowds, horses, and stalls, overwhelming young Joel and bewildering his loyal horse, Prince. The bay stallion pushed through the multitude with whinnies. At eleven or twelve, Joel was resilient, armed with his father's bow and a quiver of twenty arrows. As the youngest of eight siblings, he was perhaps the youngest traveler on the Silk Roads.

The stone streets, built long ago from durable mortar, had been ravaged by wars and rebuilt under the Xiaolong Emperor—the supreme ruler who proclaimed shares of food and water for all. Yet this emperor had exiled Joel, gifted him Prince, and slain six of his siblings. Village whispers spoke of the emperor's dark secrets, curses that twisted men into beasts under the moon's gaze, but Joel dismissed them as old wives' tales.

After a long home confinement where his mother had confiscated his belongings as punishment, Joel guided Prince through the bustling streets. Stalls brimmed with fruits, vegetables, and meats; merchants shouted their wares. A scream from the west cut through the chaos, then stopped abruptly. People scattered as a man slaughtered vendors. Joel froze, torn between fleeing, confronting, or waiting. Time raced on. Astonishingly, he alone survived the onslaught. Prince neighed urgently; Joel leaped into the saddle, and they galloped away as the murderer pursued. Astride Prince, Joel struggled to process his narrow escape. Prince neighed; Joel leaped into the saddle, and they galloped away as the murderer pursued.

Wesley

Wesley enjoyed a mundane life in an ordinary family until news of the Silk Road massacre reached him. He mounted his faithful stallion, Sandfly, and thundered down the main thoroughfare. Lately, Wesley had been restless, especially as the full moon approached. His skin itched inexplicably, and he shaved twice a day to tame the stubborn stubble that grew unnaturally fast.

Wesley and Sandfly shared an unbreakable bond; they knew when to exchange knowing glances. His brother had mocked the horse as ridiculously small, tempting Wesley to sell it for a dollar. Instead, he cherished Sandfly as companion and confidant. As he rode, a girl with strikingly similar eyes drew alongside on her mount. "Hi. Who are you? Why are you here?" Her voice echoed like that of a lost sister, yet carried fierce determination.

Wesley waved silently, questioning his own sanity. Why pursue a dangerous killer? Gamble his life? Vengeance fueled him: six beloved siblings executed by the Emperor, one banished—perhaps Joel, the brother on the Silk Roads. The mysterious girl baffled him; he'd unravel the puzzle through solitary resolve. Faint, parallel scars from childhood "accidents" lined his arms like claw marks, always hidden under sleeves.

Joel

By early noon, Joel reached a distant locale marked Romania on his map and settled into a restaurant. He devoured bread and ordered more dishes. The waiter joked about avoiding silver cutlery—"Some folks break out in hives from it," he said with a wink. Joel laughed it off, but it stirred memories of family stories about deep-running allergies.

Suddenly, a shadowy figure in black appeared. Joel bundled his meal and ducked into a cow stall with Prince. "Hide there," he whispered. Prince snorted. Joel knocked an arrow, aiming at the foe. Madness, he thought. Challenging a killer with just a bow. Death loomed, but as the finest archer in his village, he would prevail. No pity for such evil. The arrow missed. The murderer lunged, stabbing him.

An agonized scream.

Joel collapsed, blood pooling, dagger deep. Darkness swallowed him. With remarkable ingenuity, Prince hoisted him onto the saddle using hooves, then reared up, startling the attacker into flight. Prince glanced back at his bloodied rider and bolted onto the street.

Iris

Iris despised her village since her mother abandoned her, leaving her orphaned. Once part of a family of eight—one fled to the Silk Roads, six killed by the Emperor—she trusted only her bay mare, Princess. They hunted, slept, and shared life in unity. Hearing of the murderer, curiosity drove her to saddle Princess and venture forth.

Iris had always felt a wild pull during full moons, a restlessness she blamed on her orphan's loneliness. Amid the bloodbath, she spotted a boy her age with eerily similar eyes. "Hi. Who are you? Why are you here?" she demanded, though her tone softened. He waved. Undaunted, she remounted and trotted on. Bizarre, she thought. Orphaned young, now glimpsing ghostly siblings? The boy's movements had seemed fluid, almost predatory, but she shook it off.

Joel

Joel awoke groggily to see a boy and his stallion nearby. The world blurred, encircled by dark blood. "This remedy will help," the boy said. "It might sting, but hold back cries, or he'll return. I'm Wesley. Your name?" Pain radiated from Joel's chest. "I'm relieved you're alive, Joel. You teetered on death's edge. Your horse saved you," Wesley added.

Joel studied Wesley—matching eyes and hair. A lost brother? He tried to rise, but agony pinned him. Checking Prince's bags, he found the valuable silk gone. Wesley's eyes caught the light strangely, flashing dull amber for a second, but Joel dismissed it as sunlight.

Iris

Iris couldn't ignore two abandoned silk bags on the road—treasure in her eyes. She secured them to Princess and pressed on. Ahead lay two weary boys and their horses, one drenched in blood. The uninjured boy was the same from before; no coincidence.

A sudden neigh alerted the group. The injured boy's gash was horrific. Iris' stomach churned as she applied her ointments. "Enchanted by a sage," she explained. Miraculously, flesh mended, bruises faded, trembling eased. She turned to the familiar boy. "Names, or pay for these ointments."

"I'm Joel; this is Wesley. Thank you for healing me. Your name?" Their voices stirred memories. "I'm Iris Hunter." Wesley scratched his arm, fighting an itch beneath the skin.

Wesley

Wesley could believe it—a surviving sister! Joel's jaw dropped, suggesting he recognized her too. Wesley concluded Joel must be a brother as well, but he wasn't certain. Iris retrieved the silk bags from her saddle; Wesley gasped. "Silk? How—?" Joel interjected a grin, "Let's depart before the murderer strikes. We must reach the Distant Lands before the year ends."

Joel

At half-past five in the crisp morning, Joel stirred to Prince's urgent whinny, rousing Iris and Princess instantly. Wesley's sketchbook—filled with drawings of exotic colors—and Sandfly's horseshoe lay. Wesley's eyes darted, his body rigid. Abruptly, he awoke, gasping for air. Sandfly nudged him; as Joel turned, Iris was already mounted on Princess, with Prince fully laden. He swung aboard, and they galloped onward.

By midnight, the trio and their steeds reached the border of Great Britain, guards marched in bear-skin uniforms and wielded sharp swords. By midnight, the midnight moon hung full and bright. Wesley stared at its reflection in the obsidian, jaw tight, a low rumble in his chest. The grand border featured mosaics lining the walls; obsidian reflecting the midnight moon; battlements displaying the criminal heads. Joel paused to examine them, spotting the murderer's head among it. Its eyes seemed to track him. "Everyone, duck!" he shouted.

The guards drew their weapons; the murderer struck down three victims, including Joel's lead guard, whom he deemed seasoned but proved vulnerable. Joel urged Prince toward the Distant Lands; Iris battled; Wesley ambushed from the side, landing five strikes near the neck. It wasn't until the guard captain pierced the villain's heart and twisted the blade. The murderer staggered, collapsing heavily.

Iris

In the aftermath, Iris regained her composure amid the blood pools. "Feels like déjà vu, doesn't it?" remarked the captain, his face matching from her haunting dreams—perhaps a glimpse of foresight. He approached. "Imagine waking naked, drenched in blood—every primal scream's a delicious terror." Leaning close to her ear, he whispered, "You'll never foresee what's ahead."

He pivoted, flashing a smirk. Then, his eyes bulged, veins pulsing; his spine elongating, teeth lengthening. In truth, he transformed into an alpha were-coyote.

Wesley

Wesley, attuned to inaudible frequencies, detected the waves of a transformation. Breaking free from a guard's grip, he raced to the source.

There, the alpha loomed over Iris. His own itch became uncontrollable fire—the family curse, the emperor's terrifying secrets. Emitting a growl, Wesley hunched, igniting a werewolf clash right on the street. With razor-sharp claws, Wesley slashed the alpha's neck, slamming him against the palace walls. He snapped his powerful jaws, chomping into the eyes with brutal force.

The alpha's glare dissolved into panic. Wesley then raked his toenails across the ribs; the alpha crumpled, lifeless. The trio hastened through the gates, emerging onto the welcoming expanse.

The three travellers—Joel on Prince, Wesley on Sandfly, Iris on Princess—rode into the obsidian arch. The Distant Lands, whispered of in legends, breathed welcome. They had survived massacre, pursuit, nightmare, and discovered they were the last of their family. Together alive, they rode forward into the new year and whatever freedom waited on the other side, bound eternally by the moon's secrets.

The Journey of Mei

ESF Renaissance College, Chan, Yuen Ting Natalie – 13

In the Han Dynasty, within the bustling village of Xi'an, life thrummed with vibrancy. Golden rays streamed through the trees, casting a warm glow upon the jasmine flowers that dotted the landscape. Their intoxicating scent mingled with the rich aroma of freshly tilled soil, creating a sensory tapestry that epitomised the beauty of home. Among the village's artisans was Mei, a revered weaver whose silk tapestries were renowned for their vivid colours and intricate patterns. Each stroke of her fingers on the silken threads told stories of her ancestors, their dreams, struggles, and joys. Mei's artistry captured the very essence of her community, embedding the deep roots of her heritage into each carefully crafted weave.

One fateful morning, as the villagers gathered in the central square, a wave of excitement swept through the crowd like a gust of wind. News emerged of an expedition forming to trek westward in search of trade opportunities. The tantalising prospect of exchanging silk for precious spices and exotic treasures ignited a fire in Mei's soul, stirring a longing for adventure that she could hardly suppress. She could almost feel the pull of distant lands tugging at her heartstrings, beckoning her to explore the unknown. The villagers spoke in eager whispers, their faces a tapestry of hope and uncertainty as they weighed the merits of embarking on this perilous journey.

When dawn broke the next day, Mei found herself standing at the edge of her village, emotions swirling within her. Surrounding her was a diverse group of travellers – merchants with eyes aglow with ambition, scholars clutching scrolls of wisdom, and resolute warriors eager to confront the unknown. Their expressions mirrored her own potent blend of anticipation and anxiety. In that moment, Mei felt an unbreakable connection among them, united by shared aspirations.

With a bittersweet farewell to her beloved home, Mei inhaled deeply and stepped into the great unknown, joining the caravan of hope as it wound through breathtaking landscapes. The road ahead lay uncharted, a wild tapestry woven from nature's grandeur intermingled with dangers. They crossed rocky mountain passes where the air thinned, trekked through unforgiving deserts beneath a relentless sun, and navigated dense forests filled with the whispers of hidden creatures. Each step felt heavy with collective dreams.

Despite the initial thrill, the harrowing realities of the journey soon revealed themselves. Nature unleashed its fury as torrential rains turned paths into treacherous mudslides, while biting winds chilled them to the bone. Encounters with bandits lurked along the road, testing their resolve and spirit. In the face of such adversity, tensions simmered within the caravan. Exhaustion and fear threatened to fray the very bonds that had been forged in trust and solidarity. Yet, amidst the chaos, Mei's inner strength emerged like a beacon of light. She began organising the group, encouraging her companions to share their fears and aspirations by the flickering light of the campfire.

On the first frigid night, huddled around a crackling bonfire, the fire provided a haven from worries. The flames danced in the eyes of weary travellers, illuminating their faces, reflecting vulnerability and hope. With her heart swelling with purpose, Mei began to share stories of her village, her voice warm and inviting. She wove tales of jasmine-scented fields, of children playing in the sunshine, and of communal gatherings where laughter rang through the air. As she spoke, her words enveloped them like a comforting embrace, fostering a sense of belonging. The power of storytelling began to knit the group together, breaking down barriers as they laughed and shared food that nourished both their bodies and spirits.

Days morphed into weeks as the caravan faced a relentless tide of challenges. Illness swept through the group like a thief in the night, leaving them grappling with fevers and fatigue. Their spirits flickered like the dimming embers of their campfire. Mei, drawing on her knowledge of herbs and healing, became a source of comfort amidst despair. She rested a cool cloth on the brows of the sick, whispering words of encouragement; her gentle touch became a balm for both body and soul. She transformed from weaver to caretaker, stitching together the fragile strands of hope that were all they had.

The bonds formed around the campfire deepened, rooted in shared struggles and resilience. Their hearts forged new connections, becoming a lifeline in an increasingly chaotic world. As they crossed deserts and navigated rivers, Mei led them in moments of reflection, reminding them of the shared goals that had pulled them together.

Often, she paused to gaze into the expansive night sky, dreaming of the places they might go next and the treasures they could uncover.

Finally, after what felt like an eternity of gruelling travel, the group approached the bustling city of Bukhara. The vibrant marketplace that greeted them buzzed with energy, a cacophony of sounds and colours overwhelming their senses. Merchants shouted their wares, spices filled the air with intoxicating scents, and exotic goods dazzled the eye. Mei stood in awe, her heart soaring with possibilities. Each booth appeared to be a treasure trove of stories waiting to be unearthed.

As she set up her booth, Mei proudly showcased her silk tapestries, each piece reflecting her labour, pain, and joy. Her artistry captivated the crowd, drawing attention from traders and scholars alike. As she traded her silk, Mei engaged in conversation with curious souls from distant lands, their eyes reflecting admiration as they explored her intricate designs. In those exchanges, she shared tales of her culture, intertwining the fabric of her identity with every transaction. Laughter flowed freely, mingling with the vibrant sounds of the marketplace.

Yet, as the initial excitement began to fade, a shadow loomed over the marketplace. Rumours of bandit attacks and political unrest spread like wildfire, darkening the air with uncertainty. The group found themselves at a critical juncture: should they retreat to the safety of home, or muster the courage to stay and forge connections that could alter their fates? Gathered around the campfire once more, they debated their future, weighing fear against opportunity.

In that pivotal moment, Mei stood resolute, her voice unwavering. "We have come too far to turn back now," she asserted. "This journey is not just about trading goods; it's about weaving bonds of understanding. We must seize this moment to create lasting ties." Her fervour sparked a fire within her companions, silencing their fears. Inspired by her conviction, the group chose to stay, committing themselves to nurturing the fragile threads of trust and collaboration they had begun to weave together.

Days turned into weeks as the caravan settled deeper into the market, exchanging silks for spices and stories. Mei emerged as a storyteller, orchestrating gatherings where traders and scholars shared knowledge and wisdom. The marketplace transformed into a vibrant tapestry of human experience, each interaction contributing to a narrative of resilience and hope. With every tale exchanged, the essence of connection grew stronger, intertwining their lives more deeply.

As the sun dipped below the horizon, casting a golden hue across the marketplace, Mei stood before her companions, her voice resonant with purpose. She urged everyone to choose connection over separation, collaboration over isolation. In that moment, a young child, captivated by Mei's passion, gazed up at her with wide eyes, seeing not just a revered artisan but a beacon of hope. Mei recognised the spark of ambition igniting within the child, reminiscent of her own youthful dreams. It was a powerful reminder that her journey was not solely about personal growth, but also about inspiring the next generation. With every story shared, every bond forged, Mei influenced lives beyond her own, ensuring that the wisdom passed down through generations would continue to weave the fabric of unity in a world at constant crossroads.

Mei's descendants, imbued with the spirit of adventure and resilience she epitomised, became artisans and traders in their own right. They traversed distant lands, sharing the art of silk weaving while embracing diverse cultures. Each generation carried the stories of Mei, ensuring that her wisdom continued to guide them. They nurtured the relationships Mei had cultivated, planting seeds of connection in their communities. The legacy of Mei endured as her family wove together threads that transcended borders. They embraced values of unity and understanding, championing the importance of cultural exchange.

Today, the Silk Road remains a powerful symbol of connection and cultural exchange. It teaches us that the threads woven through trade, art, and shared stories can transcend time and distance. In every silk tapestry, every spice traded, and every story shared, our shared humanity is woven together. As we navigate the complexities of our modern world, the lessons of Mei and the Silk Road resonate profoundly.

“We stand at a crossroads”, Mei urged her companions, “empowered to choose connection over division, collaboration over isolation”.

Just as Mei and her companions once faced the unknown with courage and determination, we too can embrace the spirit of adventure, forging paths that bring us closer together.

Karamergen

ESF Renaissance College, Khan, Ibrahim – 12

Chapter 1: A World Turned Upside Down

Ebi was gazing at the setting sun over Karamergen, the rays of light bathed the landscape in a creamy yellow-gold hue, reminiscent of a ripe peach. As he admired the view, a distant lake caught his eye—it was Lake Balkhash. Its shimmering waters stretched across the horizon, reflecting the warm golden tones of the sunset. “Ahhh, this is the life,” he thought, relishing the creamy tang of his goat yoghurt.

At just fifteen, Ebi was known for his cleverness and kindness, traits that endeared him to the townsfolk of Karamergen. He spent his days exploring the sprawling fields and learning the intricacies of life from his parents, who were respected figures in the community. His father was a skilled blacksmith who forged tools and weapons, while his mother nurtured their small garden.

One evening, as the sun dipped below the horizon, painting the sky in ominous hues of orange and purple, a distant sound echoed through the valley—galloping hooves, relentless and ominous. The Mongolian army had arrived. Panic spread like wildfire as the invaders swept through Karamergen, their presence a harbinger of destruction. Ebi's heart raced as he witnessed the chaos unfolding around him. In the midst of this turmoil, he saw his parents being seized by the Mongolian soldiers, their cries echoing in his ears. Helpless and terrified, Ebi watched as they vanished into the night, their fates unknown and his world irrevocably altered.

Chapter 2: The Seeds of Vengeance

Years passed since that harrowing night, and Ebi, now twenty, had transformed into a strong and determined young man. The loss of his parents ignited a fire within him—a relentless desire for justice that would not be quenched. He trained tirelessly, honing his skills in combat, archery, and strategy, with the lessons from his father and the nurturing spirit of his mother serving as his guiding lights.

Karamergen was still healing from the devastation, yet the spirit of its people remained unbroken. Ebi became a beacon of hope for those who had lost loved ones to the Mongolian raids. He gathered a band of warriors, each one harbouring their own grief and thirst for vengeance. They called themselves the Guardians of Karamergen.

As they trained under the cover of night, whispers of Genghis Khan's plans reached Ebi's ears. The Mongolian army was preparing for another assault, determined to crush any remaining resistance. Ebi recognised this as his opportunity to confront the enemy and reclaim the honour of his parents.

Chapter 3: The Battle of Karamergen

The day of the battle dawned—a day that would determine the fate of Karamergen. The sky hung heavy with clouds, mirroring the tension in the air as Ebi and his comrades prepared to face the Mongolian horde. Armed with swords, bows, and an unyielding spirit, they took their positions on the outskirts of the city.

As the Mongolian forces approached, their banners fluttering ominously in the wind, Ebi felt a surge of adrenaline. Genghis Khan, a towering figure on horseback, led the charge, his very presence commanding fear and respect. Yet Ebi stood resolute, his heart beating fiercely for the city he loved and the parents he had lost.

The clash of steel filled the air as the two forces collided, a cacophony of chaos and valour. Ebi fought with unmatched ferocity, each swing of his sword fueled by the memories of his parents. He moved like a whirlwind, dodging arrows and striking down enemies, his determination unwavering. The battle raged on, and the cries of warriors echoed through the valley, a haunting symphony of courage and despair.

Chapter 4: A Sister's Return

Amidst the chaos, a familiar figure emerged from the fray. Ebi's heart stopped as he recognised her—a girl with fiery hair and a fierce spirit, struggling against a group of Mongolian soldiers. It was his sister, thought lost forever.

Ebi's breath caught in his throat as he rushed toward her, battling through the soldiers blocking his path. He remembered the small birthmark on her wrist, a mark they had shared since childhood. As he reached her side, their eyes met, and in that moment, everything else faded away.

“Ebi!” she cried, her voice a mixture of relief and disbelief. “I thought I would never see you again!”

“I thought you were lost to me,” Ebi replied, embracing her tightly. “We will not let them take us again.”

Together, they fought side by side, their bond rekindled in the heat of battle. The realisation that they were not alone fortified their resolve, and they pushed forward, rallying their fellow warriors.

Chapter 5: The Turning Tide

As the battle raged on, Ebi and his sister led a counterattack against the Mongolian forces. Their unity inspired the Guardians of Karamergen, who fought with renewed vigour. The tide of battle began to shift, and Ebi's determination became a rallying cry.

With each fallen enemy, Ebi felt a sense of justice for his parents and all those who had suffered under Genghis Khan's tyranny. The sight of his sister fighting valiantly beside him filled him with pride and hope. Together, they embodied the indomitable spirit of Karamergen, refusing to yield to fear.

The climax of the battle arrived as Ebi faced off against Genghis Khan himself. The two warriors, representing the clash of two worlds, engaged in a fierce duel. Ebi's heart raced as he fought, channelling all his anger and grief into each strike. He could feel the weight of his parents' legacy urging him forward.

Chapter 6: The Final Stand

In a moment of desperate fury, Genghis Khan unleashed a brutal attack, but Ebi was ready. With a swift manoeuvre, he disarmed the mighty leader, sending him crashing to the ground. The battlefield fell silent as Ebi stood over Genghis Khan, sword poised and heart pounding.

"Your reign of terror ends here," Ebi declared, his voice ringing out across the field. The Mongolian soldiers hesitated, uncertainty flickering in their eyes as they witnessed the courage and determination of Karamergen's defenders.

With a final, resolute cry, Ebi brought down his sword—not to strike the killing blow, but to offer Genghis Khan a choice: leave Karamergen and never return, or face the wrath of a united people. The Mongolian leader, sensing the tide had turned, chose retreat, ordering his remaining forces to withdraw.

Chapter 7: A New Dawn

The battle was won, yet the scars of loss remained etched in the hearts of those who survived. Ebi and his sister stood amidst the ruins of Karamergen, surveying the aftermath. They had reclaimed their home, but at what cost? Many brave souls had fallen, and the memories of those lost would forever linger in their hearts.

As the sun broke through the clouds, casting golden light over the city, Ebi felt a renewed sense of hope. The people of Karamergen began to rebuild, united in their determination to honour the fallen and create a brighter future.

In the days that followed, Ebi and his sister forged a new bond, sharing stories of their past and dreams for the future. They became leaders in their community, guiding Karamergen toward healing and resilience. The tale of their courage spread far and wide, inspiring others to stand against tyranny.

Final

Years later, as Ebi stood on a hill overlooking Karamergen, he reflected on the journey that had brought him to this moment. The boy who had once watched his parents being taken away had transformed into a warrior, a leader, and a protector of his people.

Ebi and his sister had not only reclaimed their home but had also found each other again, proving that love and family could endure even the darkest of times. The legacy of Karamergen would live on, a testament to the strength of those who dared to fight for what was right.

As the sun set on the horizon, Ebi knew that their story was far from over. A new chapter awaited, filled with hope, courage, and the unbreakable bonds of family and community.

Back to the Ancient Silk Road

ESF Renaissance College, Lahori, Saanvi – 11

The ancient Silk Road was a legendary piece of history that dates back to 130 B.C.E. The route was established by the Han Dynasty, which helped connect China to the Middle East, Africa, and Europe. The route was used by private merchants, monks, and many other individuals to sell a variety of goods to different countries, thereby helping to expand the trading network.

Jun Chen, a clever young boy, spends all his precious time reading about the fascinating history of his country, China. He spent hours burying his face in books, captivated by the Silk Road's vibrant cultures and landscapes. He never lost faith in the dream of visiting them.

One day, Jun was heading to the library, passing through the unkempt streets. In the distance, an old man stroked his white beard, his grey eyes catching the sunlight. His sunken eyes told the story of a deep, aching hunger, so Jun offered him a scrap of his own stale bread. "You are a gifted child," the man rasped, handing him a stained parchment map. Skeptical but curious, Jun took the map and decided to turn for home.

Once he arrived home, a rush of temptation to take a glimpse at the map filled his body. He opened the map and blew off the dust. His finger traced the Silk Road, trailing from China through the Middle East. Immediately after that, a blue cyclone swallowed him and spat him out in a different world. His eyes took a stroll around the surroundings as he tried to figure out where he was. There were castle-like structures all around him, and men wore colourful robes. Everything here matched the description Jun had read about Chang'an, located in the Han Dynasty. He had travelled back in time!

Jun walked around and saw tons of camels being prepared for a journey. He attempted to pet one, but someone stopped him. "Fu Zhao! What are you doing?" a man shouted, hurrying towards Jun. Realizing he had shifted identities, he was handed a basket of silk and instructed to move. "The journey begins now!" someone exclaimed. At last, Jun's feet were set upon the path of the fabled Silk Road.

They travelled for miles, reaching places Jun had never seen before. Everyone chattered in Chinese, a common language spoken in the Han Dynasty. Once they arrived at Dunhuang, a place known for its Buddhist cave temples, merchants decided to pray. Full of curiosity, Jun entered the gloomy cave, where the walls were lit by his dim lamp light. He saw statues of the Buddha, all sitting in different poses. He knelt on his knees and mimicked the others, clasping his fingers together and praying for a safe trip.

After about a day or two, they arrived at the Taklamakan Desert, located near the Tian Shan snowy mountains. It was super hot and dry, which made Jun face an urge for cold water. The merchants carried small buckets of water that automatically turned hot due to the weather conditions. They all stopped to take tiny sips of water, just to wet their parched lips. Jun's body was covered by a blanket of sweat. Although the journey was an exciting experience for Jun, his walnut-sized brain didn't expect it to be this challenging.

Days after the tiring journey across the dehydrated desert, they were desperate to reach Kashgar for food and water. It was located in the far western part of China. Kashgar was famous for its fresh fruit, such as dates, melons, and grapes, which are grown in irrigated fields and vineyards. Not only did the merchants trade their silk for fruits, but they also devoured a decent meal. The weather was slightly cooler and more moist. Here, it was more village-like. Many merchants, including Jun, decided to continue their journey toward the west, but others will return these significant products to China.

Slightly further away from Kashgar were the deadly Pamirs. The Pamirs were a range of high mountains located in eastern Afghanistan. Many have died here from falling into the rushing river, as the path was narrow and steep. Leading a camel across this route was risky, but it was the only way. The prickle of the camel's lead rope stung his hand, but he held on with a firm, determined grip. Fortunately, Jun was able to safely manage the terrifying trail.

After passing several mountains and rivers, they arrived at Tashkent, a city known for selling metalwork, glass, and musical instruments, which were also brought back to China. The harmonious sound of instruments being played filled Jun's ears. He roamed the streets, examining the beautiful designs on vases.

Before heading towards Herat, located in western Afghanistan, they stopped at the city of Samarkand. Many called this place dangerous, as it had no official government or laws. Jun spotted a wave of men carrying shiny swords headed towards them. "Everyone! Hide everything!" Shouted a man, who stuffed all the goods into a basket. "What's happening?" Jun asked, panicking. "These people, they are from a land where there aren't any laws. They'll rob our items and kill us," the man said. Jun found a sword and held it so tight that his palms started to sweat. The danger came closer, and the sound of swords swinging and clanging filled Jun's ears. He targeted a soldier who attacked several merchants at once. Later, he noticed that people retreated and were quickly escaping the danger. He dropped the sword and dashed through the crowd, reaching the others.

Jun felt a sticky, wet liquid dripping from his stomach. He lifted his robe and saw a deep cut that was sliced by a sword. He moaned in pain as he wrapped a piece of cloth around the stinging wound. Once the sky was dark, scattered with stars, they had reached Herat. Here, the Chinese traded their silk for carpets and more fine metalworks that were sold for an extremely high price back in China. Traders from India had come here too, selling spices and other condiments. The scent of spice filled the air, which made Jun's mouth slightly water; he had never eaten anything spicy. He mingled with the local merchants who were quite talkative and had a sense of humor. After the Chinese had managed to take everything they needed, they took their last troop of one-humped camels and headed to Baghdad.

Baghdad was not too far from Herat. Here in Baghdad, slaves from Africa sold ivory, gold, and more spices produced in their country. The gold was what attracted Jun the most. He picked a bar of gold, and guilt weighed heavily in his chest as his family had never even seen gold before. Baghdad was very village-like, but the surroundings were messy and loud. Only a handful of Chinese merchants decided to continue their journey, of course, including Jun, who was still passionate about reaching even more places.

Jun glanced at the map and saw that they only had 3 more places to head to, then they would have a tiring journey back to China. Soon, they had reached Damascus, a place where local merchants sold the finest silk cloth, which was turned into brilliantly coloured satins worn by wealthy Muslim women. Jun admired the stunning patterns printed on the satin. They stayed here in Damascus for less than a day, then headed to their final destination, Byzantium. But, before reaching Byzantium, they passed Tyre, a city located on the Mediterranean coast of Lebanon. Jun took a moment to gaze at the spectacular view of the sparkling sea, where small ships floated on the shallow water.

Byzantium had many colourful structures and greenery. Jun inhaled the earthy smell as he wandered the clean streets. The Chinese sold their last strips of silk for Byzantine gold coins, which were highly valued in China. Jun and the others decided to get a good rest so that they could return to China. The bed was so soft that Jun sank into the cushiony mattress. As sleep took him, Jun's thoughts drifted to the old man. Was he a wizard? How had he known Jun's deepest dream? Suddenly, the familiar blue vortex swallowed him once more. In a heartbeat, he was back in modern China, his home.

Day in the Life of a Camel

ESF Renaissance College, Lam, Claire – 11

Life isn't easy here.

Everyday is a repeated cycle of unpaid labour and hardship. It starts with waking to the scorching heat of the sun, then trekking miles across hot sand carrying boxes of heavy porcelain while sometimes suffering the beat of a whip. Then when night finally arrives, it's not rest that comes to us, but imprisonment in a smelly old stable.

Honestly, I'm surprised half my kind are still alive.

The heat burns my back like a focused laser, and the sand feels like fire against my bare hooves. But yet, I tread forward, driven by pure survival instinct. The extra weight of the boxes the humans put on my back usually don't bother me, but today, they feel like anvils weighing down on me and dragging me down to my demise.

Time blurs. I can't tell if we've been walking for minutes, hours, or even days. The sun continues to hang above us, constantly destroying us both physically and mentally.

I remind myself that my current masters are gentler than my last. They no longer wield the whip, and I'm grateful for that, even if it's only a little.

We finally finished for the day. Stars glittered overhead in the sky, calmingly and peacefully. The night air is a lot cooler than during the morning. It makes me wonder why we can't travel during the night instead. Soon enough, I've been dragged and locked into an unfamiliar stable with a million different sights and smells. How am I supposed to find rest here? The roof is so low that I can't even stand properly. I can practically *smell* mold and bacteria crawling up the walls, and the wooden floorboards are rotting and worn. I watch balefully as the humans deposit silk and porcelain dishware from the boxes the other camels and I have been so tirelessly carrying. One of them with a rough voice drops a vase forged from a deep blue and white porcelain. It shatters into a million tiny pieces that will never resume the job of holding flowers. How dare he! We spent *ages* lugging that box containing it over desert terrain just for him to break it as soon as we arrived at our destination. *What* a klutz. Normally, I would gladly go ahead and introduce my teeth to his leg, but I'm confined to the stable, and I'm not really in the mood for a beating anyway.

Morning dawned, and I didn't get a wink of sleep. All night, little things kept keeping me awake. The rustle of the leaves, the chirp of a cricket, and the consistent infernal buzz of a mosquito— all of it keeps me on edge. I'm tired, but I suppose that can't be helped. The humans are packing up and getting ready to leave. I wonder how long it's going to take until we finally get to rest.

Today, the gods heard my prayers and a large cloud blankets the sun, offering shelter from the heat. The change is unbelievable. It doesn't feel *half* as hot as it did yesterday and despite my deprivation of sleep, I can travel easily. I feel renewed, and even sense a spring in my stride despite the fatigue I have endured. The weight on my back isn't even bothering me anymore. The main problem was the heat, and now that that's gone, I can work much better. I hope that this weather will last until we find the sanctuary of rest again.

As I plod further, I begin to be more aware of my fellow camels dragging themselves along next to me. Some carry even heavier burdens, and their eyes are dull with fatigue. Half-closed, they look almost zombie-like. I sidled closer to an older female camel named Zari, who shared stories of distant lands and cooler nights. She tells tales of oases, among the dunes surrounded by lush greenery.

"I've been there." She reassures me, her voice a gentle whisper. "We just have to endure a bit longer. Every step brings us closer. Just keep that in mind."

Her words fill me with a sense of companionship. We aren't just beasts of travel, we are brothers and sisters on this relentless journey.

Today, everything seems to pass in an instant. We pass a group of arguing merchants, raising their voices against the high-pitched sound of the wind. We meet another group of traveling camels, and exchange brief words of greeting and encouragement. The moment passes so quickly, the faces of those camels melt away from my memory almost as soon as we part. The humans, thankfully, mostly stay quiet and let us continue on this rewardless journey.

The stable tonight is even worse than the last. Dead carcasses of rodents lined the floor, and the stench was unbearable. I have to contort my head in uncomfortable positions just to avoid getting bombarded by the low hanging ceiling. Resting my body down on the ground was absolutely unthinkable. The amount of debris there could poison any camel laying down on it in an hour at most. It appears that the most rest I will salvage tonight will be standing up. I stick close to Zari, as tonight the temperature had dropped drastically compared to the day before. As I settle in, I begin pondering over why we are traveling at all. Is this labor all meaningless? How are the porcelain vases we carry so carefully over burning desert terrain going to be put to use? Or disposed of? Are they all going to meet the same fate as the vase that shattered before my eyes just the night before? Is all this labour that we go through to transport objects pointless? I look over my shoulder at Zari. She's fast asleep, with a calm and wistful expression on her face. The epitome of wisdom, hard travels, and experience. I know that I have a long way to go before my eyes will shine with the same knowledge and wisdom. Zari has been here countless days longer than me. How must she bear it? Knowing our journey is long, restless, and unrewarding. It's enough to make anyone give up, but somehow, she still somehow manages to support others whilst also holding herself together. She is truly admirable. I watch her breathing in and out. It's calming, and inviting me into an escape of dreams. Tonight, I might actually get some rest.

I'm just about to doze off and claim the blissful escape of sleep, when I hear a sharp noise from outside of the stable. A sharp thunk. A grunt. And that smell. That familiar smell. That stench that was the phantom of my nightmares for longer than I can remember. It was the reek of my previous masters.

What are they doing here? My mind spun with possibilities. Maybe I wasn't exactly *happy*, but my current life and health status improved dramatically since the time when I was under their 'care'. I no longer have diseases and am not forced to carry heavy weights when I am far too ill to. My current masters understand that using a whip too often will not motivate us to journey on in any way, it will just discourage us. And they *feed* us. We are not just left with whatever wastes we can scavenge from leftovers. Cautiously, I poke my head outside of the stable. What were they doing? They were carrying the boxes that we carried. Were they... stealing? I haven't experienced thieves for a long time; actually, I think the last time I have was when I was under my previous masters. That night, they were furious. And now they're here committing the same crime? I knew that this was beyond me. I couldn't do anything, especially locked up in this stable. I grunted as loud as I could, hoping for the best and that my masters would hear. They came walking slowly at first, probably wondering if one of us had gotten feverish in the middle of the night, but when they saw the thieves their eyes widened. I quickly ducked down and pretended to be asleep and let the humans chew each other out. I think I'll be able to rest easy, with Zari warning my side and knowing I've saved those oh so precious porcelain vases. At least for now.

The Fossil Hunt

ESF Renaissance College, Mehta, Arnav – 13

The sun rose slowly over Chang'an, shining light across the serene, radiant village. People were already swarming in the market, selling silk, spices, fruit, and strange goods from faraway lands. Li Fang stood close to a stall filled with fossil rocks, eyes sparkling with excitement. At the age of 18, he was already known in his neighbourhood for his interest in archaeology, but not everyone respected him for that. Li usually spent his day delivering ordered Silk and Silver to people's houses around the neighbourhood. He was surrounded by people who exchanged wisdom beyond their years and had a keen insight into human nature and life.

One prized possession that brought him comfort was his grandfather's old, faded map. The parchment showed routes traders followed centuries ago, along with mysterious symbols. One spot was circled in red ink, with old characters reading "Dragon Bird's Nest". Li Fang's grandfather played a role as the only "healer" in the village. He always hoped to follow the map and discover dragon bird fossils. In China, large fossil bones, especially those of the *Sinosauropteryx*, were often interpreted as the remains of dragons; they were highly valued in traditional medicine, as legend believed they could cure many diseases. However, being the only "healer" in the village, he never got the chance to follow his dream. Li Fang had inherited his grandfather's love for Dragon Birds and decided he'd fulfil his grandfather's dream.

Li Fang was particularly eager to find the Dragon Bird fossil, specifically the *Sinosauropteryx*. He hoped his adventure would not only bring him fame in the community but also help people discover the medicinal wonders hidden in his motherland. Everyone in the village called him "初生牛犊不怕虎", which meant "a newborn calf is not afraid of tigers." Li Fang wanted to prove them wrong. Li overheard the villagers conversing, "我听说丝绸之路上的 人非常危险, 而且诡计多端。", which translates to "I have heard that people in the Silk Road are very dangerous and mischievous."

Li Fang received a visceral pull, a calling from the universe right in his mind. It was a sudden surge of unknown energy, and he heard a ringing in his ears. At first, it was a very soft whisper, and he could barely hear them, but as he ignored them more and more, they became louder and louder. "Find the Fossil, and then again, FIND THE FOSSIL." "Ahhhhhhh," he shouted. His head spun thinking if he was hallucinating, but at the same time, he knew hunting the fossil was the right thing to do.

Li Fang knew that this journey would not be a quick one, so he prepared himself both mentally and physically. He packed his bag with water and supplies like nuts, seeds, rice, and meat, as well as wool and linen garments to shield himself from diverse weather conditions and temperatures. He also included navigation instruments like 司南 (*sīnán*), the compass of that era, and, importantly, herbal Chinese remedies in case any health issues should occur. Li Fang hopped onto a navy blue caravan, making friends with a merchant named Samar, who wore a bright blue turban and shared funny stories from his childhood. Samar mentioned that he was from the Indos/Indika Empire and had set off for a relay trade to find valuable things along the Silk Road. Having grown up in Chang'an and witnessed the relay trade from a young age, Li Fang was not particularly fascinated by Samar's reason for travelling on the Silk Road.

A few days later, as the caravan set up camp near the snowy Liaoning mountains, Li Fang noticed something unusual. From a distance, he saw a woman digging under the ground, and he became curious to know what she was trying to uncover. Li recalled the perception held by the villagers about the people on the Silk Road and their notorious reputation for being exceedingly perilous, which made Li Fang hesitant to engage with her. Suddenly, he heard another voice calling, "Meet the woman," and then again louder, and louder, "MEET THE WOMAN!" Li Fang couldn't understand what was happening to him. However, he knew one thing for sure: the woman could

assist him in gaining insight about the fossils and in accomplishing his mission. After mustering some courage, he approached the woman.

He asked, "你好, 我叫李芳, 你呢?" ("Hello, my name is Li Fang. How about you?")

She replied, "梅穗" ("mei sui")

He inquired, "你在做什么?" ("What are you doing?")

She said, "我正在寻找一些化石." ("digging for fossils.")

Li Fang was astonished and finally felt a connection. He immediately explained everything, including his findings, his grandfather's map, and all that he had been through in Chang'an. They conversed about each of their findings, and Mei realised that she was searching in the wrong place the whole time. They decided to search for the red cross on Li Fang's grandfather's map. Mei explained that her friend Kublai and his team of fossil diggers could be a significant help in locating the hidden fossils more quickly. Li Fang's eyes opened as big as a colossal squid in utmost happiness and excitement; he even blinked twice to confirm that it wasn't a dream!

"There are legends about feathered dinosaurs at this exact location," Mei said, pointing at the red cross. "People have found bones and even fossils with patterns like feathers. If your map leads to something new, it would be incredible." Nervous but excited, Li Fang joined Mei and her team, saying goodbye to Samar. Together, Mei and her companions shared food, stories, and jokes—sometimes it was hard to understand because everyone spoke in different Chinese dialects. But sharing made them friends.

They explored deep valleys and rocky slopes, using little brushes and tools to search for clues. One morning, after days of nothing, Li Fang spotted a small bone sticking out from under a stone. It wasn't big, but there was a hint of colour—almost orange, with lines that looked like tiny feathers. Mei and Kublai, the fossil digger leader, dusted it

off, their hands shaking with excitement. More bones followed—jaws, claws, tail bones, all with hints of red, orange, and even yellow. Mei was amazed. She said this was a new type of Sinosauropteryx, maybe even brighter and different from the others. The team celebrated in the valley, hugging and jumping with joy. Li Fang felt proud in fulfilling his grandfather's dream, with just a map and hope, he uncovered something that changed history.

After a long, tiresome day, everyone in the camp looked forward to the experiences the next day would bring. A sudden attack occurred under the cover of darkness. While everyone was asleep, an unexpected force infiltrated the area undetected and stole the discovery of the Sinosauropteryx. The next morning, the devastating losses were discovered. While everyone gave up and decided that there was no way of retrieving the Sinosauropteryx, Li Fang took a deep breath and had a look at the map. He saw that there was apparently a cave called "The Bandit Cave" which was located behind the deep valleys and rocky slopes. Li Fang said that there is a high possibility that the Sinosauropteryx is hidden there and that there is no harm in just having a look. To great surprise, the bandits were not there, so everyone immediately knew that there would not be any chance of finding the hidden Sinosauropteryx. But then, Kublai saw something unusual; it was as if something was bulging out of the cave's walls! He gently placed his hand on top of the spot and instantly knew that it was the Sinosauropteryx. He responded, saying "Би оллоо", which means "I found it!" Without wondering where the Bandits had gone and questioning whether it was real or not, everyone kept digging and digging until the Sinosauropteryx finally came into Kublai's hands.

Back in the valley, Li Fang's team protected the fossils and secured them with a large, heavy padlock, so no one dared to steal them again. With teamwork and trust, Li Fang's discovery was saved, and their friendship grew stronger.

The ruler of Chang'an celebrated Li Fang and Mei's discovery, giving them bright ribbons and sweetmeats. For weeks, new friends arrived, sharing songs from Persia, painted cards from Europe, and stories of the Silk Road. Li Fang's name appeared everywhere, gaining recognition. People learned that real discoveries occurred when East and West worked together—just as the Silk Road had always done. Li Fang's story became famous, showing that anyone, even a young fossil hunter equipped with a calling, could shape the future.

Li Fang returned home with contentment; his friends, uncles, and teachers were finally respecting him. His name was not only elevated in his village, but the name of the entire village was also recognised throughout every corner of the Silk Road, making it a tale to remember forever!

Whispers of the Desert

ESF Renaissance College, Tong, Bradley – 12

My name is Yu Yifan, the best thing I ever found was in the worst time of my life. After Grandpa Wan passed, our family couldn't bring ourselves to clear his personal belongings. He was our patriarch, an amazing storyteller whose tales were of his youth as a local guide working with various caravans across the Silk Road.

"Yifan, it's time to go through Grandpa's study. We should preserve his memories," my mother said to me one day.

I entered the room that still smelled of him – old paper and tobacco. Behind a stack of loose paper under his desk, I found a dusty trunk hidden behind the clutter. Brushing off cobwebs, I saw unique carvings and foreign script. Inside were filled with unfamiliar artifacts, silk, paintings, and bottles of spices. "Why haven't I seen these before?" I whispered to myself.

While searching, my finger found a small lever. I pulled the lever and a hidden compartment in the trunk opened – a hidden scroll was inside. It was a map, embroidered on a special fabric with intricate writings and drawings. It showed a trail leading from Chang'an deep into an unknown desert. Engraved in the compartment was a message: Treasure does not have a physical presence.

I couldn't stop thinking about it and the reason behind all of this. Recalling Grandpa Wan's stories of caravans, exotic animals, spice markets, and of stars so bright they lit up the darkest deserts – I had to understand what Grandpa Wan meant and where the map leads to. I packed my satchel and told my family this was a trip I had to go on for Grandpa Wan. I bid my family farewell and travelled to Chang'an where the map begins.

I arrived at Chang'an, the eastern starting point and capital for much of the Silk Road. I stood at the edge of the city, marveling at the bustling trade hub. I felt so small amongst all the faces and things that are foreign to me. I clutched tightly onto my satchel as it contained the one thing that led me here, my purpose. A few camels led by a group of men with olive-like skin and exotic clothing brushed past me, "Hey kid, get out of the path! We almost killed you!"

I avoided a near-death collision; it would have been catastrophic if I had collided with that wagon. The caravan was heavily loaded with bulging sacks of silk and spices with several merchants led by two enormous camels. I quickly got out of the way. As I spun around, I was smacked in the face by a tall woman with a dark complexion. Her eyes were sharp and clever. "Hey kid, be careful!" she shouted.

I didn't realize my scroll had rolled out of my satchel during the commotion and onto the road. The woman picked it up and suddenly demanded, "Who are you? You must come with me now."

Without other options, I reluctantly followed her into a dark alley where three other men were waiting. The woman introduced me to the men and told them about the scroll I was carrying. The woman's name was Devika, an epigrapher from Egypt and the three men were Yang Feng, a Southern Chinese herbalist, Tamur, a Mongolian treasure hunter and Ensar Yayali, an Ottoman fabric and silk trader.

"You hold a piece of the past, the ancient symbols on your map lead to the Eternal Cave. I have heard about this place through stories. I can help you if you let me," Devika said. I must find out about my grandfather's secret. With nowhere else to start, I had no choice but to listen to what this group of mysterious travelers had to say.

Yang Feng, the young herbalist, spoke up. "There is an ancient flower my family has been searching for generations. Please let me come with you. I can help you along the journey. Tamur, a large man with a loud presence, patted me hard on the shoulder with his heavy hand and said, "Kid, you will need my help to navigate the treacherous journey. Treasure is what I am after. If you give me a cut, count me in!" Lastly, Ensar Yayali, an older soft-spoken man said,

“Your map is embroidered on a very rare silk, a skill only artisans from my village in the Ottoman Empire would know. I must come and find out.”

We all had our own selfish reasons to go on this journey, fate had brought us all together. Tamur used his connections and quickly assembled our caravan. At dusk, our group set off on our adventure into the unknown.

Our journey was the hardest thing I have ever faced. Our caravan passed through endless deserts with sandstorms that nearly claimed us. At night, we set up campfires, Ensar and Tamur shared stories of their distant villages. Devika and Yang Feng shared knowledge of languages and herbs. I was in awe of my new companions.

One morning abruptly began with a scream when Ensar suddenly fell ill. Yang Feng with his quick wit and calm manner, was able to identify that Ensar was bitten by a poisonous snake. “We must find the Lily of the Desert, it will cure Ensar. We must find it quickly before it's too late,” urged Yang Feng.

We searched desperately but Lily of the Desert was nowhere to be found. We felt defeated but at that moment, I looked up at the mountain where we set camp at and saw a single beautiful purple flower perched on a ledge. I immediately showed Yang Feng my discovery, “We found it! But the ledge is too narrow, only Yifan can reach it.”

I was terrified of heights and it was too risky. One wrong move meant a fatal fall. But I was the only one who could help. Remembering Grandpa Wan's voice “Yifan, you can do anything” I began to climb. I crossed the narrow ledge carefully, grabbed the single bloom, and quickly threw it down to my group. Carefully I climbed down the treacherous path and returned to my group. Yang Feng immediately made an antidote, Ensar felt better before our eyes.

Suddenly, the sky darkened. “There's another sandstorm coming, we must hide before we get buried alive!” Tamur shouted. Devika studied my map again, her eyes widened, pointing to an ancient symbol she said “This ancient symbol is a beacon where the sun meets the earth. The Eternal Cave must be nearby.”

Remembering the view from where I picked the Lily of the Desert, I hesitated and said, “I saw a strange shining light from within the mountain when I was up there.” I remembered Grandpa's stories about listening to the wind. “The wind speaks,” I repeated his words out loud. We suddenly heard a whistling from a narrow crack at the base of the mountain where we were all standing.

Together, we cleared the rocks, opening an entrance big enough for all of five of us to squeeze through. As soon as we were inside, Devika spotted ancient symbols on the wall. “This must be the Eternal Cave!” Touching the symbols softly, “it said...life was once found within this cave.”

Our group continued with Tamur's torch, guiding us further into the dark cave. We noticed we were surrounded by a dim blue luminescence and we realized the glow was from the Lily of the Desert. The cave was blooming with them. “We found it! The source!” Yang Feng cried, “The conditions of the cave allowed this rare flower to grow in abundance. We can cure thousands with this!”

“All this for flowers? Not even a single coin!” Tamur slumped, then he noticed there was a familiar axe lying beside him. Tamur picked up the old axe and studied it, “This belonged to my great-grandfather, he was here in this cave.” he said softly. Tamur's eyes were filled with tears. Ensar was still weak but spoke up, “The map is glowing like the flowers. The silk used to embroider the map was made here using a special technique only known to my people.” He too teared up.

Devika took out an old worn journal from her satchel, “I didn't understand this until now. This journal belonged to my grandmother.” The journal had an old illustration of four men and a woman in a cave of glowing flowers. The caption read: The true treasure is friendship.

That is when I finally understood my grandfather's encryption on his treasured trunk.

"Our family knew one another," I gasped. "Grandpa Wan traveled with your grandparents and his map led us to each other and to this cure."

The cave's silence was not of disappointment, but of self-fulfillment and questions answered.

I finally understood Grandpa Wan's message. The Silk Road's greatest treasure was never gold or silk. It was the shared adventure – the struggle, friendships, and bonds formed across cultures beneath the star-lit desert.

China's Silk Road

ESF Renaissance College, Wang, Anya – 12

It was a chilly winter night, and she settled in as she got ready for bed. There came her grandfather, coming to tell her a story—a story about China's Silk Road. He sat down beside her, cleared his throat, and began to tell his story.

“Trading is very important to people around the world.” He paused. “Businesses and companies use trading to earn money. But trading started as something far less than what it is now. Ever since the beginning of time, humans have learned to communicate, and therefore make agreements and swap resources for things that they would need individually. It would be rare for people to travel across country borders to trade items outside, and if they did, it would be through merchants who want to sell items to a larger variety of customers. Now, this is the story of two Chinese merchants and explorers who wanted to sell silk—which was very useful back in those times.”

As her grandfather paused, she imagined the story and how it would develop, and she was eager to find out more. She looked at her grandfather with a curious and bright look, prompting him to continue. He took a deep breath and did so: “Silk was very important. It was used to make luxury clothes, and was also used to write on. So two explorers decided this would be the perfect item to sell to other places. The thing the merchants didn't know was that this would turn out to be the most important journeys in history. They travelled westwards, and allowed the world to exchange different items, inventions, food, and specialties of each place. This not only allowed other places to see different countries' items, but also spread diversity.”

“Now, it might sound like just one road, but it was actually a complex and vast network of roads...” Grandfather paused once more, with a gleam in his eye, letting his words sink in. “The roads would branch out towards all directions, similar to a spider web!” he chuckled, and wrinkles appeared by his eyes. “Even though it started with silk, soon many other products were passed along too, from China westwards including spices, paper, porcelain, tea and gold, and from the west towards China, other products were traded, including wool, gold, silver, horses, glassware, and precious stones. Aside from products, other things were passed on: religions including Christianity and Buddhism, and even diseases like the Black Death! This one network had a huge legacy, and lasted 1400 years!”

“That's so impressive!” she sighed, imagining the journeys back then.

“Wait, let me continue.” Grandfather said, with a hint of impatience. “Now, as the silk road was so impactful and important back then, many people are trying to remake it—with a modern version. They named it the ‘Belt and road Initiative’.”

Then as Grandfather took a deep breath to continue “This trading rou——” Her mother burst in, saying she had to go to bed, and that the story would continue tomorrow...

The Poisoned Silk

ESF Renaissance College, Wong, Hillary – 11

Blossom was a very extroverted girl. She had long chestnut hair which was always tucked neatly behind her ears. Her skin was tanned, which matched her amber eyes perfectly. She was the daughter of a clothesmaker named Clementine. Much like her daughter, Clementine had amber eyes and brown hair, which reached up to her shoulder. She was pale, but she had rosy cheeks and freckles. Clementine was a clothesmaker, who used the finest silk in the city. The silk she used was no other than the softest and the silkiest in the whole country. But one dreadful day, Clementine ran out of silk, which meant that she would have to go down China's Silk Road to trade for more. Suddenly, Blossom heard leather shoes approach the door. "OOH YAY!" Blossom shouted. "IT'S THE MESSENGER!" Blossom LOVED the messenger. The messenger had blonde hair and freckles. She always wore denim overalls and a flower hairclip. She was like a second mother to Blossom. The messenger would play games with her, talk with her and share news with her. Blossom also liked calling her by her real name, Julie. She was the only person Blossom knew she could trust. Blossom answered the door, but today, Julie looked serious. She wasn't smiley like she usually was. Her face carried a concerned look, and even Blossom's mother looked strange. She exchanged uneasy looks with Julie, then nodded, as if she wanted to say "go on.." Julie took a deep breath, preparing to share the news. "A hooded figure was at the silk road yesterday." "The silks she sold carried poison." Suddenly, it felt like all the air had left the room. "WHAT?!" Blossom's mother finally managed to say. "But that can't happen!" Julie then said softly "I don't advise you to go there." "It could contain dangerous materials." "But.. but..." Blossom stuttered. "We just ran out of silk..." Fear secretly flooded her mother. Silk was crucial for her to make clothing. People only bought the clothing she made because of the material. Droplets of water slid down her cheeks. "We need silk." "I'm already short of money.." Clementine whispered. "I have to raise Blossom." "AND NOW THERE ARE REPORTS OF PEOPLE SELLING POISONED SILK ON THE SILK ROAD?!" "ugh, my life is a disaster" Droplets of tears rolled down her cheeks, and onto her neck. Blossom knew her mother very well. This was one of the times where she would have to come into action. "Julie, what does this person look like?" Blossom asked, curious to find out. A look of uncertainty flickered over Julie's face, but she quickly recovered. "It is unsure of what this mysterious figure looks like, as their face has always been hooded underneath a black cloth." "They wear a white mask and sunglasses underneath, as it is unlikely for someone to uncover their identity that way." Julie said. "I have to run now, as I must make everyone aware of this terrible news." Blossom looked at her mother, and saw her sitting sadly on a wooden table. "Blossom, I know you're worried, but I think what Julie said was serious." "This has never happened before, and it is extremely dangerous." She said, her voice trembling. "We can talk about this tomorrow." Her mother walked up to her room, and ordered Blossom to sleep in the room next to the stairs. "I need some time alone." She explained. Blossom couldn't sleep. The room was dark and cramped, and there was no room for her to straighten her legs. She clutched a pillow in her hands. It kept her warm and made her forget about the struggle they currently were undergoing. She could hear her mother talking over the phone. She was chatting to her inseparable friend, Anna. She could hear her shouting into the phone, expressing her frustration. Soon after that, Blossom knew what she had to do. *Go to the silk road and catch the poisoner.* It was such a brilliant idea, even Blossom was proud. She placed a ham and cheese sandwich into a leather pouch, along with a disguise and a large water bottle. "*It's time to go.*" She whispered to herself.

Upstairs, Clementine was reading a factual book about a famous silkmaker who hid premium silk in a special place in his old house. Clementine thought there was something fishy with this book, as it sounded too much like the person was referring to her own home. Nine bedrooms, a hideout beneath the stairs, seven bathrooms, two separate attics. *It has to be a coincidence.* Clementine thought. A mirror slipped inside a wooden frame. A silver keypad next to it. The finest silk placed inside of the room. A wooden mirror? A silver keypad? *No.* Clementine thought. *It has to be a coincidence. Oh dear me, it's 2am and I'm still awake.* But Clementine couldn't fall asleep. It couldn't have been a coincidence. So she crept downstairs and went into the room underneath the stairs. *But... I ordered Blossom to sleep in there. I guess I'll have to be really quiet.* So she crept in. Sure enough, a mirror awaited her there. A mirror with wooden framing surrounding it. Next to it was a keypad. She never knew what the keypad had to do with that

room. She had always guessed that it was placed there by mistake. *Password, password.* Clementine thought. She had always found this room interesting. When they moved in, the house was empty except for this room. A side of the wall which had been painted with the numbers 1891 on them. Clementine always thought that was just a decoration. Suddenly, her brain started connecting the dots. A keypad, 4 letters on the wall. *The letters must be the password!* She excitedly thought. Her heart was beating out of her chest as she entered the password into the keypad. It worked. The mirror turned sideways, and Clementine realized that this was her tunnel to escape from becoming indigence. It all made sense. Beads of sweat trickled down her forehead, as she succeeded in opening the “door of success.” But she had completely forgotten about her daughter, risking her life to solve a mystery.

Blossom had finally arrived at The Silk Road after ages of being in a very cramped carriage with eight other people. She was visually unaware of the presence of a figure wearing a black hood, white sunglasses and a white mask. Once they arrived, Blossom immediately saw the hooded figure running out of the carriage. She just realized she had missed a wonderful opportunity of capturing this person, or rather ‘The Poisoner.’ She chased after The Poisoner, unaware that she was risking her life for this. She ran with all her strength, but lost The Poisoner as they turned a corner. Blossom tried asking everyone around her for help, and what The Poisoner looked like. She even asked a detective, and even he said nobody has seen their face, or rather what they wear over their face. *Then how did Julie know?* Blossom wondered. Suddenly, she thought of something. She went pale. She felt sick to her stomach. *What if... What if... JULIE HERSELF WAS THE POISONER?* Tears prickled her eyes. The only person she trusted with secrets... Her only friend... Was The Poisoner. Trying to avoid the nagging feeling, she went on looking for The Poisoner. She finally found her, and sure enough, beneath her mask and sunglasses, a familiar face could be seen. “Julie?” Blossom said in a soft voice. She was calm on the outside, but fear, sadness and a sense of betrayal was mixing inside her. “WHY WOULD YOU DO THIS?” Blossom asked, her voice rising. ‘YOU WERE THE ONLY PERSON I TRUSTED.’ Julie, or rather ‘The Poisoner’ snickered and said “Oh you girls are all the same.” “You fool, I was the one poisoning your silks all this time.” The Poisoner laughed. “Didn’t you guess?” “It was me this WHOLE time.” But Blossom wasn't listening. She had chained The Poisoner to a nearby door, and she was now summoning the detectives. “DETECTIVES, THE POISONER HAS BEEN FOUND.” Blossom said proudly. Guards and detectives rushed over, and arrested Julie. “Thank you young lady.” The detective said. Blossom beamed. She rode the carriage back home, and told her mother about the news. Clementine went pale. “Well I guess the moral of the story is *trust no one.*” Clementine said. “Guess what, while you were gone, I found out our home was once the home of a silkmaker! I found his secret tunnel, and I found GOLDEN SILK!” Clementine held up multiple pieces of her findings. “Well I guess we can use these to make clothing at the moment, while they deal with this situation! Blossom smiled. “I was worried sick about you when you weren’t at home!” “Now, don’t leave home without telling me anymore!” Clementine said sternly. “Ok mom I won’t.” Blossom said. *Unless there’s another mystery for me to solve!*

New Tales of China's Silk Road

ESF Renaissance College, Yau, Hayley – 11

“Hanwing boy!” the Captain hollered at me while aggressively turning the helm, “Raise the sails!” I rushed down from the deck as my red bandana swished through the wind. My hand clutched tightly against that slick rope like a monkey to reach the sails, and then I yanked the rope hard to raise the sails. With a confident leap, I returned to the floor as the sail, the flag with a skull, swaying in the wind, hanging high above.

A man with a golden tooth came out of the cabin while stroking his monstrous beard, exclaiming, “Atta—boy!” A few more men with horrid tattoos and peg legs came out, and Golden Tooth then turned to the Captain, “See, the new sailor boy from China is pretty good.”

The group began sneering. “Check on the poppy tears and make sure the pigeons ain’t eating any, would you? And feed them as well,” the Captain ordered as I went into the treasure room. They were a group of pirates and were captured by Britain while charged with piracy. What was originally intended as a death penalty became a trade to smuggle opium for their lives. The treasure room was filled with chests and chests of black powder, the opium they were smuggling into China.

There were 3 cages of pigeons, all chirping happily, unaware of anything. The pirates could send a call for help using the pigeons if anything happened. I grabbed some sunflower seeds and hurled them towards the pigeons as they gulped them down. I stared out the tiny window on the door, checking to see if anyone was looking. After confirming my secrecy, I took out a piece of paper and began scribbling frantically. After carefully examining all of the pigeons, I chose the one with a stripe across its back by hanging the piece of paper on its foot. This was Milo.

“Bring this safely to the Emperor, and try to come back soon, alright?” I reminded sincerely before freeing Milo from its cage, and as if it tried to say he understood, Milo squawked. “Remember, look for the red flag, your favorite color,” I pointed to the waving flag. I am not a pirate; I was originally sold as a slave to the pirates, yet the Emperor promised me all the riches I could wish for if I acted as a spy. The Emperor was well aware of the illegal opium trade and, therefore, wanted to spy on the British imports. Desperately in need of money, I took the deal.

I led it near the window, then pushed it open. The panoramic view stunned me as the pigeon flew out swiftly. It took me a minute to adjust back to the ominous treasure room as I went back to the deck. The pirates were still snickering away. But when I widened my eyes to see a wave, I grabbed Milo tight as I shouted, “Wave!” But it was too late; the nearly swallowed ship had half-slanted into the water as the Captain frenziedly grabbed the helm and made a failed attempt to steer the ship back on course. The ship was capsizing fast, as we scrambled like mice.

“Grab the poppy tears and a pigeon!” Someone yelled as I rushed to the treasure room. It was far too heavy for me to carry. A crack was forming in the middle of the deck. Golden Tooth and Peg leg rushed over to help me like his life depended on it. It technically did. I grabbed Milo and put him in a cage. Everyone came over to help, carrying as many chests as possible. By the time I reached the deck, I heard a horrifying *snap!* The sound symbolized the ship splitting in half, slowly parting ways. Some of the pirates slipped into the sea, some clinging on to the wood for dear life. Oak wood soared into the air, but that was besides the fact that I hurled the humongous chest across the sea.

Someone clutched my foot, screaming for me to help. I collapsed on the floor, my ears ringing. Everything was happening too fast, and my only choice was to somehow jump across the two separating parts of the ship. And I did. The swishing of the waves continued to ring in my ear. As the pirates began arguing about how most of the food was on the abandoned side of the ship, I sat there, staring into the interminable sea. Out of the 20 pirates, only 11 made it.

Soon, we reached land. One by one, the pirates rushed the ship, kissing the land like they meant it. In a panic, I bumped into the Captain, rotating the map over and over again. The Captain tsked with dissatisfaction.

“Boy, you need to be more careful,” the Captain croaked, clearly confused. “I can only say that we’re somewhere

north, but the Silk Road from back then should be near west..." I nodded despite not acknowledging anything. Soon, the group began trotting through the jungle, filled with logs and branches. Without much thought, I continued on, trying to brainstorm a plan while holding that box of opium.

Suddenly, I heard a hiss, then a growl, slowly lurching closer. I looked around, then turned back around when I saw nothing. However, I felt a grasp against my ankle tighten. When I looked down, I saw a petrifying snake, coiled around my ankle. I screamed, I kicked, I flailed my arms, but nothing would get that creature off my foot. The Captain came running, and with a mighty pull, the snake went flying in the air. With a swift shake, the snake slithered back into the bushes.

I heaved a huge sigh of relief as the Captain, "Beware of your surroundings," The group was growing weary. Although the group whined for breaks, the Captain stayed strong and refused. Even Milo chirped along. When sunsets, the Captain finally settled down. We laid thin clothes on the floor and started a fire with the oak wood from the ship. My eyelids began to droop, gradually growing heavier by the second. Despite the horrible circumstance, the pirates were still chattering away, chuckling happily.

When I awoke, the pirates around me seemed to have fallen into a deep coma. "Up early, huh?" I turned around to see the Captain behind, collecting berries. Most of our food was left on the boat, so there wasn't much left. All the pirates woke up a little later, and we continued our way through the Silk Road. However, just like our food, most of our beverages were left on the ship as well. One at a time, the pirates would moan, complaining that they were thirsty. All the captain could do was throw some berries at them, then continue the journey. By nightfall on day two, the group had grown desperate. Unfortunately, there was no other choice but to be thirsty. Golden Tooth's face was purple, Peg Leg was spinning in circles, and my lips were drier than the Sahara Desert. Although I may not be intelligent, I do know that we can't survive without water for more than 3 days. That third day was coming close.

I rose earlier than anyone to search for a lake. I decided to ask Golden Tooth for a flask. I shook him as hard as I could, but nothing happened. "Stop playing around," I said, but nothing happened. All that commotion woke everyone. The Captain put a finger on his neck, and when he responded with a shaking head, I froze.

"He must have died of thirst," the Captain said. I felt a warm tear roll down my cheek, but I stopped myself before I could lose any more water. 1 down, 10 left. I couldn't help but wonder why I felt sympathy for a group of bandits, a group who hurt so many people. I lay down, discouraged. I could feel everyone's disappointment too. *Maybe we die here*, I thought, and if that was kismet, I wouldn't try to stop it from happening. I closed my eyes, blocking out any noise. I put my hands on that soft, wet mud, swirling my fingers in it. Suddenly, I bounced up like a spring. If there hadn't been any rain fall here these few days, then there had to be a source of water! I continued a few hundred meters to find a lake.

"Captain! I found it!" I yelled at the top of my lungs. It hurt my throat to shout like that, but it was worth it. Everyone shoved me a flask and I filled them up with glee. Drinking until I couldn't, I realized how much I loved Peg Leg, Golden Tooth, and the Captain. Through this near death experience, I realized that I couldn't bear letting them rot in jail. Friendship is something you can't buy with the riches the Emperor promised.

From that day on, I journeyed with the pirates, searching for my own adventure.

Under a Broken Sky

ESF Sha Tin College, Chan, William – 13

For the present, allow myself to remain nameless, for my forthcomings accentuate nobility; to that I am anything otherwise. Contrariwise, I can certainly recall the events prior to this writing, and most do consider them patrician acts. There is reason to distrust my tale, and I will not oppose any accusations of falsery; I will, however, substantiate that perception of this implausibility be viewed as all but a crude fantasy.

I will not reveal the year of this scribal work, for such is forbidden. All I will say is that it was when Zhang Qian returned to Chang'an with knowledge previously implausible of the western lands. Evidently, his information was met with general apprehension. Skeptical though I was, I was equally intrigued by this vast territory. I will disclose that I was a rather respected individual, as hierarchy was and is, such that I was not heavily impactful by mere thoughts, whispers in the desolate wind, however, and strayed from such scandalous figments. To what myriad do thoughts belong, to what astronomy did myriads? For days I pondered the land further beyond.

It was a rather learned journey, as navigators past had furthermore explored the terrain. Weeks passed, men numbering in the dozens began their journey. It was at the fifth journey, in which sent off three dozen travellers, did I take my sordid place in this merciless tale.

It was around nightfall, the first hints of darkness slashing at the golden clouds like a scythe. I sat, somewhat gormandisingly, waiting for my meal. My old friend had invited me to dine, and I had felt too much invested into the affair to refuse. Knives went to work at the chopping board, a low, hollow sound that echoed around the cavernous room. I stood, walked around, drank both glasses of water on the bedside table. I laid there on the bamboo-make bed, watching, from my crusted window, the three dozen ascend into darkness. By then, I had, almost as if accidentally, packed enough food, water, and supplies for weeks inside my travelling receptacle. My children had encouraged the thought; as children do, "passion without purpose". With no avail, of course; I had no reason to change my mind.

I, like before any meal, lit a candle, and prayed to Buddha.

Just then, a bright light streaked across the sky. A comet, sleek silver, slashed through the darkness as the darkness once had. This, in the most inclement season, was nothing short as a sign from the heavens. For what? My mind churned the only coherent decision I had to make. Angst and elation battled like divergent combatants, my features etched into a state of incoherent gestures. My decision was made, however, and I could not bear any longer. All thoughts of meals discarded, I slung the receptacle over my back, ran down the spiral stairs, and began running, fast as I could. I passed the gates of the town, beyond where I had ever been. I never once looked back.

A fortnight of travel brought me nowhere close to where the three dozen had been. I found myself delightful trinkets during the period of travel, however. New sights, new biology, new herbs. I collected them all, wanting to share my discoveries with more respectable minds. Once, about two days into the journey, I saw a cricket, exotic, life-like in colour. I captured it in a water jug, and fed it on leaves I found along the way.

So the cricket and I journeyed west, to the open world ahead. Weeks passed without restraint. Despite my meticulous packing, I was running out of water. For days I urged my pathetic feet onward, each and every second endless agony. At last, inevitably, I collapsed on the dry ground, bones brittle, skin bedraggled. This was the end. Until I felt hands grasp my idled limbs, lift them, and bring me to shade.

When I regained consciousness, I saw a girl, maybe six years old, in front of what seemed to be a bed of nails I was lying on. I still longed for a sip of water, thirst clasp my throat as if wrestling with death. I didn't hesitate to take the glass she was holding, the image of it like a mirage, like some obscurity from the land of fantasy. I checked my pack; the cricket was alive.

The strings pulling on my heart collapsed in relief. I sat up, no longer drained. For the first time in a long time, I spoke.

"Good evening."

It seemed to startle her, which wasn't intentional. I tried a less formal approach.

"Could you please tell me where I am?"

Her face molded into recognition.

“Nǐ hǎo. Zhè lǐ shì xīn jiāng.” (Hello. This is Xinjiang.)

I understood perfectly (as amateurish a scholar as I was) that this land was Xinjiang, or Miran. I had completed a large portion of the journey.

“Gǎn xiè nín de rè qíng kuǎn dài. Xī wàng wǒ men néng zài cì xiāng jiàn.” (Thank you for your hospitality. I bid you well.)

I was closer to the destination, but yet too far. I had to continue moving.

“Děng děng.” (Wait.)

I stopped, turned around to see the girl with a full pack of supplies. She had told me to wait.

“Ná zhe zhè ge. Rú guǒ nǐ yào zǒu lù de huà huì xū yào tā.” (Take the bag, if you are to continue on foot.)

Grateful, I took it, and walked ahead, my journey almost complete. For years past I never forgot that little girl, though now my head is swollen with rot and decay.

I continued to walk, over hill and under hill. Now with renewed supplies, I regained my prior confidence. It was only a matter of time before I reached the three dozen. I journeyed into dense lands, trees dangling like crooked fingers from the mountains. Oceans stretched beyond the horizon, endless blue circling the coastline. Nothing like I'd seen before, the sights overwhelming for the unsociable persona within.

Though I had journeyed late, I caught the first glimpse of the three dozen, or at least what was left. Most had whiled away, decomposing in the unforgiving barrens I laid my hopes in. Travel seemed nonexistent; so did progress in this inescapable dream. Doubt about the remainder about this journey upheld my foremost belief, but I quarrelled with my consciousness. I had come so far it would be laughable to turn back.

At last my goal was reached, my soul's desire quenched. I reached the distant land of once-believed pure imagination. Turkey, so it was called. The locals had a strange language, the likes of which were disjointed to my native ear. They were quite kind to me, however, and I learnt their ways. I spent little time there, but managed to leave with newfound knowledge of the many ways these people lived their lives. Greek inheritance (pardon me if I am mistaken) shaped their language, beliefs, and names. To the best of their knowledge, a surge in power called the Roman Empire was slowly engulfing the lands perpendicular. They knew nothing of Buddhism; they called them Judaism, Greco-Roman Pantheon, and more I could not place in a tellable way. I saw no sign of the three dozen; perhaps they perished in the dwindling journey. To this day no man alive has seen any trace of them since.

And so I began the journey back, knowing it would be just as perilous, just as inane as the one prior. I believed in hope, however; my own travels had proven the possibility of success. All I required was quite more supplies, namely water to withstand the heat of hell-like deserts. As I had suffered, I had learned, of not just the roads and routes, but of conditions.

I shall not revisit most details of the trip home now; only the major aspects. I took the same path, often realising how I no longer marveled at the scenery, no longer thought it beautiful, no longer majestic. It was peculiar now, the mountain ranges, the murmuring sea, the crooked trees — all sights I no longer yearned to see; but only sights I wished to greet as old friends from what seemed to be a past life.

With cricket in hand, I returned to Chang'an. It was early noon, the first hints of darkness creeping through the golden sky. I returned to my hovel exhausted. Eventually, I decided to seek companionship, meeting with where the higher authority resided. My tale would be retold to Liu Che, emperor of our land. Because of this, men began exploring the grounds I once walked, the paths I once took. I, after such a miraculous journey, ceased to traverse, my name lost in history.

It seemed as if my journey had come to an end, quite the symbolism of Ouroboros, the snake consuming his own tail; that my tale should begin, and end; with darkness penetrating the glorious sun, cycles of endless possibility.

Aurelia's Timeless Adventure

ESF Sha Tin College, Cheong, Man Fei Hazel – 11

The shrill ring of my alarm clock jolted me awake. Groggy, I sat up in bed just as my mother's familiar voice echoed from downstairs: "Wake up, Aurelia! We're heading to the Timeless Silk Pathways, remember?" Those words ignited a spark. I sprang from bed, slipped into my favorite pale-blue blouse and white pleated skirt, then bounded down the stairs and burst into the kitchen where my parents waited.

"Whoa! Slow down there, Relia!" Dad chuckled, ruffling my jet-black hair. "You might unearth a bruise instead of treasure!" As archaeologists, who homeschooled me, they nicknamed me "Relia", when I'd scour the house for hidden gems as the "Little Relic Explorer!"

After breakfast, we piled into the car for the Timeless Silk Pathways, our beloved Silk Road museum that we had explored countless times. When we arrived, I stepped out of the car and sprinted toward the museum entrance, my shoes slapping against the cool marble as my parents trailed behind. I knew running indoors was forbidden, but I couldn't resist a little twirl. Recalling how at six, I had pressed my face against the glass cases in wonder. Now, at eight, that same excitement still bubbled inside me.

Suddenly, my foot caught on a bench leg, and my balance vanished as I slammed sideways into a pedestal. Glass exploded in a terrible high-pitched shatter, shards raining down like glittering stars. A moment later, my fingers trembled as I sifted through the debris, panic roaring through me: priceless history destroyed, a massive bill for my parents. Just then, like lightning, realization struck. "The display piece!" Immediately, I clawed desperately through the wreckage as shards poured from my hands. At the center of torn velvet, untouched by chaos, something new glowed. It was no ordinary relic instead it was a heavy bronze hourglass carved with intricate symbols. Soon, the hourglass hummed and the sand began drifting upwards, as if defying gravity. My surroundings began to change and shift. I clung tightly to the searing-hot hourglass as I watched the modern building turn to ruins and little by little Ancient civilizations started appearing all around me.

When the world finally stopped shifting, I was no longer in the museum. Instead, I was standing in a bustling ancient marketplace, alive with merchants from distant lands. My clothes had changed too, from my pleated skirt, a sky-blue silk tunic from Xi'an and a Persian saffron-dyed wool skirt clung to my skin. "That looks familiar..." I thought. "In fact, this whole place looks familiar!" I whispered under my breath. Then it hit me like a bucket of ice water to the face. "Of course I've seen this place before, this was the Silk Road during Taizong's golden age 640 AD, just like Dad described."

Suddenly, the hourglass was yanked from my hands. Frantically, I looked down and came face-to-face with a boy slightly younger than me. I jerked it back, causing us both tumbled to the ground. The boy spat out sand, as I exclaimed: Thief!" I yelled in English. He stared at me in confusion, then bolted with the hourglass. Without thinking, I chased after him as he darted into a nearby house.

Quietly, I pushed the door just a sliver and peered inside. On a low bed, lay an unconscious little girl with deathly pale skin, I presumed she was his sister. The boy was tending to her, hovering my hourglass above her brow chanting the Zhang Qian's oasis prayer, as if it were a sacred charm that could make her well again. When nothing happened, he let out a sob that cracked my heart. When he noticed me peeking through the door, his eyes widened in fear, then desperation. He raced over and slammed the door in my face. I clutched my nose but after a second's hesitation, shoved the door open again. There he was kneeling with arms outstretched, forming a barrier between me and the girl. He pointed to his sister and mimed coughing, then pointed to my hourglass and rubbed his thumb and fingers together, as if representing money. But this time, I understood more. I understood the helplessness first. I knelt and offered my hand. He stared at it, his gaze darting to mine as if sensing my sincerity. After a moment, he took it. I helped him up. Silence filled the room. He spoke Xi'an dialect. I frowned, lost. He read my expression and switched back to hand gestures, more frantic now. I glanced at my modern silver bracelet, birthday gift from my mom. It was modern, its craftsmanship unlike anything here. I unfastened it and placed it in his open palm. I pointed to the bracelet, then to the door, miming for him to trade it. He didn't hesitate. He nodded, a look of fierce determination replacing the fear, and sprinted out the door.

Minutes later the boy returned, not with a trader, but with a small ceramic bottle and a wooden cup of water. He gave me a quick desperate hug, then rushed to his sister. Together, we propped her up and fed her two small pills from the bottle and helped her swallow a few sips of water. After a while, the girl opened her eyes slightly, and said something I took as a thank you. She smiled weakly before her eyes fluttered shut again, but her breathing was already deeper, more peaceful. The boy looked at me joy shining in his eyes. He bowed with his forehead touching the floor. When he stood up, he smiled, a real smile, one that lit up his entire face. He grabbed my wrist, and together we bounded out of the house.

After everything that had happened, he led me through the market as his way of thanking me. Indian saffron burned my nose. Somalian frankincense hung thick in sunbeams. Somewhere, Xi'an tea boiled over charcoal fires, Persian traders yelled to Uighur merchants, mixed with the clinking of coins. Ferghana horses neighed, stamping clouds of dust. He pulled me under the shade of a willow tree where people were huddled in a storytelling circle, exact circle from Dad's dig-site sketches over dinner. We sat quietly at the edge. The storyteller gestured wildly, describing Sasanian horses on silks. I could not understand a word but felt completely entertained, caught in the rhythm of his voice.

As I reflected on the day's events, feeling the strange warmth of the now full sun on my skin, I felt my palm gradually grow warmer. At first, I thought I was imagining it, until the heat became a burn. Frantically, I pulled the hourglass from my pocket. The symbols had flared up, glowing with the same gold light. The hourglass hummed with power again. But this time, the sand was falling downward, obeying gravity, streaming towards the bottom bulb in a glowing cascade. I looked towards the boy. He saw the light and understood. His smile faded into a look of solemn acceptance. He stepped back and bowed his head once more, a final, silent farewell. I watched as the first grains hit the bottom, and my surroundings began changing once again. The sounds of the market faded into a hollow whisper, then into the utter silence of the museum hall.

Finally, the shifting stopped. I found myself standing in the same spot in the museum. My clothes had morphed back into the clothes I'd been wearing earlier, and the floor around me was clean. It was as if the accident had never happened. The hourglass was cool and inert in my hand. I was just about to breathe a sigh of relief when the hourglass started emitting a sharp, electronic beeping sound. Frightened, I dropped it, where it rolled to a safe stop on the floor.

My surroundings faded to black as a disembodied voice yelled, "Wake up, Aurelia!" I sat up in my own bed, gasping. My heart hammered against my ribs. Sunlight streamed through my window. "Wake up! We're going to the Timeless Silk Pathways, remember?" my mother's familiar voice yelled from downstairs, bright and clear. I looked to my left. It turned out the beeping came from my alarm clock.

Disappointment crushed me. Just a dream? A vivid, wild, incredible dream. My hand flew to my wrist. It was bare. My silver bracelet was gone. I swung my legs out of bed, and my feet touched something hard and something soft on the floor, I froze. On the carpet lay the dusty bronze hourglass, and beside it, carefully folded was a small square of ancient saffron-colored silk. I lifted it and held it to my nose. The parcel crackled under my fingers, heavy with the market dust I'd breathed hours ago. When I unfolded it, a single gold character gleamed: 路 (Road). The Silk Road my dad chased through ruins now flowed through my blood. My bracelet was gone, but Chang'an lived in my bones.

The Silk Spinners

ESF Sha Tin College, Lee, Jiyui – 12

While most people remembered the glamorous silk traded along the Silk Road, few know the stories of the silk spinners who became traders in a desperate bid to escape poverty. This is the tale of my life as the son of a silk spinner, a story of my family's endurance through hardship and resilience.

Inside this tiny but comfortable house lived my cousin, Timoy Wong, my parents, and me, Bao Lee. My family and I lived on a street with other small houses. We did not have much wealth, but we had one prized possession that all of China knew: silk. Our family were silk spinners. The Romans mistakenly believed that it came from a tree called Sire. This was obviously highly prized knowledge, as it was one of the most significant things we traded as a country. We had a farm full of hundreds of thousands of silkworms and abundant stacks of mulberries. We collected ten bundles of silk from our hard work over the past ten years. Each bundle weighed about 3 kilograms.

After a good day of trading silk with outsiders, as slow as a turtle, I walked back home. This was the moment when I could take in the beautiful scenery of the mountains from afar. When I reached the doorstep of my home of hay and wood, I felt a sense of dread course through my veins. Once I opened the door I saw Timoy crouching over my father.

Like a flash of lightning, I raced to my father's side and saw a thousand red dots resembling a swarm of red ants. My heart stopped, and I stared at him blankly. Many people in our village had fallen ill with this mysterious disease and would die in a matter of months.

Father forcefully murmured, "Son, you must travel to Rome and sell our silk. It's the only way for me to get medicine."

Instantly, I recoiled in disbelief. Just after those words, he added, "I want Timoy to supervise you on this trip." Timoy was thunderstruck to hear this.

Later that night, my cousin and I were still in a state of shock. When Mom came home, she immediately sensed the mood. That's when she finally spotted Dad and charged forward like a bull. While she tended to Dad, Timoy and I remained on our makeshift bed, still in shock.

My cousin and I set out towards the trail ten days later. Our packs held everything we needed for the long road ahead: bread, preserved meat for special occasions, a map to Rome, many bottles of water, ten bundles of silk, and ink and brush and paper to write letters home in case of an emergency. As we began the journey, I started to see things I had never seen before. I heard some rustling in the dry bush.

"Timoy, did you hear that?"

"Hear what?"

Suddenly, a group of people emerged from the bush, and all were wielding daggers that looked wickedly sharp in the sunset.

"Okay, listen up, you'd better give us your most prized possession, then we will leave you alone. But if you don't, we will forcefully take all of your possessions."

Obligingly, my cousin handed them one bundle of our valued silk from our backpacks while begging them, “Please accept this, it is all we own. We are so poor, we need to sell it, but I hope it serves you well.” Grunting, one of the men took the silk, and they all disappeared into the forest. Most likely waiting to mug some poor souls. Timoy sighed a sigh of relief, and he told me they were known as The Triad, a ruthless and dangerous group of people who stole goods from weary travellers. He said we were lucky to even have our lives intact. But I was not so sure if we were truly that lucky, losing one bundle of silk was like losing one year of harvest.

As we continued the trail, we noticed many random objects on the road, like food and clothes. We found this very strange because people normally keep clothes and food for their journey to somewhere, but we did not question it because this type of stuff is like gold to us. Down the road, we noticed many mysterious engravings in the stones, but we ignored them.

A few weeks later, in the sweltering heat of the unforgiving desert, we continued to see these nonsensical engravings along our route. But one particular engraving caught my eye, it had an eye in the middle, as if someone or something was watching us. Suddenly, the air was filled with suspense. I instinctively tried to look for Timoy, but all I found was air. I felt a pang of indecision on whether to flee or to search for him, then I felt something shot into my neck. As I felt the walls closing in on me, I fell onto the cold, hard ground.

Blurry. I felt groggy, with the sensation of the chemicals coursing through my bloodstream. The sack covered my head like sweat. I could hear people talking, then the sack was ripped away from my head. I could finally breathe, and while I took a few precious gasps of air, I looked at my surroundings and said to myself, “ This is not what I envisioned my journey to be like.” Then the Kidnappers raised a long, elongated stick and whacked it over my head. Then everything went black.

New Tales of China's Silk Road

ESF Sha Tin College, Li, Edgar – 11

Niko woke up early again like every other morning. He walked out into an empty living room. Where was mom and dad? He wandered around the house and found a note on the kitchen counter.

Dear Niko, it read, me and your dad have to go on a business trip. Sorry for not telling you as we were in a hurry. Uncle Jeff will be arriving soon to pick you up.

Take care, Mom.

Niko put down the note as Kate walked into the room.

"Where's mom and dad?" She asked. Kate was Niko's (annoying) younger sister.

"They went on a business trip, Uncle Jeff will be coming soon to get us soon, go make yourself breakfast or something," Niko replied.

Almost immediately after Niko had finished his sentence, the doorbell rang. At the door was Uncle Jeff.

"Hey kiddos, your parents want me to take care of you at my house," he said.

Uncle Jeff drove them there in his special tuk-tuk. Once they arrived at the house, Kate ran inside. Niko sat down and relaxed on the couch but was interrupted by shouting.

"GUYS I FOUND SOMETHING!" Kate shouted from the backyard.

Niko rolled his eyes, Kate was always being dramatic. As he opened the back door, he saw it. A large object had landed in the backyard, leaving a crater. It had these glowing patterns and buttons on the side.

"Maybe we should leave it alone..." Niko said.

But Kate had already started running towards it and pressing buttons.

"Stop! We don't know what it could be!" Niko couldn't even finish his sentence before a light engulfed the three of them.

Niko woke up on the forest floor. He was lying on the ground, Uncle Jeff and Kate were still unconscious. Where were they? As the others woke up as well, a robotic voice sounded. It came from the machine.

Core damaged. Time located: 1092 CE. Repairs needed. Location: Silk road, China.

'Aw great,' Niko said angrily at Kate. 'This is even worse than I expected. We're not just in the middle of nowhere, we also went back in time! None of this would have happened if you had just listened to me for A SECOND!'

'Well, then you shouldn't always be such a worryrat then!' Kate snapped back.

'Stop it! The both of you!' Uncle Jeff shouted at the two of them. 'The only way we can get out of this mess is to stay calm, not argue. And if there's one thing that can get us out of here, it's the box. There must be a way to turn it into a carriage or something.'

The voice sounded again. *Request accepted.* Now in its place was a carriage. It still had those strange patterns though. Niko and Kate looked at each other and climbed onto the carriage quickly. Soon, they were riding along the path and discussing what to do next.

"We need to get to a village for shelter and also to fix the machine, for now, it's just travelling," Uncle Jeff said as the carriage clunked across the road.

'At least things can't get any worse!' Kate said happily.

A result came from the bushes and three burly men jumped out. Bandits.

"Give us all of your valuables and no one gets hurt!" one of them said, he was holding a sword, and it was pointed directly at them. Kate screamed in fear.

Oh great, Niko thought, Why can't we just GO HOME ALREADY?

Nothing happened. He was still in this cursed place. And so were the bandits. As they got closer and closer, the machine suddenly started to splutter and shake and sped off at cheetah speed, leaving the bandits in their dust.

Niko stared at Uncle Jeff. 'Did you do that?' He asked him. He looked behind them and saw that the bandits were only small dots in the distance.

“No, it just happened. This machine is very strange; I wonder where it came from... Anyway, we should set up camp somewhere, it's getting dark.”

That night, Niko couldn't sleep. He kept tossing and turning in his uncomfortable rock bed. He sat up on the forest floor and spotted Uncle Jeff awake, tending the campfire. The feeling of burnt meat still lingered in his stomach. Kate was sound asleep, relaxed on a log, but Uncle Jeff looked like he might be awake the whole night.

“Do you ever think we'll go back home?” Niko said, breaking the silence.

Uncle Jeff raised his head. “Don't give up hope. There's always a way out of these things” He said. But he, too, sounded worried as well. And so, Niko stared up at the moon until he fell asleep.

The next day, the terrain had shaped into vast sandy plains. They had entered a desert. The sun was blazing hot and it beat down on them as the carriage clunked across the road. Niko's sweat might as well be enough to fill two buckets. Uncle Jeff was driving the carriage in front, but he looked very tired, dark circles had formed under his eyes and his posture was slumped.

“Eww, you got your sweat on me.” Kate whined as she tried to use her hand to wipe it off.

“Well, deal with it. We have other, more important issues to deal with, such as the one YOU got us in.” Niko snapped back. And then the two started arguing once again.

“Stop it, you two. There's no time to be arguing right now—” Uncle Jeff's voice was the last thing he heard before the darkness.

Niko woke up with a throbbing in his head again. They had crashed into the ditch. Kate was on the ground, but she was awake, Uncle Jeff, on the other hand, was sprawled on the floor like a ragdoll. He seemed to have landed on his head when they crashed. The carriage was tilted on its side, but it looked unharmed.

“Now look at what you've done! And this time, it's not MY fault.” Kate suddenly shouted at him. She seemed furious. They were so close to getting home, and Niko had ruined it. *But fighting is just going to make it worse*, he thought, *Uncle Jeff was right. We need to work together, or else we'll never get back home.*

“Stop! Please just listen. Can't you see where this is getting us? Nowhere! If we keep fighting, we'll just be stuck here forever, so we need to work together,” he said. Kate looked at him uncertainly, then approached him slowly. Niko flinched. *Is she going to hit me?* he thought, but Kate grabbed his hand slowly and shook it.

“Fine, truce. But NOW what do we do?” she said.

Moooooo. A sound came from over the ditch. *Moooooo.* There it was again.

“Let's go check that out,” Niko said. The ditch itself wasn't that deep, so Niko and Kate climbed out easily. The hard part was getting the machine or Uncle Jeff out.

On the surface was a brownish yellowish cow, almost a golden colour. It had a rope on its neck and it looked healthy and strong. It gave Niko some kind of special feeling.

“We could use that rope on its neck to pull the machine out!” Niko exclaimed, “Quick, grab some grass!” They spent almost the whole afternoon to get that cow to follow, let alone tying the rope to the machine. While Kate was typing the rope, Niko jumped into the ditch to check on Uncle Jeff. He had a pulse, but one side of his head had an obvious bump. Ouch.

“Ok get ready to pull!” Kate shouted from above. Niko nodded before lifting Uncle Jeff onto the machine's seat and starting to push it up the steep ditch. The cow mooed at the sudden weight, but started to move again when Kate lured him (or was it her?) with some grass.

“ONE MORE PUSH! THREE ... TWO.....ONE.....PUSH!!!” Niko shouted and pushed with all his effort and with a final shake, the machine was back on the surface.

Oh Uncle Jeff, please wake up. We need you! Niko thought desperately, *I just wanna go back home. It's horrible here! Please wake up.*

“NIKO! The—the machine is glowing! I think it's gonna blow!” Kate cried, “Get down!”

And the two of them were engulfed by blinding light again. Niko opened his eyes and they were transported to a grassy field. It was Uncle Jeff's backyard. They were home!

“Maybe our friendship had something to do with us getting back here”Niko told Kate.

“Oh shut it,”Kate huffed,”it makes it sound like a fairy tale!”

A groan interrupted their conversation.

“Ugh.Everything hurts.Wait,Are we back home?Was it all a dream?”Uncle Jeff said as he stood up.

“Uncle Jeff!”They shouted and both ran over to hug him.

The machine was gone.

*Maybe it really was all a dream...*Niko thought.

What the Sand Remembers

ESF Sha Tin College, Shi, Iris Sun – 13

The sand has a memory.

It's the first thing you learn out here, in the crushing, gold-white silence between worlds. It holds the metallic scent of every spilled drop of blood from forgotten skirmishes for control of an oasis, a pass, a river crossing. It remembers every footfall; the measured tread of Tang soldiers, the heavy plod of Bactrian camels, the frantic scrambling of men caught in storms. It remembers every caravan that ever crossed its face, from Zhang Qian's exploratory missions to the great merchant trains of the Sogdians. It remembers the weight of empires: the fleeting shadows of the Huns, the relentless advance of the Han watchtowers, the disciplined patrols of the Tibetans, the swift horsemen of the Uighur Khaganate. It forgets nothing, just waits, for the wind to scour the story clean and start again.

It also remembers the exact moments where the silence broke, centuries apart.

The Storm

The storm hit Jun's caravan three days later. A karaburan, the black storm of legend, whose name the men whispered almost reverently. The horizon vanished and the world shrank to the howl of sand, scouring skin, cloth, and courage. The camels groaned and knelt. The men tied themselves together with ropes and huddled. Jun, in his terror, found himself reciting the ballads of frontier soldiers he'd once transcribed, his lips moving soundlessly, uselessly.

The bamboo tube against his ribs suddenly felt absurd, a toy of a distant, orderly world. It was his mission, holding words meant for a Tang general in Kashgar, words of strategies and alliances in the endless struggle to control the Silk Road. Jun, a minor scholar from a modest family in Chang'an, had been selected for his reliability and his clean hand, but more because he was expendable. It was a validation of years spent honing his script in dutiful obscurity, yet it was shadowed by bitterness. He understood that great poets and strategists were not sent into the maw of the Taklamakan.

He had travelled with a small Sogdian caravan for camouflage, a scholar amongst the boisterous, Zoroastrian-fire-worshipping traders whose language he did not fully understand.

One evening, by a dwindling oasis, a relic of the old Kushan irrigation lines, the old Sogdian guard Nergün had pointed to a slight ridge in the sand.

"See that? Not a dune. Something's buried there," he said. Jun had helped him brush away the grains. They uncovered a story: the parched, wooden frame of a cart, its design unfamiliar, possibly Xianbei from centuries past. Beside it, a human form, curled as if in sleep. The features smoothed by time and wind into an androgynous mask of peace. In the corpse's clenched hand was a small, felt-wrapped bundle.

Nergün pried it loose. Inside was a Byzantine gold solidus, Heraclius's profile worn soft, and a jade cicada, exquisitely carved from Khotan nephrite, meant for the tongue of a noble corpse to ensure resurrection in the Han tradition.

This traveler, perhaps a mercenary or a renegade trader, had died carrying someone else's passage to the afterlife.

When the wind died, the world was remade. Dunes had migrated like nomadic armies. Landmarks were gone. The oasis they were heading towards was buried under new, anonymous hills. Two camels were lost. Their water sacks, slashed by flying grit, were half-empty.

Panic settled over the caravan. Arguments in Turkic, Sogdian and Chinese broke out. The master was dead; his lungs filled with sand. Nergün took command. "We walk. That way!" He pointed to a blankness.

Jun watched the Sogdian guard read the sun like a book, interpreting the sand where the storm had brushed it. He learned to ration his spit, to ignore the blistering sun on his neck. His purpose, his precious message became just a shape, then a nuisance, then a part of him. He stopped thinking of Kashgar, of the Tang Empire's celestial mandate. He thought only of the next step, and the next, and the next.

The Unknown

Centuries later, the memory of that desperation flickered on a screen in an air-conditioned trailer. Dr. Arman zoomed in on the satellite image. The proposed New Silk Road highway's path was a red line cutting through endless amber desert. Right through Grid G-7, his team's last dig. The Place of the Wooden Cart, they called it

informally. A single find from a preliminary scan; the silica of wood, one human skeleton. But now the funding was gone. The permit was revoked. Progress had a new scripture, and it had cut Arman out.

In his trailer, Arman held a plastic bag. Inside was a single artifact recovered just before the shutdown. A small, exquisite jade cicada. The report would call it Funerary Object, likely Han Dynasty. But Arman thought of the hand that last held it. The sand had remembered the body and the object, but the name, the why, it was dust, and Arman hated it.

He packaged the cicada for shipment to the national museum, forever labeled Provenance Unknown.

The Shovel

On the fifth day of walking, Jun saw it. A glint of metal. Some kind of shovel, half-buried, left behind by some transient crew. He stared, uncomprehending. It was a shape with no context. He didn't touch it. It was part of a story he would never, could never understand.

His lips were cracked and his vision was swimming, the world dissolving into a shimmering, treacherous heat haze where sand met sky, and every step forward felt like he was walking on knives, a bargain struck with the ground beneath his feet. Nergün was a dark, faltering shape ahead. Then, Nergün stopped. He sank to his knees in sudden, frantic purpose, his hands clawing at the sand. A sound tore from his throat, a ragged sob choked with disbelief that broke into a wild, gasping laugh. His fingers, raw and bleeding, had found a promise: an unexpected, shocking coolness. A dark stain spread against the pale sand, then a seeping, muddy trickle. It was water from an old, buried spring, its source likely carved by Tocharian herdsman a millennium before.

They drank like animals, the mud coating their tongues. It was life.

That night, huddled by a feeble fire of tamarisk scrub that spat more smoke than warmth, Jun felt the sand, once as deep, as fathomless, as unending as the sea. Now it had traces of gravel and stubborn root. They were nearing the edge. He took out his dry inkstone and his last scrap of paper. With precious water, he ground the ink. He wrote not in the rigid kaishu of official documents, but in the swift, fluid xingshu of personal emotion. A private record.

The sand remembers the weight of empires, but forgets their names. It remembers the thirst, but not the prayer. I loved order, poetry and carried words of power for the Son of Heaven, but have learned the language of thirst, of wind. I am Jun, who survived. The message is intact, but the man who carries it is gone, remade by the desert. He sealed the note and tucked it inside his robe, beside the official tube. One for the Empire. One for the sand.

The Cigarette

The next morning, thousands of years in the future, the foreman of the New Silk Road highway crew, a man named Li, lit a cigarette. The survey was done. The flags were up. This stretch was empty, boring. He kicked at the sand, revealing a black, twisted shape: a piece of old, rusted rebar. He threw it towards the pile of construction debris. It landed with a thud.

He didn't see the slight, human-sized depression in the sand nearby, a desperate man's kneeling prayer for water. He didn't feel the memory of the place, the whisper of a wooden cart, a final surrender, a group of survivors passing.

The Survival

When Jun stumbled into the caravanserai at Kashgar's outskirts two days later, he was celebrated as a miracle. He delivered his bamboo tube to the general's aides with efficiency. His duty was completed.

Before returning to the orderly world, Jun walked to the edge of the bustling outpost, where the desert began again. He took the jade cicada he had kept, tribute to the unknown traveler, and held it in his palm. He laid it on a flat stone, an offering to the wind and the memory, a gesture more Sogdian than Tang, an act not of the person he was, but as the person he had become.

Then he turned his back, leaving a piece of his story for the desert to keep.

The sand has a memory. It remembers the shovel, the rebar, the cicada on the stone. It remembers the storm and the taste of the mud. It holds the sigh of the scribe and the cigarette ash of the foreman. And it waits, patient, vast, unflinching, for the next wind, or the next road, to write over it all again.

The Last Gift

ESF Sha Tin College, Wang, Helena – 12

September 29th, 1297

Every day I asked myself why I chose this path — the treacherous Silk Road, winding and unforgiving. But Shangdu is unlike anything I could have dreamed of, with vibrant markets packed with unfamiliar products, and silks that whispered stories. Today Father, Uncle and I explored a library that felt like a temple. Scholars sat in silence, their eyes admiring the ancient texts that adorned the walls. Some had spent their entire lives here, praying, studying, fading away from modern life. We were given the honour to see the lead scholar. As I walked through, I saw him lying on his deathbed, breathing shallowly. Before I could speak, he tentatively handed me a scroll. Stunned into silence, we had no answer. His hands trembled as he rasped: “You must carry this home.”

I stood in his chamber, surrounded by mahogany and wisdom. He was defying Kublai Khan, and I was honored that he spent his last breaths choosing me. Still, I felt small. The scroll weighed down my satchel and my heart. I didn’t know what it held. But I knew this— my journey has turned into something different.

Alas, I was right. We visited Kublai Khan’s court, and he immediately suspected something. The lead scholar was smart enough not to leave any evidence, yet Khan still took away my Uncle. I will get him back.

November 21st, 1299

I had arrived at the Desert of Lop, where I had been bracing sandstorms and venomous scorpions ever since I set foot here. The tales I had heard about miles and miles of grassland are nowhere to be seen, and this place brings back the nightmares of the Sahara Desert. Honestly, this part of my trip is the one I had been dreading ever since we carefully mapped out our route on the map. We were lucky enough to have well equipped tour guides and experienced camels, since my trip has gained fame — oh, what 10 year old me would have thought. I hated to imagine how many people with too little resources have died here, all those corpses buried under sand and skulls littering the path. Mirages shimmered in front of me: occasionally a bubbling stream, a glittering oasis.

But... not all mirages are illusions, not all mirages are fake. The scroll in my hand shimmered; as if dusted with glitter. The once illegible, faded with time hieroglyphics suddenly burst with colors, and the empty parchment glowed with colorful ink. The transformation startled me, and I fell into the sand.

“Are you alright?” The tour guide shouted back at me.

“Fine! Got startled by a scorpion.” I replied. The tour guide nodded back at me as I desperately tried to regain my composure.

I glanced back at the scroll, which flickered brightly until it returned to its original state.

I was one step closer to finding out its origin.

December 2nd, 1300

Tabriz, Persia. Still worrying about my uncle. He could be rot— STOP. An echoing voice boomed through my thoughts and a bulky hand thrust itself in front of me. Cautiously, I raised my eyes to meet his, only to find a pair of black sunglasses glaring at me. I raised my hands up, but before I could blink, a gleaming pair of shackles bound my

hands in an instant, and the end of my capturer's mouth lifted up in an evil sneer. People around us whispered and pointed, before hurrying along with their children clasped tightly to their side.

"The Malum!" I heard an old woman whisper. This was my only clue to their identity. The last thing I saw was darkness as a bag was pushed over my head.

"You have been detained. Everything you say can and will be used against you. Speak wisely." A gruff voice echoed across the interrogation room.

A bodyguard standing behind me dragged the burlap sack over my head, and I took in the yellowing walls and faint spiderwebs littering the tiny room. "Hich" was the name engraved on his nametag, and he gestured to the surprisingly state of the art microphone sitting in front of me.

"Explain." Hich pointed to the scroll, to which my eyes widened in surprise. His face stayed monotone, though I could've sworn I caught a knowing glint in his eyes.

"Uh... i-its a fa-amily.. h-heirloom" I stammered out.

"Sure, sure." It wasn't enough. I was going to be imprisoned.

I was dragged into a bleak cell with one barred window. Was this going to be the end of my journey? I looked to the cell across from me, and started with a jump.

"Dad! What are you doing here?"

"Same as you. Captured." He said with a chuckle.

"Now is not the time to laugh! When? Where? How?" I asked frantically.

"When you were in that room. Don't you know they took you out?" Realisation dawned upon me. Looking back, there were gaps in my memory that imagination had tried to fill.

"*Salam.*" A voice interrupted our happy reunion. I jumped again, and I wouldn't have been surprised if I'd gotten a heart attack right then.

"Move the *takht* a little, will you?" I knew enough Persian to understand what he was saying and I cautiously nudged the bed over. A scratched, muddied face grinned up at me.

"Heard you're the famous Marco Polo. Want my help?" So... news of my travels had traveled far. Despite the circumstances, a small flame of pride ignited in my chest. Graciously, I nodded to the man. What could be worse than this... jail? He gestured to me.

"I want to help."

"Really?"

"Yes. My parents died in the Malum. This is the least I can do." He said, face contorted in displeasure.

"No matter. Come. Cannot help your father. Near *nageibanan.*" With the last word came another grimace, so I took it to mean guards. He crouched at the hole which had been opened up in the dirt walls, and motioned for me to crawl through. I took a quick glance left and right, before carefully kneeling on the floor and inching through the hole. Once I was out, he filled the hole with sand and he led the way with the ease of an experienced man.

“My scroll!” I suddenly exclaimed.

“Ah, no worry. I have the scroll. I steal from office.” He smirked, full of pride.

“Thank you.” I was practically shaking with gratitude.

“No worries.” He smiled at me.

“Ah, yes. I forgot to say, my friend is getting father out.” At this point, my eyes were overflowing with gratitude. His kindness was one I had never seen before; even in my closest friends. This prompted me to show him my scroll. The least I could do was show the man who saved my life. Slowly, I unfurled the delicate paper, and presented it to him.

“Ah! My *baba bozorg*!” He cried.

“Your grandfather?”

“Yes! Is his signature!” He replied enthusiastically.

“Really?” I said, shocked.

“Of course. I would recognize him anywhere.” He said proudly. “This is a *tumar nageiban*, let travel across anywhere.”

“A...?” I asked hesitantly.

He nodded eagerly. “Yes. Old protection scroll. Only few exist. My grandfather was last keeper. This—” he tapped the glowing signature, “—means no guard, no Malum can touch you.”

Before I could respond, shouting voices echoed behind us. Boots pounded against the fine sand, and fear ran through my veins.

“Take! Now!” The unnamed man who saved me shoved the scroll into my hands, and frantically started whispering in Persian.

“Now is not the time for prayers! Just run!” I bellowed, yet the man still kept going, shaking his head and gesturing with his hands occasionally.

“There!” He pointed at a faint golden hole, before tugging at my sleeve and jumping inside. The hole glimmered, and before I could make up my mind, a hand pulled me back.

“STOP!” The security guard shouted at me, and out of the corner of my eye I saw the hole flicker once, twice, before I mustered all of my energy and hurled myself inside. Gold. Black. Nothing.

The next time I opened my eyes, I saw the street sign next to me. “Corte De Milion”, pronounced against the green background. Confusion swarmed me.

I glanced around, dizzy with nausea, before the familiar brick building swam before my eyes. Surprise overtook me, and I stumbled, eager to get home. I missed you, I thought.

Later, events of my journey still playing in my head, a sudden knock rattled the door. My heart lurched— but it was only Father, dusty and breathless, who stood beyond me. I embraced him. The journey of the Silk Road was over, but I knew that the scroll's story was not. Someday, I will understand why the dying scholar entrusted me with it, why the Persian man — who I have not yet found — helped me. But for now, I am home. And that is all that matters.

This is Not The Tale of Emperors Or Generals

ESF Sha Tin College, Wong, Tara – 12

This is not the tale of emperors and generals, but of a young weaver whose courage rewove the threads of China's destiny.

In the year 138 BCE, the city of Changxing buzzed with anticipation. Emperor Yang's soldiers marched through the crowded streets, their armor gleaming beneath the sun. Villagers paused their work, drawn by the rhythmic clatter of hooves and the commanding presence of the imperial guard.

A high-ranking official stepped forward, his voice echoing across the square: "People of Changxing! Our wise and mighty Emperor Ling seeks courageous souls to journey westward and represent China in the Silk Road trading!" Gasps rippled through the crowd. "Who will go?" whispered one. "Isn't the journey dangerous? Many have never returned," murmured another.

"Silence!" barked a soldier. "We will not question the Emperor's order. Skilled merchants and artisans are needed to carry our silk to distant lands."

From her workshop nearby, a young weaver named Meng Yao listened intently. Known for her special patterns and unique craftsmanship, she felt a spark ignite within her. Without hesitation, she dashed into the square and stood before the officials.

"I am willing," she declared, her voice steady. "Let me help Changxing shine on the Silk Road."

Meng Yao's courage was remarkable, but her past was even more extraordinary. Orphaned at a young age, she carried only half of a necklace left by her mother—a mother who had been exiled after being falsely accused of theft. The villagers, bound by loyalty to her mother, raised Meng Yao as their own, ensuring she never lacked care or love. Though they worried for her safety, they knew she deserved the chance to explore the world beyond their village. The officials exchanged glances, then nodded in approval. That night, Meng Yao worked tirelessly, selecting her finest silks and preparing for the dawn departure.

2.

At sunrise, Meng Yao rose swiftly, her heart pounding with excitement. With her silk satchel slung over her shoulder, she stepped into the square.

Cheers erupted: "Meng Yao! Meng Yao!" The villagers cried with pride.

The leader of the traders raised his arm. "Let us begin our journey. May Changxing return with riches and honor!" Days blurred into weeks. The landscapes shifted from fertile valleys to barren deserts. Though weary, Meng Yao remained positive, encouraging her teammates to press forward. When they reached the western lands, the group divided—some securing shelter, others negotiating trade. Meng Yao joined the merchants eager to strike bargains.

3.

As she wandered the bustling market, Meng Yao spotted an old woman seated beside a bundle of supplies. Seizing the opportunity, she approached.

"Hello, ma'am. Shall we strike a bargain for these goods?"

The woman looked up, her voice creaky yet warm. "Yes, dear. If I give you these supplies, what will you offer in return?"

Meng Yao smiled. "I carry silks of exceptional quality."

The woman's eyes lit with curiosity. "Let me see."

Meng Yao proudly took out her fabric. The old woman's hands trembled as she touched it. "So soft... so radiant. It is rare to see such talent endure."

After a long pause, she whispered, "I will trade with you. Your silk is extraordinary."

Meng Yao beamed. "Thank you, ma'am. This is my first trade, and you have made it unforgettable."

The woman wished her luck, and Meng Yao skipped away, unaware that fate would bring them together again—under far more dramatic circumstances.

4.

Weeks passed, and rumors spread of thieves haunting the Silk Road. Supplies vanished mysteriously, leaving no trace.

The leader gathered the traders. “We face danger. Shall we stay and fight for our trade, or return home?”

One by one, the merchants chose to remain. “We will stay,” they declared.

“Then we must be observant,” the leader commanded. “Each night, one of us will keep watch.”

5.

When Meng Yao’s turn came, fear rushed through her. Alone in the darkness, she clutched a sharp tool gifted by the old woman. Suddenly, footsteps echoed nearby.

“Come out! I have a weapon!” she cried.

From the shadows emerged the same old woman.

“You?” Meng Yao gasped. “Were you the one stealing supplies?”

“Yes,” the woman admitted calmly.

“But why? I thought you were kind.”

Her eyes glistened. “I sought revenge. Years ago, a villager from Changxing, my hometown, framed me for theft. I was pregnant, and they exiled me, forbidding me from seeing my child. My friends promised to care for her, but I was cast aside. So I left her half of a necklace, so that one day we could maybe find each other again.” The old woman said, showing Meng Yao her necklace.

Meng Yao’s breath caught. “What was the child’s name?”

The woman’s voice trembled. “Meng Yao.”

A gasp escaped Meng Yao’s lips. The necklace at her chest seemed to pulse with truth.

“I am your child,” she whispered. “Raised by your friends, carrying your name. Mother, let us make this right.

Return the stolen goods, and together we will prove your innocence.”

Tears filled the woman’s eyes as their necklaces connected, completing the broken chain. “My dream... my precious child. Yes, let us make this right.”

6.

At dawn, Meng Yao revealed the truth to her companions. United, they returned the stolen supplies and journeyed back to Changxing.

Before the golden palace, Meng Yao knelt. “Your Majesty, we have returned with a villager wrongly accused long ago—my mother, Qiaoxue. She was exiled unjustly. I beg you to lift her banishment.”

The Emperor studied her carefully. “Are you not the girl who braved the Silk Road for Changxing?”

Meng Yao nodded.

“Then your request shall be granted. You have brought honor to our land and restored justice. For this, I bestow upon you a medal of gratitude.”

Meng Yao’s mother bowed deeply. “Thank you, Your Majesty. We will forever carry this mercy in our hearts.”

And so, Meng Yao’s journey brought not only riches to her people, but redemption to her family—her silk weaving a legacy of courage, love, and justice across the Silk Road.

The Great Plains

ESF West Island School, Chan, Bailey – 13

The nature of the Asian plains changed in 1453; instead of the scents of trade, the air was heavy with dust. Veteran merchant and cartographer Ali traversed the Khorasan highway on his unwavering camel, Laila, looking for remnants of the once-vibrant caravanserais. This trip was a surrender to the unavoidable transition to maritime channels rather than an attempt to make money.

A fabled request for a perfect piece of "Celestial Jade" from Khotan, a stone thought to contain the world's mysteries, was sent by Mehmet II, the Ottoman Sultan. Jamal recognized the significance of this last commission, which represented the history of the ancient path.

Near Merv, whose once-bustling caravanserais now crumbled in stillness, the fragments of his recollections emerged as he journeyed. He used his careful maps, which are now artifacts from a bygone era, and the stars to guide him. He remembered the happy festivities of trade in Turfan, only to see desolation—a rusted stirrup half-buried in dust, a silted spring.

Not only were there physical obstacles to overcome, but the illusive Celestial Jade was a myth. Real commerce items had moved to quicker maritime routes, where Portuguese and Italian traders predominated. Relying on fractured knowledge from elderly connections, Ali traveled farther east than he had in twenty years. Despite the perilous travel through the Pamirs, he persisted in his quest to recover the fabled promise of the jade, which he thought could bring strength back to the historic pathways.

When he eventually arrived at Samarkand after months of journey, he discovered it to be both gorgeous and hollow. The magnificent Registan Square lost its vitality and became silent. The once-thriving market was now a shadow of its former self, and merchants lingered in muted stillness.

Maya was an experienced Chinese-Uighur dealer that Ali pursued. She showed him the jade in a little, exquisitely carved piece that looked like a merchant's cart rather than the enormous stone he had imagined. He was disappointed when Anya revealed that the jade represented endurance rather than strength.

The plain truth was that ledgers, not stones, now held the map of trade. Maya noted the effectiveness of maritime routes, which now surpassed the land, and how modern ships eliminated the necessity for caravans. Ali had to face the harsh reality that his life's work—documenting the commercial landscape—was no longer relevant.

In the middle of the jade's splendor, Ali recognized it as a memorial to a bygone era. He pondered his travels for days, feeling conflicted. In the end, he decided to proceed. He proceeded south toward the prosperous sea ports and the Persian Gulf, selling Laila to a family that would take good care of her.

Ali stood on a ship for the first time, feeling the briny wind against his skin. He believed that his conventional maps were useless and that the world had grown more fluid. He took out new sheepskin and ink together with the Celestial Jade, a symbol of his legacy. The journey of a cartographer never ends; it just changes. In a world rebuilt, he would record the emotions of the water and find a new purpose.

The Curse of the Jade Lute

ESF West Island School, Chen, Claire – 13

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

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

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

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

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

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

Daphne raked her eyes over the scene, her breath hitching as she spotted what she was looking for: **the legendary Jade Lute**. The craftsmanship was truly amazing, that much could be seen as she stepped forward. The body

was crafted from aged and polished maple wood, refracting light in pieces back to Daphne's gaze. It was inlaid painstakingly with ebony, ivory and tortoiseshell, and strung with lamb gut, a masterpiece of royalty.

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

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

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

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

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

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

The sound was the most terrifying part – the camel bell and haunting melody gnawed at her sanity, slowly shredding it. The shadows closed in: ten paces away. Five. The lead figure, stretched out a hand made of nothing but darkness towards her. Not to strike, but to beckon. With a final gasping effort, Daphne tore her gaze away from the hand, fixing it upon the lute. Reflected back to her on the sycamore soundboard, was the reflection of another woman. She looked young, but carried an ancient weight of sorrow behind her crown of faded jade. It was the

missing princess. The shadow's hand was inches from hers. The bell chimed a final time, right behind her ear. And as the cold began to seep into her skin, Daphne at last understood the true curse of the Jade Lute.

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

The Quantum Silk Road

ESF West Island School, Chiu, Kolman – 11

By the year 3025, Earth wasn't the main trading place anymore. It was just one stop on a giant space highway called the Quantum Silk Road. Long ago, the Silk Road was a dusty path for camels and caravans. Now, it was a glowing corridor that stretched across galaxies.

Instead of camels, traders rode gravity skimmers through wormholes. They carried amazing things like data silks that could store whole libraries in one thread, and smart fabrics that changed color when you thought about it.

Markets floated above planets like shining holograms. Merchants were AI avatars, bargaining in hundreds of languages. Spices? They were now flavor codes that chefs beamed straight into your taste buds.

But danger still lurked. Data pirates stalked the quantum streams, stealing rare crystals and secret codes. That's why the Quantum Silk Guild hired cyber-nomads, warriors with photon steeds and glowing code sabers.

Chapter 1: The Offer

"I'm telling you, Jax, it's too dangerous," my dad said, slamming the holo-screen shut.

"But Dad, this is my chance!" I argued. "Lyra needs an apprentice, and she picked me!"

Lyra was one of the best traders on the Silk Road. Her skimmer was legendary—fast, sleek, and armed with the latest tech. When her message popped up on my wristband, I nearly fainted.

"Meet me at Dock 7," the message said. "If you're brave enough."

Chapter 2: Into the Corridor

The skimmer hummed as we entered the corridor. Stars blurred into streaks of light. Lyra handed me a glowing thread.

"This is data silk," she said. "It holds the map to the Eternal Pattern."

I stared at it. The Eternal Pattern—the mythical algorithm that could control reality. People said whoever found it could rule the universe.

Suddenly, alarms blared. "Pirates!" Lyra shouted. A swarm of black ships appeared, their code sabers slicing through the quantum stream.

"Hold on!" I yelled, gripping the controls as our skimmer spun sideways.

Chapter 3: The Battle

Plasma blasts lit up the corridor. Lyra fought off the pirates with her saber, sparks flying in zero gravity.

"Keep the silk safe!" she shouted.

I tucked it into my jacket and activated the cloaking shield. The pirates were closing in when a bright flash lit up the corridor—a cyber-nomad riding a photon steed!

"Need a hand?" the nomad grinned, swinging his saber and scattering the pirates.

With his help, we escaped into a hidden wormhole. Lyra smiled. "You did good, Jax. The Eternal Pattern is still out there. And now, you're part of the hunt."

Chapter 4: The Hidden Market

The wormhole spat us out near a glowing planet called Aurion Prime. Its rings shimmered like rainbow glass, and floating above it was the Hidden Market—a secret trading hub only the bravest merchants could find.

Lyra docked the skimmer and whispered, "Keep your hood up. Pirates have spies everywhere."

The market was incredible. Stalls hovered in mid-air, selling things I'd never imagined—time-thread fabrics, gravity seeds, and even bottled starlight. AI merchants flickered like ghosts, shouting deals in a hundred languages.

I clutched the data silk tightly. Every trader seemed to stare at me. Did they know what I was carrying?

Suddenly, a voice hissed behind me:

"Hand over the silk, kid."

I spun around. A tall figure in black armor loomed over me, visor glowing red. A data pirate.

Chapter 5: The Eternal Pattern

Before I could move, Lyra leapt between us, her code saber blazing. Sparks flew as she clashed with the pirate. “Run, Jax!” she yelled.

I bolted through the market, weaving past stalls and leaping over crates. The silk pulsed in my hands, glowing brighter with every step. Then, without warning, it projected a map into the air—a swirling pattern of stars and wormholes.

“The Eternal Pattern...” I whispered. It wasn’t just a myth. It was real, and it was guiding me.

I jumped onto a gravity skimmer parked nearby and slammed the controls. The engine roared, and I shot into the corridor, following the glowing map. Behind me, the pirate’s ship gave chase, lasers slicing through space.

The pattern led me to a shimmering gate at the edge of the galaxy. It looked like a doorway made of pure light. My wristband beeped: ACCESS GRANTED.

I took a deep breath and flew through.

Chapter 6: Beyond the Gate

The light swallowed me whole. For a moment, I thought I was falling—but then I was floating in a place that didn’t feel like space at all. It was endless, shimmering, like standing inside a living star.

The map dissolved from my hands, and in its place appeared a glowing lattice of threads—patterns weaving and unweaving faster than I could blink. The Eternal Pattern.

A voice echoed around me, calm but powerful:

“Welcome, Jax. You have found the Loom of Reality.”

I stared at the threads. I could make Earth the center of trade again. I could erase the pirates. I could even make myself the richest person in the galaxy.

But then I remembered Lyra and all the traders who risked everything to keep the Silk Road alive.

“I don’t want to control reality,” I said. “I just want to protect it.”

The threads pulsed, then folded into a single glowing strand. It floated into my hand.

“Then you are ready.”

The light faded, and I was back in the skimmer. Lyra stared at me.

“What happened?” she asked.

I smiled. “The Eternal Pattern is safe—and so is the Silk Road.”

As the stars stretched out before us, I felt calm. The danger was over. The pirates were gone. And for the first time, the galaxy felt at peace.

The End.

Grandmother Lǎolao and her memories of the Silk Road

ESF West Island School, Freyer, Zeph – 11

My grandmother, Lǎolao, often said I was a baby of many firsts. Born into the Han Dynasty when the Silk Road emerged, I was baby Hao from Xi'an, the first to travel along this legendary route.

According to Grandmother Lǎolao, I was the first to be wrapped in a silk cloth upon my arrival in the world. She told me how my father traded his silk for a jade bracelet to clasp around my wrist for protection. Yes, I was the first baby to wear jade. He named me Hao that day, which means "vastness of the sky" in Chinese. This was because that was all there was on the day I was born—just sky, between the cities of Tianshui and Jayuguan, though Lǎolao couldn't remember the exact place.

Grandmother Lǎolao reminds me that I had a traveling home for the first two years of my life, and I enjoyed peeking out from the holes of makeshift huts made of bamboo and rope. I witnessed a new environment every few weeks; new people of different colors and languages, wearing different garments, sometimes stopping, sometimes on their way. Or quite often I'd see nothing at all, just the expansive miles of desert that felt like an endless sea of golden dunes. My vague memories tell me that nothing was stable; everything was constantly changing, moving, and trading, but also learning, as new cultures arose.

I recall our donkey, nearly buckling at the knees under the weight of our family belongings and bundles of Father's silk. I remember Mother's special treasures in a tin box—bags of spices like cinnamon and saffron, dates and grapes, a glass bottle of perfume, and pistachio nuts. I can still taste Biang Biang noodles: wide, hand-pulled noodles with a clattering "biang" sound, served with a tangy ginger sauce, garlic, and chili. Father made it in his wok, which was also slung across our donkey along with other large utensils that travelled with us everywhere. Grandmother Lǎolao insisted we bring everything along, everything had a purpose – nothing could be left behind.

Thankfully, I don't remember reaching the northern edge of the Taklamakan Desert, where we were met by five armed men riding on enormous animals with long necks and two humps. Although Grandmother Lǎolao recalls the fear in my father's dark eyes that day. We were told to turn back, but father found a way to reroute and carry on.

Grandmother Lǎolao said that fear was nothing compared to the treacherous, winding, unpaved tracks of the Pamir Mountains. She thought we might lose baby Hao that day; the roads were icy, and the freezing winds and rains pierced through everyone's bones. We had nothing to shelter us in the desolate valleys. This is a memory she has only talked about once.

Yet it was around that time that the trade route along the Silk Road was the moment my father's efforts flourished. Those who bought and traded my father's silk were not only enchanted by the magnificent texture and colours of his cloth but also captivated by me, baby Hao. It was at this time my family learned about karma, a concept in Buddhism suggesting that a newborn carries the karma of past lives, influencing their predispositions—not that they remember. I certainly don't, but I like to think I brought good luck.

Grandmother Lǎolao said that through the cross-cultural exchange and interaction of trading along the Silk Road, we made many connections and grew closer as a family. But above all, I was indeed the first baby of many firsts.

Untitled, Xi'An

ESF West Island School, Lee, Claire – 13

Dusk had eventually graced Wang Tianmo after countless hours of the sun beating down on the nape of his neck, sweat dripping into the packed brown dirt he had cultivated for moons. The fiery goddess Xihe that commanded his work hours had retired for the day, dipping behind the mount to the west, a vivid purple bleeding into the tangerine afterglow of the sunset.

When the radiance of the sky had been siphoned away, the gentle tread of his woven straw sandals greeted his humble abode.

“Good night!” Tianmo called to the stars, his companions of the evening. He resided alone; during the day, the fields became his wife and the songbirds his most trusted confidants.

A moonbow arced over the thatched roof of his house, a gift from the gods up above – a myth he had been told in his adolescence that had chased him far into adulthood: the viewer of a moonbow would be rewarded by the gods with spectacular visions in their sleep.

And oddly enough, when Tianmo did drift away, his dreams were indeed more extraordinary than any folklore he had been told as a child.

His first sight was of the rich earth and the coiled fronds of fiddlehead ferns unfurling. Tianmo’s hazy vision rapidly adjusted to the overpowering colors swimming before his very eyes. A whirlwind of rainbows morphed into fantastical creations, peony flowers blossoming and butterflies swarming his vision. As the flutter of amber wings miraculously cleared away, Tianmo could only stumble backwards to absorb the idyllic scene.

To his right, the rolling mountains seemed to swallow him whole in their vibrant embrace, only offset by the cobalt water crashing onto the shore, beating the bay rhythmically. The soil beneath the soles of his bare, calloused feet was dark and damp, an indication of a fortunate rainy season, and luscious green blades of grass stretched on to the horizons.

And the sky — oh, the breathtaking sky — was opalescent in color, a million glimmers of beauty in one infinite expanse, shining and shifting like oil on water as glorious sunlight broke through the cumulus clouds faraway, which rippled like the pelt of a sheep.

As he stood with the fragrance of earthy petrichor and lavender invading his senses, overlooking the vast ocean, imposing mountains, and sprawling valley of wildflowers, Tianmo could not recall having seen anything as majestic.

Tianmo’s eyelids fluttered open, squinting through the gloom that accompanied the dead of night. On automation, his feet padded softly across the ground and his hands moved of their own accord, navigating a path through the hazy darkness. It was nowhere near sunrise and yet his skin was prickling uncomfortably, tingling with an innate desire he could not comprehend.

He crouched in a beam of moonlight upon the floor, the silvery luminescence serving as his only source of light this far into the night, as he ran his fingers over the paper born of mulberry fiber, a craft rumored to have carried through the Silk Road. Elders had taught him in his youth the skill of traditional paper making, an arduous yet rewarding process, and he had retained it in the depths of his mind.

The paper he had kept in his possession for decades was not as flawless as it ought to have been, but its seemingly diaphanous qualities brought about a certain ethereal glow, its radiance causing specks of dust to be caught suspended in midair.

As if in an illusion, Tianmo’s fingers began to move methodically with a mind of their own, his fingertips rapidly becoming stained with red clay and dark ash. His worn hands with blistered fingertips and dirt caked under his stubby nails transformed into those of an artist.

He could have been there for centuries, breathing life into the paper as the world ground to a halt. Twin flames of euphoria and fear coursed through his veins until they froze, ice leeching into his boiling blood. All he knew was that he had never felt more alive yet constrained by his own body.

The cleansing breath he took felt as if it was his first in a millennium, his entrance into a world that contained . . . *that*.

The paper, which had started out from a humble wood fiber beginning, had flourished into a painting that chanted the tales of the past and present and future, a choir of haunting voices singing the song of groundbreaking beauty. Each speck of seafoam, each blade of grass, each flower petal seemed to breathe new life into the world. The brilliance of color and detail was close to unbearable, burning into his eyes with a vigour he had never experienced. It was a facsimile of the dream sent by the gods, and his eyes caressed the pieces reverently.

Bang! He was abruptly thrown out of his reverie by a fierce and weighted thud on his door. He paused before it came again, the relentless hammering upon his door, causing the wood grain to appear disfigured as it rattled viciously. The sound reverberated through his one-room house, echoing off the mud brick walls, penetrating his eardrums with such intensity that he winced.

“Hello?” Tianmo set his painting aside delicately before rising to meet the strangers at the door, his voice ringing with cautious discretion. It was rare for others to encroach on his property, as signs of civilization were almost nonexistent in his vicinity. His agricultural farm was located on the extreme outskirts of Xi’an, a mere thread on the vast tapestry that was the sprawling Silk Road.

He cracked the door fashioned out of scrap wood open, his eyes darting from one tall figure to the other of the duo standing before him. Both wore hemp tunics and cloaks, typical burlap sacks over their shoulders, the peculiar weapon both carried being their only idiosyncratic feature.

“Apologies for trespassing on your land.” The accent of the traveller’s words was wholly unfamiliar to Tianmo. “We are merchants from the Silk Road.”

The Silk Road merchants! How that had been quite the subject of discussion in the past few decades! Tianmo found himself becoming increasingly intrigued by the claim of the merchant, and his interest only piqued further when the man’s companion requested a place to stay for the night.

Without much thought or hesitation, Tianmo eagerly offered, “Come in, come in! Please, do tell me everything.”

It was then that he recognized the pang of longing for human company in the depths of his stomach, and his desire to seize the elusive opportunity to hear the countless tales they had gathered from their travels. Tianmo wasted no time in kindly rolling out additional woven sleeping mats, waving the merchants towards them.

“Thank you, good sir.” The merchants bowed their heads in gratitude.

It was just as the claws of a deep slumber had snatched him into their dark depths, that he recalled the stories of his childhood of shady thievery in the Silk Road.

So when the sun rose, cresting over the mountain in the early morning and casting shadows upon the grass, he was consumed not by bewilderment but rather painful anguish to find that the solitary remnant of his artwork was a speck of paint.

The sun had decided the day would be a blazing one, humidity clenching around their stifled bodies as beads of sweat surfaced on their foreheads. Bekhir and Ali had seen countless days and nights on the Silk Road, yet none of their quests had been as successful as their newly completed one. Having reached the largest market in Constantinople from an agricultural farm on the periphery of Xi’an, their latest journey was coming to a close.

Though travelling under the premise of common merchants, the two were workers for the Ottoman Empire in reality – some might have said glorified thieves, but Bekhir and Ali considered themselves loyal servants. For more years than either could count on their fingers, they had been taking from unsuspecting fellows along the Silk Road for royalty in the Ottoman Empire – only, never had they ever found a treasure as remarkable as the painting stashed in their burlap sacks now.

“That artwork is truly amazing,” Bekhir commented with pride in his voice; it had been weeks but the man was still rambling on about their success. “A true masterpiece. Quite the rare find.”

Ali grunted in response, forging a path through the swarm that had rapidly enclosed them so as to pinpoint the caravan named the location of their rendezvous. He murmured, “And now it is time for handover.”

The prized exhibit at Topkapi Palace Museum in the 21st century had to be the untitled yet astoundingly popular anonymous painting framed imposingly in the entrance hall, believed to have originated from Xi'an during the time of the Silk Road.

ANONYMOUS – *UNTITLED*

Circa 1460 CE

Xi'An Landscape

Mineral Pigment on Mulberry Paper

And though the piece's relocation to Istanbul was nothing short of an enigma, the prevailing suspicion of curators was nothing other than . . . *theft*.

The White Archive

ESF West Island School, Lo, Lucas – 13

2026: The Shanghai Tower

Shanghai didn't scream when we replaced its soul; it just hummed. From the 128th marbled floor of the Shanghai tower, the destruction of the world beneath was a silent, beautiful transition. I stood with my forehead pressed against the thick glass, watching as a horde of spindle—units dissolved bricks with their bare hands, replacing them with high—tech silk that would last centuries. Down there, in the rubble and dust, planet Earth's long—term building block was finally being archived. I wasn't just building a road below; I was installing the armour that protects our world from the chaos caused by humanity.

I call it the White Archive; threads that connect the world in a fresh new way, devouring the old to build a system that can support humanity itself.

To the 150 nations renewing the 2013 Belt and Road Initiative, it was a savior, with its self—healing networks for seamless trade and global unity. But deep down, I knew the truth; this biological silk sensed every pulse, monitored every secret, wove total control into the planet's roots.

"Director Kaiser," Lee's voice cracked in my ear. "The Xi'an silk is rejecting the order. It's changing."

"Force it," I said.

"I can't! The stones are overriding the AI. It's almost like the ancient stones are hacking the server. They're uploading two thousand years of salt and desert dust into the AI! Director, it's not just changing the data; it's overwriting us."

138 BCE The Silk Road

Twenty—two centuries ago, the air in Chang'an was thick with the smell of charcoal and roasted lamb topped with rich spices. The Silk Road cut through the endless desert like a dao against silk, a thin, precise route for the most valiant, bold merchants. A worn—down caravan reached the shelter oasis at sunset as the merchant unloaded crates of raw silk, spices, and a perfect piece of lapis lazuli. Camels drank thirstily from small pools of water.

Here, strangers gathered across campfires lit with nothing but wood. Deals were made freely under the shelter of the canopy as hands began to place and receive items: silk for spices that burned the human tongue, roasted lamb for a barrel of apples.

This form of exchange was messy, risky, and profitable. Enemies became friends over the campfire. Cultures clashed and fused every time a new recipe or invention was shared. The road thrived in open chaos with no control and no owner. A merchant reached out and pressed his hand against a half—baked clay, leaving a mark of defiance in the sweat. He wasn't archiving his life; he was thriving in it.

2026: The Shanghai Tower

Reality snapped as the floor shook.

Lee emitted a bloodcurdling scream as what seemed vaguely like white silk crept slowly up the great pillars of this ancient structure, twisting and flooding every corner. Scent exploded, rich spices, medicinal herbs, and desert smoke. The white silk didn't just grow; it mutated. As it swallowed every digital server in my office, it began to bleed, a deep blue indigo—the exact shade of lapis lazuli, into the sterile white walls of my office. As pieces of stunning art got projected onto the ceiling and floor of my office, breathtaking holographic ancient caravans moved from left to right. "Lee! Shut down the Xi'an system!" I bellowed, but my voice was overruled by the chimes of an ancient instrument playing a low, sad tune.

I looked at my hands. The white archive had begun to weave itself around my fingers, but it wasn't cold, high—tech silk anymore. It was pleasantly warm, capturing the warmth of the sand in the Gobi Desert. However, unlike sand, this white silk held strong.

"Director," Lee's voice was barely above a whisper, trembling with terror. "The silk has stopped following our Python code. It's no longer being controlled by the AI chip we inserted; its insides are filled with sand and desert soil. In simpler words, our system is crashing because it can't handle the rich history of the Silk Road."

I watched in a daze as my masterpiece turned against me. The Liquid Crystal Display on my desk shattered; then it began to leak a thick, slimy oil that smelled of pressed olives and ancient herbs. On my brand new monitors, once fresh with 8k resolution, were being overwritten with a pair of pale ghostly hands precisely etching ancient Han characters onto a piece of fine parchment.

No time! The silk was already binding me up to my torso, wrapping around my ankles like a living snare. I tried to pull away, but the floor beneath me was no longer the smooth, solid marble; instead, it had turned into a sinkable, shifting texture of the Gobi desert.

Lee's voice tore through my ear, a final distorted scream before my signal cut.

I looked outside through the dissolving glass of the 128th floor. Shanghai was being submerged by sand. The neon vibe of the 21st century was being overwhelmed by the colossal waves of golden, gleaming sand. The white archive had failed to monitor the world; instead, it had only allowed the past to reclaim it. Through the grit and dust, I saw holograms of merchants, traders, and adventurers leading their camels through the now-buried city. They weren't just passing through it; they were trampling all evidence of the 21st century existence into dust.

The silk now surged over my throat, tasting the ancient salt and bitter pepper. I knew my end was coming. I wasn't the key to a new door. I was the key to looping the 21st century back to the Han Dynasty. As sand filled my lungs and the tower collapsed, I realized the road didn't want me to archive it. Instead, it wanted my silence.

The Bandits And The Merchant

ESF West Island School, Ma, Kyle – 12

A voice asked, “Hello there, I understand you sell some of Li Jin Chen’s famous pottery? I am here to buy one of his pots from his collection of twelve pottery pieces, the “Sleeping Dragons”. He eyed some of the pots on Ming that glistened resplendently on the store owner’s shelf.

“I do have his pots, but the pots you see here are my own pots. My Great grandfather’s pots are held in another location as they are much too valuable to keep here in the open Silk Road. Meet me here again tomorrow afternoon, I’ll bring the pot”. The mysterious man thanked him and said goodbye.

Ming, the shopowner watched people going about their business along the Silk Road. Merchants cheerily carrying their wares, horses loaded with mounds of cargo moving slowly but majestically. As he leaned against the wall of his store, he reflected on how “Ming’s Pottery” was a very successful store, bestowing upon him great wealth but it was never his pots that brought the money. He was happy that his great grandfather’s pots had been passed down to him, but sometimes he wondered if he would be happier and more fulfilled without them.

It was already late, and everyone had gone home. Ming was about to pack up his pots and go back home, but he stopped at the sound of hooves trotting towards him. Three men on horseback pulled up to Ming’s store.

“You! You’re Li Jin Chen’s great grandson, right?” While the masked man was talking, the muscular men started to move closer to Ming’s store. Hesitant to answer, Ming shakily replied with “Y—yes, I am..” The two muscular men had now surrounded Ming. “Tie em up!” the masked man exclaimed. The muscular men ran around him with rope in their hands, Ming struggling to get out and make an escape. The masked man pulled out a sword. “Tell us where the pots are and we can spare you.”

Ming’s eyes widened. “No—no no, p—please, don’t kill me! I have a wife and two children at home, I—I’ll tell you where the pots are, just please let me go!” Ming, hyperventilating, finally gained the courage to speak. “Fine, fine! The pots are at my home, in the basement, located in No. 849, Shihao road! Inside you’ll find a large silver safe, I have the key here with me, take it, it’s in my shirt pocket, just don’t hurt my family!”

The masked man regained his smile. “Thank you, Ming...you’ve been a great help. But alas, we can’t risk you running off to the police and telling them now, can we? Tie him to that pole, boys.” Ming watched as the three men disappeared into the darkness. He struggled and screamed at the same time, but after a half hour he decided to give up.

Ming breathed a long sigh of relief as he saw the shadow turn and start running towards his direction. “Yes!” he muttered under his breath. The shadow belonged to a skinny man who wore red robes and had a long flowing black beard. As he started untying the ropes, Ming explained the whole situation to the man while he finished untying him. The two had a long talk about pots, since they were both pot enthusiasts. Ming found out his name was Chan. Until the man brought up a question. “Those pots are very rare and special! How do you plan on stopping them or getting them back?”

“They may have already taken all the pots from my basement, but the actual Sleeping Dragon collection is not just 12 pots, it’s 13. Long ago, my great grandfather had made 13 pots in total, but he had gifted one of them to his wife, my great grandmother, Ah Ning Chen. After my great grandfather’s passing, my great grandmother passed the pot down to my grandfather. Unfortunately, her son was greedy and sold the pot to a store called “Lang’s Pots” here on the Silk Road for lots of money. No doubt Lang’s Pots has resold the pot to another store, so I am sure the pot has been

resold and resold again then ended up in a completely different place... my great grandmother decided to never talk about the pot again after she was so disgraced by her son. That's why it's not very widely known. ”

Chan's eyes widened in disbelief. “There—there's a 13th Sleeping Dragon pot??? Well.. we have to find it don't we? Can I go with you? Please? I would love to be named one of the people who helped uncover the lost 13th pot!” He grinned at Ming.

Ming's eyes gleamed. “Well! Yes, I was hoping you would say that before I had to ask you! It would be a pleasure and great help if you could accompany me to find the 13th pot. It's not just going to be for one pot though. I am a hundred percent sure that the thieves are on their way to also get the pot. They must have heard about the 13th pot from other sellers and assumed that I had possession of it. Now that they already have my 12 other pots, they are definitely trying to search for the 13th pot. An antique collection is a lot more valuable with a whole set.”

“So... It's a race against thieves, huh?”

“Yes. And the first place we have to find is “Lang's Pots...”

They walked for a few minutes until their eyes captured the tall wooden sign that said “YANGS POTS”. Rushing in, they went to the nearest counter and quickly explained everything. “A long time ago, you had possession of one of the Sleeping Dragon pots, right? Could you tell us where it went?”

The man in the counter wheezed and coughed for a solid ten seconds before he made eye contact with Chan. “The—The Dragon Sleepy, you say?” he stroked his long white beard while thinking. “Yes, I think this shop used to have one. But we were almost out of business so we had to sell it to— to... oh yes. Somebody by the name of “Dao”.

Ming scanned the map. Dao's noodles, Dao family toys...aha! “Dao's Pottery!” It's close!

Chan immediately sprinted out of the shop and towards the location whilst Ming stayed back to thank the man. When Ming arrived at the store, Chan noticed a woman carrying a box of things and coming outside the back door of the shop. He whispered excitedly with all the hope coming back to his body. “That could be the manager!” They asked her whether she had the pot, and like clockwork she told them that they had sold it. “Yeah, a poorer store like us couldn't keep that pot for long. We had to offer a lot of money to get it in the first place. Sold it to Zheng's Pots and Vases a while ago.”

“Thank you!” they yelled as they started running. They had to jostle their way through a crowd to get to the store. There it was. “Zheng's Pots and Vases.”

Ming noticed something inside the store. “Is that...” He mumbled. “Are those ... the thieves who robbed my store!?” he hollered. Chan gasped. “Those are the men who stole your pots?”

Before they could do anything risky, Chinese guards surrounded the perimeter. “Lee Zheng Chi, the notorious thief! We have surrounded you. Come out with your arms up and leave your weapons behind! The captain yelled.

The next scene was glorious for Ming to experience. The masked men and the two muscular men refused to go outside, so the guards stormed inside and made an arrest. The masked man hung his head in shame while the guards dragged him out of the store. He turned his head to Ming and gave him a stare like none Ming had ever seen. It was the most angry and threatening stare anyone could ever give.

One of the guards walked to Ming and handed him a bag of his pots. “Here, we believe this belongs to you.” The guard beamed at Ming. “Take good care of them. They are one of a kind collection!” Chan and Ming could not be more grateful. “Thank you so much sir! If you don’t mind me saying, there’s one more pot inside that store that we need...”

Back in Ming’s store, Chan had become co-owner and they decided to display all of the Sleeping Dragon pieces on display. Ming admitted that most of the reason he didn’t display them in the first place was because he really didn’t like them and he felt like he was always in the shadow of his great grandfather. Right next to the Sleeping Dragon collection was another collection of 13 pots, all his own work – right underneath them was a shiny silver plate. It said: “Dragons Awakening”.

Echoes of the Silk Road

ESF West Island School, Misra, Yana – 12

The wind of Gansu Province blew through my ebony waist length hair as I snaked up the winding path of the mountain range. Each tree seemed to whisper forgotten secrets, the howling of the wind telling me to turn back, back home, back to safety. Yet—what was home anymore? No feeling of warmth, no feeling of comfort, no feeling except that of grief. It felt like I was constantly trying not to drown, constantly fighting my brain to stay afloat, sometimes I wish to just give in to the stifling feeling of grief and let it pull me under just to escape this never ending fight. It weighed heavily on my heart. I know that what I was doing was wrong, my mother and sister would likely have to get common jobs in the marketplace now that neither me nor my father would be there to supply them.

I adjusted my pack on my back, a meager collection of essentials that I hoped would last a month. I cringe as I realise that I should have come better prepared, the cold bites into my skin while I trudge up the path. Soon I reached the infamous silk road, from here I could see the village of Yangling, the only place I had ever called home. The population only consisted of around a few thousand residents, each one intertwined with memories and stories. Growing up I had heard tales about the silk road and the wonders beyond Xi'an by travelling tradesmen. It sparked a fire inside me, a burning blaze, which led me to embark on a tortuous journey to Jiayuguan, a daunting 800 kilometers to the west. It would take about 20 days by horseback.

Before I could set off I would have to secure my method of transportation, so I walked toward the rocks on the far side of the horse stables. I would steal a horse come dusk. Letting the night conceal my actions.

Three or so hours later the sun had fully set and the managers of the stable had gone home, leaving me with an optimal time period to execute my plan. The front door was undoubtedly locked and any attempt to tamper with the lock would alert the manager next door.

Instead I scaled the roof soundlessly, flashes of my father teaching me to scale a roof when I was seven or eight, I could almost hear his encouragement as I entered the stable through a small emergency hatch embedded in the roof. A tsunami of emotions threatened to submerge me fully. The weight of loss, regret, and guilt crashed over me, each wave more powerful than the last I had left my mother and sister to fend for themselves. My mother was a mere seamstress but my sister, she was just a child, eleven years of age. She was five years younger than me, five years of less experience. She had yet to experience the cruelty of the real world, and here I was just throwing her to the wolves. The wooden walls of the stable pressed against my back as a wave of heaving sobs escaped me.

I gave myself a brief second to collect myself, I should be at least ten kilometres from this dreaded town come dawn.

I briskly choose a brawny looking steed. I stuffed some grains and a couple of apples into my pack to give to the horse. After saddling him, I set off.

The sun rose above the horizon about four hours after I left the stables, I had easily done about 20 kilometres by now. However, the situation at hand had left me a bit perplexed, when the traveling tradesmen had described the silk road, He said it was filled with colour and patterns, a vibrant place, as you traveled along this network of routes, you would find yourself completely engrossed in the sounds, colors and sensations. On the other hand, other than the occasional piece of garbage on the road, I had yet to see any evidence of civilization. Of course there was the fact that we had better modes of transport but I hadn't expected it to be so utterly stagnant.

After about 10 more kilometres, I decided to take a break at a serene lake, its tranquil waters lazily lapping at the shore. My horse looked quite weary-eyed and in need of rest so I left him at the edge of the lake and I explored the surrounding areas of the lake.

The lake seemed to be in the middle of an overgrown forest, the lush trees blocking any sunlight from entering the forest. As I trekked further into the forest I noticed the outline of a structure, glimmering in the sunlight. After a few more minutes I managed to reach the structure, it seemed to be a manor of some sort. The once-grand structure is now cloaked in layers of ivy, The roof, sagging under the weight of years, is partially caved in, The massive door creaks with the wind, as if it's trying to convey something. On the side there is a garden, once it was undoubtedly a majestic, vibrant place, however now it lays weed-infested, all the flowers had withered and died a long time ago, leaving a garden devoid of life.

I step inside the manor, the portraits on the walls are peeling, they seem to be of another era, a once vibrant location left behind in history. I walk down a pathway of memories. I can hear the wind whistling hurriedly behind me, as if it's telling me to turn back. There is an invisible force, a spell of some sort, pulling me further Inside the house, i am no longer in control of my own body. It feels like I am in a fever dream, I am present but not in control. I watch as my own body betrays me and leads to my impending doom.

I halt outside a mahogany door, in contrast to the rest of the house, it seems to be the only place which remains unaffected by time. I push the door open, there before me stands, a real human being. I blink in surprise. “ Hello, I have been expecting you” He says, my jaw drops, “ Wh-Why?” I manage to sputter out. “ We don’t have a lot of time, you must listen to me, everything you have been told is a li-” Before he can finish, a force sweeps him up into the air , and he disappears into thin air, taking the entire house with him.

I now stand in the middle of a clearing where the house used to be, I whip around, stunned. Then I run, faster than the speed of light, I arrive at the lake, I saddle the horse in the blink of an eye. As if the horse understands my panic, he starts galloping speedily forward. I must get away from this paranormal sight. Something nags at me, deep inside I sense that there is some truth to the man's words, something uncanny is going on, on China’s silk road.

After a day of traveling non-stop, my horse had slowed down significantly, he was exhausted and desperately needed rest. We stopped at the side of the road where there was yet another lake, this time the waters were ink-black and still, however the water seemed safe to drink. I went to the outskirts of the surrounding forest to scavenge for food for the horse as we had almost run out. At this point we were at least 100 kilometres away from Yangling.

Dusk had arrived and the roads were not safe to travel on in the dark, so I decided to spend the night at this location. The fire I made illuminated the lake, the fire dancing across still waters. As I studied the waters, I noticed something in the reflection, the shadow of a standing figure. I slowly turned around, there was the man, however this time something was different about him, something ominous, something wicked, something dangerous. He beckoned me closer, like before, my body with a will of its own. He took my hand, and then faster than a bullet from a gun. We were in a castle. The walls were Marble-clad, it was truly Grandiose. Opulent chandeliers were hanging from the ceiling, every detail was ornate, the Gilded thrones were shimmering in light making it look spellbinding. There were tapestries displayed on the walls, each one containing a story woven by hand. Depicting dragons. On a closer look all the stories seemed to be about humans and dragons. A tragic tale of bloodshed and egotistical humans.

The door cracked open, literally, it split open. An enormous dragon flew in, its ruby red scales blazed like a fire with the light reflecting off it. Then, I understood, everything I had been told was a lie, marine travel was not a cheaper option, it was the only option. For hundreds of years humans and dragons had an agreement, as long as humans supplied them with food they would leave them alone, but recently, the humans had become greedy, they didn't want to waste their resources on these dragons, so the dragons had decided to claim the silk road as their own, and now the silent disagreement was about to turn to war...

The Silk Road

ESF West Island School, Pantano, Lucas – 11

The Silk Road – the winding trail of merchants, burglars, and many adventurous yet intriguing stories. Some might narrate the merchants carefully moving through shadows to avoid the plight of lurking thieves, while others tell of wondrous discoveries and the positive and negative impacts of the fascinating exchanges taking place each day. The Silk Road was a massive connector between civilizations – it allowed Europe and Asia to trade many items such as flavorful spices, pure green jade, and, obviously, silk. However, to fully understand how countries were able to swap all these items that were completely new to them, we must explore the life of a merchant travelling on the Silk Road – the core artery of the cultural exchange.

As a merchant, you'd be forced to get up before the break of dawn, where the desert was dark as coal, and cold enough to sting your lungs. You'd scramble your worn-out tent and put out the burning embers of the fire that had served as a warming blanket against the chill of night. Each day was filled with a long period of travel, but also a chance for fortune pitted against the threat of being robbed or overwhelmed by the elements and facing sudden destitution. Death was not out of the question. But as soon as the caravan was ready, you'd climb aboard your camel and make your way through a desert as vast as an endless tarpaulin while the sun slowly rode its own golden camel from the edge of the horizon to the center of the sky.

It's midday, and the sun is high. The heavy piles of jade and woven silk lie heavily on your sullen camel, its big, soft, circular lips chewing air from side to side. Nevertheless, you push along the trail with the windless heat scorching your back. When an occasional nomadic gust shoots across the desert, it is more like a whip than a caress. The lumpy sand shifts and sinks, testing your balance in every step of your journey that is so long that reality becomes almost a dreamstate, and you wonder if you are really here in this surreal landscape of endless promises of gold that turn into the broken promises of sand. However, despite the hardships, the heat isn't the worst part of your journey. It's the stillness. The suspicion that the desert is a phantom glaring at you in stoic silence. It is a relief to discover that you are not alone after all. Occasionally, you pass caravans heading the other way; now you know why they call this sandy expanse 'The Silk Road', and there is much commerce, yet the trail today remains eerily silent, as if death itself were tiptoeing towards you. No small talk is made, as the only result of speech is thirst. Your caravan trudges forward, all thinking of one thing – **water**.

Fortunately, your caravan finds the most fortuitous sanctuary any merchant could wish for – an 'oasis', which is to say, a makeshift trading post where water and other vital provisions can be replenished. These are practically your lifelines on the Silk Road; a thriving place in the desert requires much maintenance, yet if you are lucky, you can find anything a merchant could ask for – water, food, and specific directions to the bustling towns that await you where the desert finally leaves off, and where trade thrives. Your caravan unpacks and soaks in a view that contrasts with the dull, lifeless dunes that surround you; it is even possible to envision a deep blue lake filled with fresh water, greenery, and intense civilization. But in the desert, you must be careful about mistaking a mirage for an oasis; it happens when thirst and starvation begin to create fanciful delusions.

Your caravan stays for two days. On the first day, you settle the caravan down and get water and food. Later on, you take a short respite due to a long period of travelling, before having an evening dinner with other traders in the area. You have arrived at last. Around you, the torchlights proclaim the city. At around 8 p.m., your caravan heads to bed to prepare for a day of trade tomorrow.

You wake at 3 a.m. to start the negotiations. Half awake, you drag your body into the crowded streets. You can already see traders arguing over prices and weighing goods. "I need the extra 10% to cover the cost of danger," one says. "Well, that is far too much to expect for only one pound of silk," the other snaps back. Their bickering is

nothing new to you. Every caravan — as well as yours — fights for even a small margin such as that. You know why: only a fool would travel the whole route — it is far too long and far too deadly. That's why merchants use a system called relay trade. You buy a pound of silk at one oasis, carry it for a few days, and then sell it to the next caravan for a small profit. They'll take it further along the trail, passing it from stop to stop until it finally reaches the European cities where the prices are astronomical.

You are very joyful as you head back to China, and your caravan has made a good profit. Your success lifts your mood and sustains you on the long journey home — but so does crime and danger. You've won the battle today, but not yet the war. At dawn, your caravan heads warily back into the dunes, hoping for a safe journey. After a long day of walking, you set up camp for the night. You're chatting with others, discussing money and your imminent reunion with your loved ones. All is well.

Earlier, you even saw the moon rising over the desert like a pearl. It confirmed you in your optimism. But then the moon disappeared, and you hear something, something big, but when you tell the crew, they joke about it. In the distance, you see something ominous. At first, you think it's bandits, but then it starts growing larger and larger until it finally dawns on you what it is. The caravan notices, and panic fills their eyes. As they try to collect what they had earned and fill their bags, mountains of sand rush towards them — and you — like a marauding army unlike any you've ever seen before — and it's not long before your caravan starts frantically retreating, leaving behind all the profit they gained to be consumed by the sand.

Fortunately, most of you escape, though some of the names you call out for in the darkness do not answer. Everything your clan had — money, water, and food — is gone. With nothing left, dehydration sets in, and the journey becomes not a search for profit but a desperate battle for survival. There is not a single oasis along the parched and arid way.

A Letter of Love

ESF West Island School, Pantano, Valerie – 13

Dear Qingmei

My darling, I haven't gone a day without worrying about you and our daughter ever since I set out on my journey along the Silk Road. I hope you are managing fine at home in Xi'an. Do you have enough to eat? Is Xiaotian doing well in school? I promise I'll visit you soon, when I have traded enough to make this trip worthwhile.

I am writing from a post in Tibet. One of the merchants I have met here supposedly knows a man who runs an unofficial postal service. He has agreed to ensure that this letter is delivered to you in exchange for five kilograms of my brick tea. Though I cannot be certain he will keep his word, it is the only way I can reach you.

I know you must be just as concerned about my well-being as I am about yours, so I'm pleased to tell you that I am doing quite well now. However, I cannot say the same for the situation I found myself in when I first began my journey. We were underprepared, and I have never known such cruel weather. The raging sandstorms tore at our eyes and noses, and there were a few times when we couldn't see our own hands in front of our faces because the relentless sheets of sand kept blinding us. Our reward for all our endurance was cracked lips and bleeding hands. The stench of our sweat would fill the air during the burning afternoons, but it would soon become a stinging sensation in our nostrils from the cold of the night.

The lack of food was another constant problem. Our twenty donkeys and camels could only carry so much, and with ten merchants to feed, our supplies drained fast. After only a day or two, my co-leader and best friend, Jianhao, and I decided that a rationing system would have to be implemented. We limited ourselves to a small bowl of millet congee in the morning and another at night. Occasionally, we would find a small village to trade for more nutritious food such as goat meat and fresh fruit, but it was little compared to what our ten rumbling stomachs cried for. As they shrank, we learned to stifle hunger better, but those first two weeks were horrible. It took a lot of coaxing, pleading, and one strong motivational speech from Jianhao to prevent the others from turning back.

Eventually, things started to improve. As we traveled further west, we came across more merchants who were willing to trade. Our first one was with a Persian caravan that had come in search of Chinese goods to bring back to their homelands. Everything about them was quite strange but admirable in a way. Their men were dressed in long, flowing robes and curious turbans the color of berries, with gold trinkets jingling on their necks and wrists. Their camels were adorned similarly, with bright saddlebags heaped upon their backs and bells fastened around their legs. The men shouted in an alien language and laughed boisterously, forming a chorus with the jingling of the accessories and the thudding hoofsteps of the camels. Long before we even saw them, an unfamiliar but pleasant aroma of unique spices, incense, leather, and camel had reached us.

We all froze simultaneously, each of us staring at the other party. Did they possess weapons? Were they thieves disguised as merchants? Did they carry a rare disease? We carefully sent our translator to introduce ourselves to them. Looking back on it, bringing a translator was one of the smartest things we did. Without him, I doubt we could have made many trades. Luckily, they seemed to be quite hospitable towards him. They proposed that both parties examine each other's goods before deciding on anything. We agreed, but not before making sure our translator and our strongest merchant were guarding our caravan well.

When I opened their first chest, I was astonished by the beauty of the items. It was hard to keep an impassive expression, since we would be at a disadvantage if they knew how impressed we were. Piles of shining jewelry, all of different sizes, colors, and shapes. In a section to the left, a series of small, coloured-glass bottles and beads lay in a cushioning of shredded leaves. Not ceramics or bronze, but coloured glass! Can you believe it? Some

even had flowers painted onto the surface. They would easily be considered a luxury item back at home; I could probably sell them for a few silk bolts. The goods were enveloped in a peppery smell which seemed to be coming from a fabric pouch in the corner of the chest. The cooks and apothecaries you list among your friends might be willing to pay well for that unique spice.

The Persian merchants were equally intrigued by our caravan. They were smiling like children as they ran their fingers through our fine silk bolts. “Straight from the mulberry farms of Xi’an,” our translator told them, and they all nodded excitedly in response. One tapped his knuckle against our ceramic bowls, and as they quietly listened to the ring it emitted, they began to converse with animation among themselves.

We moved on to the next camel, which had rolled-up carpets tied to its body. When we unraveled the first one, our jaws simultaneously dropped in amazement. It was a good thing the Persians had their backs to us. They had somehow sewn into the woollen fabric an image as detailed as the paintings that hang in our living rooms. Over the rich blue background, an enormous bird with extravagant feathers of red, purple, and gold was perched upon a high mountain peak. In its wings lay a small child wrapped in a blanket, who was sleeping peacefully. The bird cradled it gently, its eyes shining with warmth. I knew from the moment I laid my eyes on it that this was what I needed from them the most. The fabric was of very high quality, and I have heard the traders further west in Gansu really appreciate artwork.

When we turned to face them, they were already holding up one of my bricks of tea. I asked our translator to inform them that we were willing to trade for the rug. After a relatively long discussion between him and the Persian merchants, we learned that the picture was actually showing one of their myths. They believe that this bird (I think they call it a Simurgh) rescued an abandoned child, and later helped deliver his son, who went on to become a great hero. I didn’t realize that the rug had such a beautiful meaning behind it as well. The merchants also praised our tea, saying that it smelled among the best that they had tried. I knew that the remedies from home were hard to surpass.

We negotiated back and forth for a long time. There was a moment during the bargaining where the Persians started to shout over some passing disagreement, but Jianhao managed to de-escalate the tension, and soon it was all smiles again. If we thought they were asking for too much, I would simply threaten to leave, a tactic I learned from watching you bargain in the night markets, Qingmei. Finally, we agreed to give them seven kilos of our brick tea and one of our silk bolts in exchange for the rug, four colored glass bottles, and a few pieces of jewelry.

Before we parted, Jianhao thought it wise to ask for advice on the journey ahead, since they had been travelling for a long time. After reminding them of the value of the silk we gave them, they told us which merchant towns sold good-quality food cheaply, which trading posts we were likely to make a profit at, and even a couple of tricks on how to protect our caravan from bad weather. In return, we briefed them on how to guard against trickery and fake products and where to find the water and food sources that we had passed on our way here. With this new information, we were able to continue our journey with much less difficulty than before. After wishing each other safe travels, we marched forward, our hearts filled with the satisfaction of making our first real trade.

I would love to tell you more, but I can’t keep my men waiting forever. We plan to continue riding until we reach Persia, where we should meet even more merchants like them who are eager for what we have to offer. Here in Tibet is also a good spot, because the local merchants want tea to trade with the Indians. I’ll write to you again as soon as I get the chance. In the meantime, make sure you and Xiaotian eat enough, and please don’t worry too much about me. I can assure you that I am safe, and I’ll be back before you know it.

With love,

Huanyu Wang

Travels Through Dreams

ESF West Island School, Wan, Daniel – 12

Sand blew in all directions as Marco followed his father, Niccolò, and his uncle, Maffeo, across the endless dunes which stretched on and on. The wind howled in his ears, carrying tiny grains that flew at him, piercing his eyes and scraping against his skin. Above them, the sun burned fiercely onto their backs, turning the air into a shimmering wave of heat. The camels moved on, their backs carrying their riders and oil, as Kublai Khan requested from Niccolò and Maffeo when they first travelled to Khanbaliq.

They had already been stuck in the Gobi Desert for numerous days, and the barren sky stretched above them as grains of sand flew wildly around. Evil spirits were thought to roam in the desert, finding lost travellers from their group and calling out their names to lure them further away.

All three of them were starving and desperately needed water; they knew they had to escape the harsh desert before their strength gave out completely. The blazing sun beat down on their backs, a constant reminder of their struggle, while the footprints of their camels disappeared as soon as they were made, swept away by the shifting sands that danced in the wind. Each moment felt like an eternity, the heat wrapping around them like a heavy blanket, pushing them to keep moving in search of safety.

“How much farther do you think we need to go?” Marco asked, squinting into the endless dunes.

“Not much further,” his father, Niccolò, grunted, shifting the heavy pack on his shoulders as his camel kept walking on.

They trekked on, the winds threatening to blow them off their camels. As they were about to think that they would never escape the vast sea of sand, up ahead they could make out the shapes of people. Urging their camels on, they could see a wall behind them; the people seemed to be guarding the wall.

“That is Suzhou,” Maffeo told Marco, catching up to him.

“Who are you? Where have you come from, and why are you here?” one of the guards demanded,

“We are from Venice, I am Niccolò, and we have come back from Venice with oil for Kublai Khan, as he requested of us,” Marco’s father replied calmly. The guard opened the gates into the city. “We’ll notify the Great Khan,” he told the travellers. The other guard led them through the city past all sorts of shops, racks filled with fruit of all sorts of colours, fish swimming in glass boxes, and a butcher with all kinds of meat hanging from ropes.

As they crossed a bridge over a river, Marco marvelled at the sight of the boats gliding silently on the river. The area had canal systems and stone bridges, just like those back in Venice. The area seemed to be full of people trading; silk was seen in every direction Marco looked.

They were brought into a small but tidy house,

“You’ll stay here until the Great Khan’s escort comes.” the guard informed them, Niccolò nodded, and they put down their items and settled in for some sleep.

Morning came, and the three travellers woke to fruits and meats on a table. Having been starved for all their time through the Gobi Desert, they wolfed it down hungrily. Suddenly, the door opened, and a guard stepped in.

“The escort will be arriving soon,” he informed them.

Maffeo nodded, a flicker of excitement appearing in his tired features. Marco, amazed by the city’s canals and bridges, spent the rest of the day exploring the city. He wandered through crowded streets and narrow alleys, then made his way down to the river. There, he walked along the road beside it, watching boats glide silently along the river—barges piled high with goods, slim fishing craft, and elegant vessels with bright banners fluttering in the breeze. The gentle slap of water against the hulls and the low murmur of voices followed him as he went.

A guard walked towards him, his steps sounding against the stone tiles.

“The escort is here, follow me,” he told him. Marco nodded and followed him through the busy streets back to the house. Turning one final corner, he saw that his father and uncle were already on a chariot, all their belongings behind them. Marco climbed aboard, and they set off toward Shangtu.

Upon arriving at Kublai Khan’s palace, they were led into a grand chamber filled with gold. A red carpet stretched out before them like a road of fire. Their eyes followed the trail up to a throne where Kublai Khan sat.

“Niccolò, Maffeo,” he said. Then, turning to Marco, he asked, “Who is this?”

“He is my son,” Niccolò answered.

They went on to recount their challenging journey back to Venice and the long trek to Kublai’s palace, sharing tales of the diverse people they had encountered along the way—each one a thread in the complex story of journey, some offering shelter in times of need, others sharing food and wisdom that kept their spirits alive. The Great Khan listened intently, his eyes narrowing with interest and admiration. After hearing their story, he smiled broadly and declared, “I will reward you for your invaluable assistance. I have abundant jade and silk ready for you to take home, treasures that will honor your bravery and the friendship you forged during your journey.”

Bags were brought into the room, and Marco’s eyes shone at the sight of the treasures before him. They gleamed in the light, revealing gold coins and silks in splendid colors, making his heart race with excitement. Suddenly, he felt something wet on his face. Jolting awake, he found himself back in his own room, and his dog, Ferrari, licking him awake with vigorous affection. The magnificent journey had been nothing more than a dream.

With a sign, Marco remembered that he still had math homework to finish, the reality of his responsibility settling in. Though the adventure lingered in his mind like a whisper, he knew there were equations to solve before he could chase any more dreams.

A Journey of Silk

ESF West Island School, Wang, Allison – 11

“Hunan! Hurry up!” yelled the father as they dragged two huge boxes of crates along the wet gravel floor. Rain fell and pattered annoyingly at the workers and traders of the Silk Road.

“Papa, I’m too tired,” said Hunan, flopping on the ground in a pool of sweat.

“Nonsense, Hunan,” he replied, continuing to drag the crate along. “When I was your age, I had to carry the crates on my back all the way to the traders! Now come along!” He nonchalantly whipped his silk black scarf wrapped around his neck.

“*Okay*, I’m coming,” she said, wiping her sweaty forehead with the torn sleeve of her shirt.

“That’s the spirit,” her father grunted, and he expertly fastened the ropes so the box didn’t slide out.

“It’s beautiful, isn’t it,” murmured the father. He gazed around the beautiful scenery of trees, grass and flowing water.

“What’s this, Papa?” Hunan asked, as curiosity filled her.

“The Silk Road, daughter of mine,” he replied gently. “A huge trade route for us. It’s where we get.”

“But... how?” she asked once more.

“You will understand when you are a bit older,” he said, before turning away to collect another crate. Hunan skipped behind, regaining her energy.

They walked through the gravel ground and into the deserts, where tons and tons of boxes were being carried by tons and tons of workers.

“Huang!” yelled another man, his clothes drenched with sweat and rain.

“Zhi! Good to see you,” he called back, wiping his face. “Shen got the camels this month. Maybe next month we’ll get them!”

“Ha! I bet,” he replied before heading back to his boxes. Hunan and her father continued, using the ropes to drag it along faster through the fine golden sand. As wind blew up, yellow speckles flew into the air, blinding the girl.

Hunan desperately tried to blow it out before giving up and brushing it out with her hands. Her father, on the other hand, simply kept walking.

A minute later, Hunan’s strength was all gone. Her hands cramped up and her legs felt weak. She leaned against the box, exhausted.

“Papa?”

“What now?” he replied in an annoyed tone, turning his head round to peer at her.

“I’m really tired. Can we rest?”

“Oh, please. This is nothing,” he replied, but accepted. “Two minutes,” he said, sitting on the crate as other workers passed all around them, like moving mountains.

Hunan took this precious chance and sat down as well, brushing dirt and hair out of her eyes and batting away bugs. She gulped water from the ropes in the bottom of the crate.

“Easy now,” said her father (also known as Huang), as he removed the water bottle from her lips.

“You don’t want to need to use the toilet in this crowd,” he said, smirking.

Hunan raised her eyebrows quizzically. Then she shrugged and put the bottle down before grabbing hold of the ropes.

“Come on, just a couple miles and there’ll be a lake to top up,” mumbled Huang, tying the ropes to his shoulders and across his chest. He looped the end around his neck and then began walking.

Fine grains sifted through their feet, drenching their feet in a wonderful beige.

The day grew incredibly hot, the angry sun blazing bright orange above them. Hunan’s face went pinkish red. In the distance, amber sands seemed to be blowing, but Hunan’s eyesight wasn’t sharp, so she ignored it, telling herself it was probably more sand hills. Workers and camels began rushing away, but perhaps the lake was already near so they could fetch water. Hunan shrugged.

“Huang!” yelled Zhi from across the desert, in a sudden manner. A huge sandstorm began blowing by as grains flew. The sun was blocked by showering sand as Hunan attempted to brace herself, debris of dry plants and rocks flying around.

“Hunan!” shouted her father, blinded by the dirt. “Go on! I will catch up to you with the box! *Go!*”

Hunan heard the words and raced out of the storm. Wind pushed her aside and pebbles smacked at her face, but she continued to run.

“Whoo!” she exclaimed as she escaped the storm, and the sand calmed. She found a huge rock providing cool shade and sat down, waiting for her father to come out.

The storm passed. It blew over the high mountains and stopped, the grains of sand dropping to the desert as if nothing had happened.

The blazing sun turned into a shiny silver crescent moon, but Hunan waited impatiently for her father. She tossed pebbles into a nearby water pool, where ripples danced along the water.

“Father!” she yelled, tears streaming down her face. “Where are you?”

Restless, Hunan got up and began running toward where the sandstorm had been. The silence hung in the air like mist as rain began pattering down once more. Despite the rain and the gray clouds gathering, she ran. Eventually she stumbled upon a box. Tied with fraying ropes. And a black silk scarf.

Hunan broke down into tears. She collapsed on the floor of the sand, sending a small shockwave of sand all over.

“Father,” she whispered to herself in the quiet chirp of the crickets. “Please. *Please.*”

And so, in order to finish her mission, Hunan dragged the box further and further down, wrapping the magical bond of her father’s silk scarf around her neck. In rain or shine, snow or mist— she walked through the treacherous lands. Her eyes blurred and her back ached, but powered through.

In desperation, Hunan brought the crate all the way to the mountains, through the Gobi Desert and through the pain of her loss. The temple, where everything was traded in for huge amounts of money. As if money could compare to her father. But Hunan knew her father would want it for her, so she continued to walk towards the colossal mountains ahead.

Buried amongst the tall forest trees, a small mountain path unraveled. Hunan walked for hours, through muddy patches and rotting vegetation, just to trade in. The box was looking not its best now, with many holes.

Hunan herself was grubby and her face was dirty. She was older now. Taller. More mature. It had been months since she’d lost her father— and almost two years since she left.

As the temple grew bigger in her eyes, she saw the golden tip of the huge tower. The bright colored varnishes and navy touches sparkled in the yellow sunlight as the dazzling temple flashed before her. Hundreds of people were walking inside, exhausted from the journey.

Just as Hunan was about to walk in the comforting golden doors, she heard something. Again and again.

A distant voice yelled, “Hunan!”

Hunan whipped around, her long black hair flying. She dropped her crate and the ropes snapped, but that was the least of her worries right then. She saw a figure running to her.

“Father...?” she whispered, confused. Then she understood.

“Hunan!” he shouted, running over. Hunan excitedly began racing, her heart pounding in her chest. Her feet lifted her from the ground and down again, as the warmth of the sunlight embraced her. Hunan closed her eyes, free from the journey.

The two touched. Her father’s dark eyes looked into hers lovingly. His hair was grayish and his wrinkles creased up— but they hugged for a long time. Two people separated for eight months. Reunited.

“Where did you go, Father?” she asked, silvery tears washing her grimy face.

“The storm brought me away,” he said, stroking her hair softly. “When I saw you wearing that black scarf, I knew it was you.”

Hunan looked down for a moment at the silky scarf hanging around her neck. It was still smooth and uncreased, shinier than ever.

“Look in the box,” said Huang. He tapped the lid gently, making a rattly noise.

“What?”

“Look in the box,” he repeated, smiling.

Hunan, with trembling fingers, opened the box. Inside was silk. Just fifty kilograms of pure pearly-white silk.

“You see,” said Huang, “Your mother died before you were born. She used the finest silk she could find, spun by the rarest *cán* in the country. She wove this scarf and dyed it with the finest squid ink. I hung it from the mountains to be nibbled away by the most beautiful butterflies— and this scarf, it never fades. Never.”

“So...?” asked Hunan, whose curiosity had won over.

“It described her love,” he said. “Never fading, even when she died. I was devastated, but... the scarf saved it and kept it safe.”

Hunan was stunned by this beautiful connection. She smiled at her father.

“Let’s go in,” she said, gesturing to the temple. More people flowed inside with crates.

“Yes, let’s,” he replied, tying his leather belt to the box. They, together, dragged it into the temple’s jade floors.

“I’d like to trade this silk...” said Huang, his voice fading into silence.

“Yes,” interrupted Hunan. “The very best silk.”

What if The Silk Road Was Recreated in Minecraft?

ESF West Island School, Wong, Olivia – 11

As I clear away all the litter and junk from my desk, I finally find it. Beneath all the debris, I uncover a map of the Silk Road. Known to have been the olden times network, the Silk Road was actually tons of routes, stretching all the way from Europe to China. From Italy to Iraq to Afghanistan, it was approximately 4,000 miles long, stretching through ice cold temperatures and boiling deserts. The silk road wasn't actually being used for trading silk. The most common trade made was the trade of horses. Back then, the silk road was used for exchange and interaction, even spreading the black death along, which I personally thought was quite cool. When I spawned, I knew that I was destined to be an explorer. The endless biomes and un-looted villages and desert temples sat there, waiting for me. It was enough to drive any player mad. The only problem was that I needed to have a sufficient amount of food and an even larger amount of drinkable water. I owned 3 llamas, obtained by killing the wandering traders who had owned them previously. But even llamas had their limit. I looked through my study room's windows. It looked like the weather was going to be quite pleasant, and there were no hostile mobs in sight.

I sighed. I only had one set of iron armour and an iron sword. I planned to set off tomorrow morning, but I had to gather the necessary materials to go on this perilous journey. First, I used my sword to kill animals and cook their meat. Cows, chickens, sheep, pigs, anything that I could eat went right into my furnace. While my furnaces were smelting, I headed down to the nearest cave and went to get extra coal. You never know how much meat you can eat! By the time I finished killing all the mobs in sight, I had gathered stacks and stacks of steak, cooked porkchop, cooked mutton, and cooked chicken. I packed all of it in Steve, my only brown llama. I then went to my ranch, but noticed the sun was setting quite quickly.

I guess goodnight for now!

Sleeping through the night

Me again! This morning I sprinted to my ranch and removed all the crops, packing them into Coco, a white llama with quite a temper. Overall, I had collected an overwhelming number of crops, as my farm was vast and had a good water source..Satisfied with my items, I now proceeded to gather sand. After gathering the sand, I could smelt them to make glass and craft glass bottles. The last step was filling the bottles with water. I sprinted down to the beach, armed with my enchanted golden shovel I had found in an abandoned nether portal's chest. Digging the sand, I felt a hint of annoyance. I was supposed to go on my adventure today, but I had underestimated how short an average day was. I started digging feverishly, sprinting back to base while eating steak, my pockets full of piles and piles of sand. After getting all the sand into my large chest, I mined down into the earth and came back with lots of cobblestone. After crafting the furnaces, I studied the map a bit more, while my house was alight with the golden glow of the furnaces turning the sand to glass.

A long while later...

The glass bottles are finally ready! I sprinted down to the ocean and managed to fill 64 bottles before sunset. I chugged one bottle down and lay on my comfy red bed.

Sleeping through the night

I awoke to a creeper trampling on my farm. It wasn't great, as it exploded and dealt damage to three of my health points! Anyway, I filled all my bottles with water and packed them all in Lenoph, my other white llama with the

biggest storage. I said a last goodbye to my base and grabbed my leashes. Leashing my llamas, I set off on one of the biggest journeys in my career.

Two years later...

Wooooooooooooohh!!

The desert wind whistled in my ears as I walked on my blistered feet. My armour was now a shapeless blob of iron, with a fifth of hp left. My hunger bar shook, the chicken legs outlined by a sickly green because I had eaten some rotten flesh the night before. I was now in the Hami region in Xinjiang, China. It was a part of the Gobi desert, and it was fascinating to look at. It had stark, vast landscapes, and even a ghost city in Wubao! I coughed up some sand and carried on. I had never liked the desert. It had sand storms, rabbits, no water, and cactus. My food was going down in numbers quite severely, and there was a chance I could get raw rabbit meat, but the rabbits were fast and ran away when you got too close. Occasionally you would come across a desert temple, but my inventory was full and I didn't have the material to craft bundles. Even my llamas were beginning to slow down due to so much weight. Fortunately, desert temples pretty much have the same loot. The usual string, gold ingots, iron ingots, horse armour, or rotten flesh. An even rarer form of loot is diamonds, which chests usually don't have as much of. After walking for a while, I then came across a village. It gave an innocent vibe, and everyone was chatting about the latest gossip or family matters. Wandering traders and local villagers bartered with each other for the latest robe, or to stock up their beetroot supply with the farmer.

"Hello. Are you new to China? I've never seen you in these parts of Asia before. But of course we have tourists now and then." someone behind me exclaimed.

A tall old man stood behind me. He wore colourful robes just like everyone else and had sparkling dark brown eyes. I introduced myself and told him that I was journeying along the silk road, going to a place called Cathay. He then beckoned me into a shabby looking straw-wood house, with an amused smile on his face.

The villager's story

In the hut, he told me that he himself was just like me twenty years ago, picturing himself as a brave and fierce explorer. He had planned the journey for years, traveling to Cathay and meeting Kublai Khan, the emperor of the Yuan dynasty. He had had four llamas, each with around ten slots for storage. He had killed tons of rabbits and even some cows and pigs from the plains. He had dug the sand around the village to make glass bottles and traveled quite a far distance to fill them up with water. He then set off on a journey that could make him one of the most well-known explorers of his time! On the journey, he had ventured through the cold temperatures and the deserts with the most boiling sun. Halfway through, he realised that his food and water stock was low, as he had underestimated the difficulty and length of the journey. Yes, he had stopped in a couple villages, but the villagers there needed something in return for the food(trading), and he couldn't give the supplies in his llamas to them because he needed it for the journey. He could taste the defeat of failure like how a player could smell a splash potion of decay. He arrived to find a famine had arrived upon Hami, and he had to share his food with the villagers until it was over. What a famine it was! He saw people begin to get thin, beg on the doorsteps of neighbours in an attempt to get food, weakened immune systems, and sometimes even death. With everyone worrying about the famine, people's homes started to go into disrepair, cobwebs spawned, and furnaces were no longer used. Along with that, there were the usual nighttime dangers, such as husks and parched. Their iron golem started showing cracks each day, only to be replaced by even more the next night.

Then one day, he cried out in delight, as his farm had two fully grown wheat crops. It wasn't enough, but it gave him hope. He gave the farm the best fertiliser and the cleanest water he could, and even had to build a two block high fence to keep out the crowd and the foxes who stole his sweet berries. Every week, he harvested the food and gave it to people. Slowly but surely, the town soon began to thrive again. People came to his house everyday to offer gifts in exchange for their lives. They called him "Baatar", a phrase in mongolian meaning "Hero".

But he was never satisfied. No matter how many gifts he got, he always wanted to go and experience Cathay. Even if he died trying.

After hearing the old explorer's story, I felt even more determined to get to Cathay and trade with the Chinese for their jade and silk. He tried to make me go back, but I wouldn't let him.

I laid my bed and slept, dreaming about the silk and the stories that I would come back with.

Sleeping through the night

A Tale of Silk Road

Evangel College, Leung, Sin Yu Christine – 12

Hello! My name is Ashley. I am a traveler. I needed to journey along the Silk Road to trade with a neighboring country. It was my first time, and I felt quite nervous. My friends, who had plenty of experience, assured me it would be easy. For them, of course, it was! But I had heard from others that the route involved wandering through deserts, climbing mountains, and facing countless challenges. I didn't know who to trust.

As I was lost in thought, my friend Charlie, who was also coming along, said it was time to get going. Oh well, no time to think! It was going to be a long day and an even longer journey.

We mounted our camels, loaded with resources like spices, pearls, and ivory for trade, and set off. We started in a desert, so the hot, dry land didn't bother us much at first. But soon, thirst became a serious problem. Water was limited, and we still had a long way to go. We ignored the thirst for now and kept following the Silk Road trail.

After about two hours, we finally stopped to rest. We were no longer in the sandy desert, but we were nearly famished from hunger and thirst. I took a sip of water and enjoyed a moment of peace until a sudden scream shattered my peace! I was annoyed, until I turned to see a bandit trying to steal our goods! My eyes widened in fear, and I covered my mouth, trembling like a leaf. The bandit held a sharp weapon, ready to harm us if we resisted. My friend was about to hand over the goods when another companion grabbed the bandit by the collar and ordered him to leave. To my surprise, the bandit fled immediately. I had thought he looked so menacing, but in the end, he was just as scared as we were. That was an experience worth remembering but one I hope never happens again.

After that traumatic encounter, I wasn't sure if I wanted to continue. Our next checkpoint was a forest. I sighed and thought sarcastically, "Great. Another obstacle. Just what we needed." We rode toward a large forest that looked menacing but harmless, well least for now. I gulped, unsure of what awaited us. With all my friends and companions, we entered the forest, bringing our goods and our fears along.

I was the first volunteer to step inside. I closed my eyes in fear, my camel still following the trail. When I opened them, what I saw took my breath away! It was a beautiful rainforest. Loose vines hung everywhere, trees bore fruits and flowers, and lush grass covered the ground. Small creatures scurried around like squirrels, wild rabbits, monkeys, and butterflies in every color. Even my camel paused to admire the view! My friends gasped in awe, and one even picked a ripe apple from a tree. For a moment, I forgot the earlier experience.

But good things don't last forever. A mischievous monkey swung down from a tree and snatched my supplies! I gasped as I realized all my water, food, and goods were gone. I tried to grab the monkey's tail, but it was too quick. Tears welled up as I felt like a failure. It was my first time on the Silk Road, and I was already messing everything up. How could I fail such a simple task?

Seeing my tears, Charlie jumped off her camel and comforted me, saying it would be okay and that she and the others would help find the monkey. I felt like a burden and politely declined. "It's my fault for being careless," I said. "It's not your responsibility, it's mine. But thanks for the offer." Charlie responded, "Alright. The offer's still here if you need it." She gave a comforting smile and a thumbs up. I smiled sadly in response. We decided to move on, and I tried to forget about it.

As we neared the end of the forest, I saw the monkey again! I quickly grabbed my bag from its arms. Some food was missing, but I couldn't have been happier to get my bag back.

Charlie cheered, "Perfect timing! We're at the end of the trail now. We can trade more of our goods now! You feeling better?" I nodded, still amazed and relieved at the same time. We exchanged our spices, pearls, and ivory for silk, porcelain, paper, and tea. Maybe that's why it's called the Silk Road as we got silk in return!

This journey was truly unforgettable. It gave me happiness, sadness, and even frustrating memories all at once. Charlie was an excellent friend on this journey as well. But if I had to choose again, I think I'd prefer a normal life over these new experiences. I just hope my next journey will be less traumatic!

New Tale of China's Silk Road

Evangel College, Mok, Hui Lam Clair – 12

Twenty-two centuries ago, some intrepid Chinese people spent months trekking westwards to see if they could sell silk to new customers.

The trip was a big success — and soon grew into a two-way trade route, joining Europe and China's Chang'an, which became the biggest city in the world.

The Silk Road became one of the most important journeys in history, with east and west exchanging wonderful foods, remarkable inventions, stunning art and creative ideas.

Lets dive right into the New Tale of China's Silk Road!!!!

CHAPTER 1: INTRO

A long time ago, around twenty-two centuries ago, was one of the most important journeys known to mankind. I'm talking about the journey of the Silk Road

Zhang Qian was the person who founded the Silk Road. He travelled from China to Central Asia in the 100s BC.

Zhang Qian was originally sent to negotiate with Nomads in the west, returned to the Han emperor with tales of sophisticated civilizations with prosperous trades and exotic goods beyond their borders. The Han emperor was intrigued by the tales that Zhang Qian had described to him, so he sent merchants and Zhang Qian to go on the long journey to the west.

CHAPTER 2: THE JOURNEY TO THE WEST

Zhang Qian led the merchants and soldiers (as the emperor demanded) towards the path we now know as the Silk Road.

Zhang Qian yelled: "Guys keep going, we are going to be there soon!"

Merchant1 *muttering*: "It doesn't seem that we are likely going to get there soon."

Merchant 2 replies: "Don't be so negative bud, what if he wasn't lying and we are almost there?"

"Well, we have been walking for quite a while, perhaps we should set up camp here for the night." said a third voice behind them.

Zhang Qian *called*: "we are going to set camp for the night here."

The merchants and soldiers sighed, this was the 5th time this had happened. They were hoping that they would be at the place Zhang Qian had rendered.

After who knows how long, they finally made it to the place that Zhang Qian had recounted for them multiple times

CHAPTER 3: PROBLEMS THEY FACED DURING THE JOURNEY

Zhang Qian faced many challenges during his journey to the west, primarily of which was the capture and long-term captivity by the Xiongnu nomads.

CHAPTER 4: OUTRO

The Silk Road we know now isn't just made up of Zhang Qian's path to Central Asia from China, but a vast network of land and sea routes connecting Eurasia and North Africa. It was used to trade many cultural items and tales up till the 14th century.

FUN FACT!:

Did you know that the whole journey took around 13 years?! He was captured for about 10 years, making this journey ridiculously long!!

New Tale of Silk Road

Evangel College, Sin, Lee Nga Clair – 12

Meet Alex, a curious historian with an insatiable thirst for knowledge. Eager to explore the past, a cutting-edge device resembling a sleek wristwatch has been made by Alex based on his extensive research. Its digital display flickers with coordinates as he prepares for his journey.

With a blast of light, he is transported to Xi'an China where it all began. The vibrancy of the market is palpable. Merchants call out, their voices mingling with the music of traditional instruments. The air is rich with the scents of exotic spices, incense, and the earthy aroma of fresh produce. A jovial man, his hands stained from dyeing fabrics, showcases vibrant silk rolls that shimmer in the sunlight. He says to Alex, "Feel the softness! This silk is like nothing you've ever touched." Alex politely declines and starts his journey.

Alex traverses various landscapes—majestic mountains, arid deserts, and lush valleys. At last he reaches Bactria, Modern Afghanistan where a bustling caravanserai is located. Traders exchange not just goods but stories and legends. A local trader inquires, "You seek gold? Here is the heart of trade! But beware—trust is our most valuable currency." His heart racing from excitement, Alex can't help but blurt out, "This intricate web of exchanges is astounding! Each interaction feels like a dance of fate." Alex continues on after purchasing some food and eventually arrives at Ctesiphon, (Persia).

The grand city with its monumental arches and vibrant bazaars filled with exotic goods takes Alex's breath away. A Roman ambassador welcomes Alex warmly, "You must be new here! We believe the East and West must unite through commerce. Our shared future depends on collaboration." Alex nods in agreement, "Your city has such insightful perspectives! This has far-reaching implications for the future of nations." Alex decides he has seen enough and clicks the time machine once again. Suddenly, he is transported to the End of the Silk Road (14th century AD).

He finds himself in Venice, Italy, the epicenter of maritime trade, bustling with energy as ships dock with their rich cargo. The Grand Canal glimmers in the sunlight, filled with gondolas, merchants haggling, and scholars debating. The city is alive with stories waiting to be told. In the city, he meets a commanding figure, storyteller in both demeanor and dress, with a well-traveled satchel at his side. He proudly exclaims, "I shared tales from the East to inspire my people. You must do the same, traveler!" Stunned in the presence of Marco Polo, Alex stutters something under his breath, then hurriedly walks away. Walking into one of the busy markets, Alex bumps into a Venetian merchant. He's elegantly dressed, but his hands display smudges of charcoal and ink from ledger notes documenting trades. "Silk, spices, and more! Come buy, after all we stand at the crossroads of the world!"

As Alex gazes over the Grand Canal, he reflects on the incredible tapestry of trade and cultural exchange witnessed throughout his journey. He feels a sense of purpose and responsibility. He thinks to himself, "From humble beginnings to the bustling veins of commerce, I've witnessed history unfold in ways I never imagined." The Silk Road isn't just an ancient story, nor is the history of China, they are both a living reality.

The Adventure of Zhang Qian and the Silk Road

Evangel College, Tong, Tsui Yau Candace – 12

P6C 24 Tong Tsui Yau Candace

With a grateful and persistent heart, Zhang Qian fell asleep. He dreamt about the adventures he would encounter during the long journey. The next day, Zhang Qian woke up with a jolt early in the morning. He sat up on his small but comfortable bed, staring at the horizon. He grinned from ear to ear as he thought about the exciting news he had received yesterday. Zhang Qian was sent on an important mission from Emperor Wu to seek an alliance with the Yuezhi people to fight against the Xiongnu. Zhang Qian hurriedly got ready and packed a lot of supplies for his mission. Then, he set foot on his journey from his backyard.

There, he was surprised to see a huge crowd gathered to send their farewells and blessings to him. He was brought to tears when his family hugged him goodbye. Before Zhang Qian and his team of about a hundred people left, the king gave them a travel permit to allow him to travel between kingdoms. “Good luck,” the king blessed deeply. When they finished, Zhang Qian finally grabbed his sack and boarded the camel. Even though he was very loyal to the emperor, he also missed his family. With one last bittersweet look at his dear family, he took off with the camel, ready for a new adventure.

Zhang Qian and his entourage travelled for days and days and days. They passed through sandy deserts where the sandy ground seemed to stretch into the horizon. They also trekked through snowy peak mountains with the cold wind howling mercilessly against their cheeks. The sun nearly melted them during the day but night breeze made them shiver. Yet, Zhang Qian did not lose heart. Every now and then, Zhang Qian would lead his crew to stop at a shelter and rest for a day or two, and then they would keep going. Zhang Qian was loyal to his adored king and he didn’t want to fail his mission.

During their journey to the Yuezhi, they had to cross through land ruled by the Han dynasty’s enemy, Xiongnu. Soon, the gang was held captive by the Xiongnu. During those years, Zhang Qian was given a tent to live in. Despite of the well treatment, Zhang Qian never forgot his original aspiration and held on to his emperor's staff throughout his captivity. He was also given a Xiongnu wife who later gave birth to Zhang Qian’s son and Ganfu, a Xiongnu slave, as a servant. She helped Zhang Qian gain trust while they waited to escape. After more than ten years with the Xiongnu, he finally escaped with his family and loyal servant Ganfu, who acted as his guide.

A year had passed when Zhang Qian finally reached his destination—the land of the Yuezhi people in Bactria. He stayed there and arranged meetings with the king. He tried to convince the king there to be alliance but to no avail. Even though the king didn’t accept the offer, Zhang Qian didn’t go home empty-handed – he learnt a lot about different cultures, and bought some goods to bring home along the way. After a year since he has arrived at Yuezhi, he decided it was time to head home. However, he was captured by the Xiongnu troop again on his way home despite of his effort to avoid them. He was still spared from his life and treated well because of his composure. After one or two years, Zhang Qian managed to escape again and went home.

After returning to his hometown, Zhang made a detailed record of what he had seen, such as different animals and architecture styles from other countries. Inspired by Zhang Qian, some folks went to the other places, exchanging goods, knowledge, paintings and architecture style, which promoted the exchange of different cultures. Soon the Silk Road developed many variations and became a very popular trading road. Goods from foreign countries, such as grapes and walnuts, were imported in and Chinese products, such as spices and pottery, were exported out. It was later named the “Silk Road” because silk was a very popular good from China at that time because of its texture. And there, my friends, is the adventure of Zhang Qian and the Silk Road.

Echo of Silk Road: A Tale of Friendship and Trade

Evangel College, Wong, Shun Mei Gabrielle – 12

In the heart of Chang'an, a vibrant city alive with the sounds of merchants hawking their wares, a group of intrepid explorers prepared for a journey that would alter the course of history. It was over two thousand years ago and the allure of silk had captured the imagination of many. As dawn broke, casting a warm glow over the bustling marketplace, the travelers gathered, each carrying dreams of adventure and the promise of fortune.

Amongst them was Xiao Shan, a young merchant with a heart full of ambition. Growing up in a family of silk weavers, he had often listened to his grandfather's tales about the wonders of the world beyond the mountains and deserts—a world where silk was not merely fabric, but a symbol of wealth and status. With dreams of expanding his family's trade, Xiao Shan set his sights on the west, where he believed that untapped markets awaited.

Beside him was Yie, his best friend and a skilled navigator. With an innate ability to read the stars and the landscape, she had a keen sense of direction that made her invaluable on their [journey](#).

'We have to be careful crossing the desert,' Yie remarked, glancing up at the vast sky.

'The sun can be ruthless.' 'I know,' Xiao Shan replied, determination in his voice. 'But think of the fortune waiting for us. We'll make our families proud!'

Together, they set out towards the west, their carts laden with shimmering silks, the finest produced in Chang'an. Each piece was a masterpiece, adorned with intricate patterns that told stories of their origin.

As they went out on their journey, the landscape transformed drastically. They traversed the arid expanse of the Taklamakan Desert, where the sun beat down mercilessly. The heat was relentless and every single step felt heavy with the weight of their dreams. Yet, with every challenge, their friendship deepened. They shared stories around the campfire at night, their laughter echoing against the vast emptiness, reminding them of home.

Along the way, they encountered fellow travelers who enriched their journey. Persian travelers Khan and Tok, welcomed them with open arms, offering fragrant spices that tantalized their senses.

'Greetings! You carry silk!' Khan exclaimed. 'These spices will complement your silk beautifully.' Tok said, presenting a vibrant pouch of saffron.

'Thank you!' Xiao Shan said, his eyes lighting up.

In return, Xiao Shan and Yie shared tales of their homeland, the art of silk weaving. Thus, the traditions of Chang'an. Each meeting turned into a vibrant exchange of ideas, shared dreams and laughter.

As they reached the crowded markets of Samarkand, the duo felt the weight of their journey's significance. The city was a kaleidoscope of colors and sounds, filled with merchants from every corner of the world.

'Look at all these goods!' Yie gasped in awe. 'Our silks will blend perfectly here.'

'Indeed.,' Xiao Shan replied, a smile spreading on his face. 'This is the Silk Road—where cultures unite.'

The Silk Road was more than just a route for trade; it was a bridge connecting diverse cultures. Here, Xiao Shan and Yie witnessed the merging of goods, where their silks mingled with spices, textiles and innovations from far-flung places, creating a rich tapestry of global culture.

While staying in Samarkand, Xiao Shan and Yie attended a grand festival celebrating the diversity of trade.

Musicians played enchanting melodies and dancers twirled in bedazzled costumes, embodying the spirit of unity. It was a moment of joy and celebration, where they realized that their journey wasn't just about silk, but about the connections they forged with people from different cultures.

As they continued westward, they faced new challenges. The towering peaks of the Pamir Mountains loomed ahead, their snow-capped summits touching the sky. Climbing these treacherous paths tested their resolve. At night, they huddled together in their tent, sharing warmth and encouragement. Yie reminded Xiao Shan, her eyes shining with determination "We aren't just traders, we are ambassadors of our culture."

After weeks of travel, they finally reached the shores of the Mediterranean Sea. The sight was breathtaking; the vast blue waters sparkled under the sun, a stark contrast to the arid lands they had crossed. Here, they encountered Roman merchants Ares and Aprob, who were captivated by the beauty of their silks.

Ares proclaimed, "These will definitely fetch a high price in our markets, what would you like in exchange?" his eyes wide with excitement.

'Exquisite glassware would be wonderful,' Xiao Shan said, intrigued by their advanced engineering techniques.

Fast forward to today and the spirit of the Silk Road is alive once more. The Silk Road initiative has reignited this ancient connection, linking over 150 countries. Imagine a world where ideas flow as freely as the goods did centuries ago. Innovations in technology, art and sustainability are shared across borders, fostering a sense of global community.

What might the new Silk Road achieve? It could build understanding among nations, inspire collaboration to tackle climate change and promote cultural exchanges that enrich our lives. Just as Xiao Shan and Yie set out with dreams

of prosperity, today's world can dream of a future where unity and respect flourish.

As we reflect on the tales of the Silk Road, let us be inspired by the courage of those who ventured into the unknown. With imagination and cooperation, we can write new chapters in this timeless story, wearing a narrative that celebrates diversity and our shared humanity.

In this ever-changing landscape, the lessons from the past remind us that trade is not merely about goods; it's about people, relationships, and the stories that connect us all. As we journey forward, may we carry the spirit of the Silk Road with us, embracing the richness of our differences while forging a path towards a united future.

The Silk Road Games

German Swiss International School, Wang, Natalie – 12

Jin looked out of the window and saw that the morning of March 3rd glowed bright and sunny, the air filled with the anticipation and excitement of many. Today was the day. The day the annual Silk Roads Games took place in Jin's small village in Xi An. A traditional tournament to compete for the prize of the most exquisite goods traded on the Silk Roads. There would be three challenges, one prize and many contestants; and every year the theme would be different. Jin closed her eyes. She was extremely anxious, because this year she wouldn't be watching the Games. She would be competing.

The usual explosion of sounds and smells hit Jin full on in the face as she weaved through the throng of people at the main street leading to the Imperial Plaza where the Games were held. They were going to start in less than 5 minutes. "Good luck Jin!" a voice called from behind her. It was her aunt, waving to her. Jin's aunt would be helping to take care of her family's horse-trading business for the day, and Jin could only manage a quick thanks. Any more and the butterflies in her stomach would burst out.

Finally, she arrived at the busy plaza. A crowd stood around a circle in which there was an arena about half the size of a soccer field. She was just in time. She ran to a line with the 14 other contestants and waited to start the first challenge. The prize this year was going to be a rare haul of fur pelts from the remote lands of southern Siberia and a big bag of gold – enough money for quality treatment and months of food and water. Jin desperately needed it for her father who had recently caught a foreign disease on a trading trip to Tibet. Jin was the one representing him in all things related to the family business. Everything was resting on her shoulders.

"Ready set go!" A person shouted. The other contestants raced off into the distance. Jin broke out of her reverie. She had no idea what they were doing, and could only follow. It was hard to keep up with the much taller men but from the path they were taking, Jin soon realised that they were heading to the local barn.

"Excuse me!" She sprinted towards the closest competitor in front of her. He turned around. He was a tall man, with gray hair and bushy brows.

He shouted back: "What horse are you going to pick?"

What? Then something in her mind clicked. Horse and barn! They were going to race back on horses! Without answering she immediately turned to the right.

"Hey, where are you going?" The man yelled at her.

Jin was taking a shortcut she knew well. She went to the barn almost every other day to check out the horses there. She also knew which horse to pick. Jin raced around a corner and arrived at the large barn. She was way ahead of the others, so she slowed down and went in.

The barn was dank and musty but very active. There were about a dozen pigs, many cows, a few sheep and a dozen horses. She went to the stable on the far right, away from the other horses and quickly tacked up the small brown horse inside. Since she grew up living in a trading horse family she was in her comfort zone. She walked the horse outside, then squinting in the sudden brightness, she mounted. The rest were just arriving and glared at her in the dazzling sunlight. As she rode past, mutterings and whispers floated behind her. *What is a girl doing here? How is she so fast! She must be cheating. She better be disqualified!*

Jin cantered all the way through the shortcut and the main road, then arrived at the arena in less than a few minutes. Chants greeted her and she could see her aunt waving wildly as she dismounted the horse at the centre of the circle. “What shows the skill and determination of an animal carer? The ability to ride a horse well! The winner of the first round is Jin!” An eruption of cheers followed. “The following are eliminated...,” the official crossed off a list the five people who arrived last, all of them struggling to turn their horse around. Ten contestants left.

The next challenge was archery. The goal was to shoot as many arrows they could onto a target in front of them. Jin wasn’t skilled at archery and she glanced at how one of her opponents on the other side of the arena was fitting the bow into the arrow. It was nearly impossible to pull the bow back, let alone to have enough of an angle for the arrow to fly.

As she struggled to shoot anywhere near her target, the nine others were pulling even more arrows out of a basket near them to shoot. Jin wondered why she was the one to replace her father anyway. She didn’t have any strength compared to all the others. Dong! Dong! A gong bell sounded. The time was up and Jin looked at her nearly full basket. Only one in the target. She crossed her fingers hoping not to be eliminated. Please please please! She repeated the words over and over in her head. After a while of announcing the winner and eliminations, Jin stopped. She wasn’t ejected from the tournament! However there was one more round and she had to focus. There were only five of them left and she had to secure the prize.

The contestants were brought to the edge of the bamboo forest where a circular obstacle course was built up in the lower branches of the trees – about four metres tall, consisting of swings, climbing ropes and jumping platforms. It completed a round shape and it was obvious that it would be a race around the obstacle course. The bamboo at Jin’s village was plentiful and Jin tried climbing the shoots once or twice in the bamboo forest before when she was younger. She would have to see if her skills were still sharp enough.

The rules were simple. Make it to the end without falling. The winner of the race would have the best chance at receiving the grand prize. Despite the sunny and warm weather, Jin’s teeth were chattering. How would she be able to win against all these other stronger traders? Doubts filled her mind, but she had no time to feel bad about herself as her trembling legs walked her over to a thick white line marked in front of a tall bamboo shoot.

“The race will start shortly!” An official shouted. He began to count down: “5... 4... 3... 2... 1... GO!!”

Jin looked at the others. She was by far the smallest and as Jin raced to the first section – a bamboo climbing pole, she was already falling far behind. Being the smallest, she got squeezed behind the four others who gained a fairly big headstart. Finally, up and up she slowly went, pulling herself higher and higher. Soon, she reached the platform connected to it. A faint crash sounded in front of her. Someone was already eliminated. Maybe she had a chance? Jin shook her head and kept going.

Through some narrow tunnels, tree branches snagged at her clothing but she kept going. Some men were having trouble going through the tunnel as they were too big to fit. Jin was catching up and... ahead. She was a bird flying through the air aimed at her destination which was the finish line fueled by the thought of her father recovering.

Everything became a blur as Jin raced through the track, almost completing a round. As she hopped from a rope, Jin could see her own shadow on the ground, following her all the way. Nearer and nearer to the finish line. Just then, a long shadow raced up to her. She turned around in surprise and realised it was the guy who talked to her on the way to the barn. He had a look of determination plastered on his face. Jin forced her sore legs to sprint the final few meters towards a slide that led down to the starting/finish line. Would she be fast enough?

She nervously went down the slide and crashed straight into her aunt. She seemed to be shouting something but from all the exhaustion and heat, Jin didn't register the words and could only stare open-mouthed at the velvet bag shoved into her arms by an official. Pride and relief washed over her like a flood: she had won! At the end of the day she never needed to doubt herself just because she was out of place.

Woven Roads of Silk

Good Hope School, Fong, Nga Ching – 12

Nanaka Shen. Also known as a girl with an intense passion for history. At the moment, the Silk Road is her current infatuation. With such a fascinating history, you can't exactly blame Nanaka for harbouring such interest towards this infrastructure, especially since it is also part of her culture. Being someone who holds multiple ethnicities in her veins, she's unique compared to her fellow enthusiasts, yet that has only fueled her fire.

"The Silk Road, one of the most influential trade routes ever created..." Nanaka mutters to herself, keeping a steady pace on her once-in-a-lifetime opportunity route. She knew she had to experience the landscape for herself to really relish the feeling. It's not every day you get to walk an international sensation personally — her fellow scholars surely wouldn't, anyway. She's the girl with the candle in her heart that doesn't burn out as long as she has a clear finish in sight. Her reputation defines her. This report would do wonders to her academics if done correctly, and Nanaka is definitely aware of that. That's why she's walking the absurdly lengthy path, after all.

Trading, cultural objects... She should be able to think of a decently satisfactory thesis for this topic. Bearing the Shen name, Nanaka knows her ancestors are watching, but it's up to her to make sure their faces are graced with pleasure and not disappointment, at least to the best of her ability. "Nanaka, have you finished the draft?" "Nearly there, V." Nanaka obnoxiously replied, it was the fifth time her older sister had badgered her about the synopsis now, and she was starting to get piqued. Nanaka rigorously jotted down a couple more words in her notebook regarding the infamous road, continuing down the path simultaneously. She's getting more determined by the second. Vidalia smiles at her sister's stubbornness. Sometimes an attitude like that can bring a person vehemence.

Her trek brought her to the scorching heat of the desert. Nanaka felt the heat on her skin and her heart — burning nearly painfully, yet motivational. A journey must perpetually contain the aching of pain, either mentally or physically, as the saying goes. "Nanaka. I got it. The deserted land of this environment doesn't bear enough water nor fruit for human survival within range," Vidalia hummed. "The need to rely on others." The other sister gasped, "You're a genius V. The shared desire for survival leading to connected hearts and relationships," she hurriedly scribbled down, "this trade route wasn't just about trade. It connected humanity as well, Vidalia. Ancestors bonded of sheer coincidence, by the sole purpose of life they beat death together!" Nanaka was on cloud nine, over the moon, or whichever phase matched her current emotions. It didn't matter anymore.

Her breath caught. Her flame flickered. Was this the true meaning of the Silk Road? It might not have been silk which inspired the route's branding. Perhaps silk was used to symbolise the correlation between humanity. Silk was woven by innumerable people, all of which must cooperate to gain the maximum efficiency possible, considering the high demand of the delicate material. Of course, she couldn't doubt the value, but this theory. She couldn't get this off her mind, even as she lay to rest that very evening.

As Nanaka and Vidalia made the return journey, she used the time to reflect and finalized her decision. "The Red Thread Linking Hearts", that would be her topic. The destination of the desert path may not have been the most memorable, and despite the fact, the journey and feelings she's felt during the journey itself is definitely worth the effort. A life lesson deeply engraved in her heart. Besides, she knows she's changed for the better — a further understanding and empathy for the world, and respect for the people that came before them. They've made an abysmal dent in the world of history.

Woven Fate

Good Hope School, Mak, Tsz Ching Ashlee – 13

It didn't seem like long ago. She recalls when she was a child. Dragged between the merchants' knees and haggles, she was warped into a world of scripts and spices.

"You ought to walk faster! I'd be able to get us good food if i make a few more trades"

Her father brought her along occasionally, little her was always curious, but at the same time, trading had always been more of a hustle than she anticipated.

From the first peek of sunlight to the last haze of it, the horse cart treads along roads of rock and sand. She watches as boxes after boxes of goods come and go, watches the way her father's brows furrow and lift, watches the colourful and obscure clothing of the traders.

The boring part was that she was never allowed to get off the horse cart. Her father was ever so worried that feeble her would be swooped up by some tribal member and sold off to some uncultured man.

That day, however, was different.

Her father gently guided her on to the ground, her eyes wider than ever. As if looking at a reflection, there was a boy, too ushered by his father. They stood stalk, inanimate, it was as if life had been sucked dry out of them and they were only shells, void of a soul.

"Just say hello, don't be rude."

The boy shyly waved his hand, and she mirrored him. The boy tilted his head, and she mirrored him. The boy sneezed, and she let out a very weak attempt at a fake sneeze.

This time, she smiled a toothy grin, and he mirrored her.

She started going with her father on trades regularly, she'd stare at the boxes of spices and silk and scripts, she'd count the amount of times the horse flicked it tail, all for the moment her father would give her the green light to get off the cart and play with the boy.

The two dads would sit there and enjoy their newly obtained wine while the two plucked flowers from the side of the wall. Or they would attempt to climb the trees. Or they would draw crooked childish art with sticks and sand. They would laugh until their lungs yelped for air. They ran until their legs were sore and wasted.

They would make a promise to each other each day, to be together for all eternity. From the land to sea, to always stick together.

Day after day, the bond of the two wove together, strand after strand, it was ever so beautiful, a perfect embodiment of silk.

"We have to leave, it's not safe anymore."

It was a blur. Shouts and orders. She watched as her mother frantically dragged her and her brother into the travel carts. Boxes of goods piled up in the cart, her father's face solemn as ever.

The journey to the south was suffocating. She spent days in the cart as the traffic moved slower than ever whilst navigating the never treaded trails. At times, there would be yelling and ruckus that would be ear splitting. At times, the only sounds were the click clocks of the horses' traveling.

Then they arrived, all the way to southern China, where the strange political people had finally settled their disputes and where they could finally rest, but life could simply never be the same. Staring at the foreign streets, her mind reaches to fill it with what was previously in the north, but her imagination and memory can only go so far.

She was certainly not one of the ladies her mom went to that predicted each and every detail of life, and she certainly wasn't the smartest nor good at predictions, but she finds this time she hopes she is not right at her guess.

She still went to trade at the piers with her father. Only this time she's often called to meet the young men that bring loads of jewels and tea leaves. She received no shy wave, only a curt nod. None of them tilt their head, but raise their eyebrows at her less than fair skin and small eyes. She doesn't sneeze, but holds her breath under their judgmental gaze. She doesn't smile, and they never meet again.

Every man she met, never him. Every new face tugged at the silk that he spun around her heart. It was shallow of her, her parents berated. They were eager to marry her brother off, but by customs she had to be wed first. Her brother never bothered her, but she knew he would suffer if she didn't make a choice.

Another day, she went off with her father to the pier once again.

That day, however, was different.

Her feet planted to the ground, her eyes widened. That man was a mirror image to her expression. Only they weren't just shells and their souls whirled with such alacrity they could barely contain.

The man shyly waved his hand, she mirrored him. The man tilted his head, she mirrored him. The man faked a sneeze, she sniffled her nose.

This time, tears from her eyes escaped, and he held her in a suffocating embrace.

"I promised you."

The First Silk Merchants' Journey

Good Hope School, Wong, Tsz Kwan Tiffany – 12

1 Week Before the Journey

Lately, there's been a new hype in China— this rare fabric called silk that everyone seems to gush over. It has already become a symbol of wealth albeit it just being discovered! Now, as a wealthy merchant myself, I simply had to see what the trend was about.

At first, I wondered: What had made it so different from other furs and fabrics? What was so unique about it, that it had captured even the eyes of distinguished monarchs? Those thoughts immediately evaporated the second I had laid eyes on a piece that my acquaintances had brought to a party to show off. It was a smooth color of ivory, lustrous and slightly gleaming in the light.

Naturally, my senses told me this could make me a great fortune if I sold such a luxurious beauty. And if none of the others countries had discovered it yet... I could trade it and make myself a fortune that even my richest friends envied. Once the idea rooted itself in my head, I started getting even more enthusiastic. I shared them with my partners, yet most of them doubted me. It was too dangerous, they had warned.

However, I had always believed that high risks lead to higher rewards, so I gathered the few who had wanted to join my journey, and we started planning. We spent a quarter of our fortune and bought plenty of silk, and though I was slightly worried about failing this mission and coming back a ruined man whom others called overly ambitious and insane, I trusted my gut and continued to prepare for the long journey ahead.

Day 1

We left China's borders at the brink of dawn. Since it was still early morning, some of us were drowsy but most of us were in high spirits. We would make ourselves famous if we succeeded! Our names would be spoken of like legends, with the rarest valuables to our name...

Suddenly, I heard loud shouts getting closer. My fellow merchants shrieked, "Bandits!" We sped the horses into a gallop, and I, trying not to panic too much and fall off my horse, hastily reminded myself that I have been trained for these situations since the moment I had decided to step into this career path, like my ancestors before me.

Bandits were common nowadays, with many unwilling to have unfulfilling yet stable jobs. Two of them had sharp objects in their hand, whereas the other three didn't seem to have anything but their hostility. The former ran towards us, but our horses were undoubtedly faster. In the end, we got away safely. In the rush though, a pouch of supplements, which we knew contained food after carefully counting all our items, had came loose and dropped to the ground.

"Let those bandits have it. They've clearly lead miserable lives and are not worth our time." I offered as the others grumbled, but none of them complained much. We had more important matters. With heavy hearts, we continued, slowing our horses to a comfortable, steady trot, occasionally making small talk. I glanced at the map, with countless markings across it depicting where our journey would lead us. It would be a long, strenuous journey, and I was far too invested to back out now. I only hoped I'd live long enough to witness the end of this trip.

Day 32

After many days of horse-riding, minimal breaks and excruciating walking, we are now traveling through the famous Hexi Corridor. There was the well-known Gobi Desert to our north and Qilian Mountains to the south. Our merchants and I complained constantly. About the unbearable heat, the carefully rationed food, the soreness after riding for days... We took breaks for the sake of the horses, admiring the scenery as we passed by.

The natural landscapes, majestic and multicolored, was an amazing, eye-opening sight for people like us who have never went this far out of Xi'an, which lead to a few of us stopping to write down the view in detail, most likely to

show their wives or children who were left behind. Poor souls. But it's alright. We'll come back from a successful journey, and their families will live comfortably for the rest of their lives.

Day 50

We're officially in Dunhuang. Everyone is ecstatic, to finally find another city. Immediately we set up to sell. Before the journey, I already knew we'd have some difficulty communicating, not speaking the same dialect, but we make do and get the point across.

Finally, a presumably wealthy man, given his fancy clothes, gives us a bagful of coins, and we gladly give him a small roll of silk. He seemed to be in awe and chatters excitedly with his companions. After that, our sales only increased and we decide to stay in Dunhuang for a couple more days. Eventually, we would split into groups of three and meet up back in Kashgar, to maximize the areas we covered. All the more profit for us, I thought as we headed to an inn for the night.

The beds were surprisingly more comfortable than we had expected, given the relatively cheap prices. We have our first warm meal after more than a month since we've left Xi'an, our home. I never thought I'd miss warm meals, which I used to take for granted. I had already felt homesick too, missing my old friends and the large old house, the much more peaceful life I'd left behind.

Day 53

After three days of staying in Dunhuang, we're finally packing up to leave. We had made more than I had expected. Wealthy men in this city traveled here specifically to buy some of our silk, despite our small stall residing in poorer areas of the city, merely by word of mouth from their peers. We were more than delighted, especially when repeat customers kept coming back for more. I knew this would be successful! As we walked through the city, we saw tailors with their heads down, working at rolls of silk diligently. Its fame was already growing significantly, and I knew people enjoyed this symbol of status, lightweight and easier to flaunt than gold and fast horses.

When we arrived at the borders, I said goodbye to my fellow merchants, who I've gotten to know intimately after spending so much time, overcoming so many challenges with them. "We'll meet up again, as people with better experience and wisdom." I told them with this certainty in my words. The following few minutes, we prayed to the great Buddha silently, for a safe road ahead to each of us.

We had made unforgettable memories in these months and await many more to come, I thought, as we nodded to each other confidently and set off into the beyond.

Reemergence

Good Hope School, Wong, Yee Ning Giulia – 14

I fell off the camel just as the sun was coming up. The knot on one of the bales had come loose during the night, and when the camel caught a scent in the air and started galloping all of a sudden, the impetuous movement almost immediately sent it lurching over to one side, moving the entire load. Next thing I knew, I was going sideways and landing on the bone-chilling sand with a dull thud. I fought hard to keep my composure – after all, I was the proud product of the best Sogdian craftsman, according to the boasting of the Persian merchant. When he first cast his eyes on me, his mouth fell open and his hands were soon all over me. “Beauty, beauty in the mall, you are the fairest of them all!” His voice was trembling. The next second he passed a handsome amount of money, and I was soon fastened carefully to the back of the camel. We were on a journey to the house of a rich and noble man, as he claimed, in Bamiyan, or somewhere farther west, I know not. Instead of being sublimed into a robe or a curtain, however, I took this tumble and was half-sunk under a dry bush on the edge of the Taklamakan Desert.

At first I was startled with the tinkle of the caravan’s bell becoming fainter and fainter. Why didn’t he notice? Didn’t he show me off to his companions and regard me as “my precious”? Then I heard shouts, before they were overwhelmed and drowned by the clatter of the hooves, of camels rather than horses. Screams followed, interlaced by evil laughter, and the dead silence afterwards soon was shattered by the rough, hurried noise of loot being tossed and dragged. A voice yelled, “Leave it! Just the silver and the spices! Go!”

The sizzle of sand replaced the receding glee. Then the moon rose, afterwards it was the sun again. When the wind helped the sand devour me, I thought it was over, but then this foe shifted allegiance soon after and forced the sand to regurgitate me.

The desert didn’t finish me off. The Taklamakan is brutal, but it’s also dry. Really dry. There is hardly any rain, hardly any humidity. Things do not perish in the manner they do in the forest or on the seashore. Here, I enjoyed the sunlight without being raked off by the leaves and branches overhead, got washed by the sandstorms and experienced all four seasons in one day.

In the beginning I prayed for a miracle, that the merchant remembered me, if his life was actually spared. The sun stared at me, then the stars kept their gaze fixed upon me, at last the eyes of the moon were riveted on me. When the dawn glow appeared again, I knew another day had come. Eventually, however, the sand prevailed. I learnt about the grains of sand in the River Ganges when the monks in my hometown compared them to innumerability in their chants of sutra. If only these monks actually set foot in this desert. I lost count after day one thousand and twenty-four, when I was finally buried, leading to my epiphany that time carried little meaning. Nothing was relevant anymore, actually – the merchant was probably not returning.

By being blocked from sunlight I could retain most of my colours, but the pressure brought by the piling sand and the persistent exsiccation have mummified me. For once or twice flash floods from afar had sent some water to scour the desert, but it never reached deep enough to rot me.

Sheep were dumb. Really dumb. For no reason at all they dug the sand and pulled me out on a random day. I had to squint – seemingly the sun was equally powerful just as aeons ago. A herder came over, pulled me free, shook the dust off me and scrutinised me. For one second I thought he’d take me, perhaps to use me for a blanket or sell me. But he just causally tossed me onto the sandy ground and left with his bleating rogues. I was relieved that there were no more blood-curdling shrieks this time when they disappeared from the horizon.

After perhaps some decades, or some centuries, the cousins of those stupid sheep, that is the goats, shook me up from the slumbers again. They bit me and trod on me, but their shepherd paid no heed to me. The inattention might hurt the pride of some but served me well. I often imagined the dreadful consequences if I made it to the palace of that prestigious man – his blood could have stained me, as a robe, during an assassination by the usurpers, or his grandsons might have scribbled something naive on me. Well, time was on my side and I enjoyed killing time by viewing alternate futures and seeing all the possible outcomes.

More emergence and reburials followed. In between I noticed some changes. The caravans got smaller. I heard merchants complaining about new routes, something about ships which could now reach every corner of the world. Safer, they said. Faster. Cheaper. Fewer bandits. The number of camels dwindled, just like my hope of seeing my merchant again. The last caravan had only four camels and a couple of tired people. One of them sat right near my bush to rest, sipping the last few droplets of water with his chapped lips, and gave a long and weary sigh. He never saw me.

All of their traces were ruthlessly effaced, very quickly, by mother nature. Gradually I was sent to the nether again. It was a long, dead tranquility, except when the dry *shhh* traversed the flats and waltzed with the dunes, kicking up the shimmering veils of the desert's skin. Perhaps humanity was gone and I could finally rest in peace.

I was so wrong. One day the ground started shaking. I felt shovels and brushes. Bright lights cut through the darkness. Hands in rubber gloves lifted me out. Someone shouted, "Hey, come look at this, it's silk!" Further away, another voice yelled, "We've also got human remains over here! Skull and partial skeleton."

They brushed me off carefully, took tiny samples with scissors and put me in a white box. When the box was reopened, people in big white coats and gloves poked me and argued with each other. Some said I was from the Han Dynasty, the others said perhaps I was made by the Turks. They could have saved themselves some time if I could speak.

Then they mentioned that the bones found seventy steps from me belonged to a male, barbarously killed by a blow to the head. Could it be?

Finally, they placed me in a building which they called a "museum", naming the exhibition "Silk Road: Now and Then". At the entrance there is a huge map with two glowing lines. One marks a route across cities and mountain passes with all those familiar names: Chang'an, Bukhara, Khiva, Merv and Bursa. The other set shows a different path which reads: The Belt and Road: A New Silk Road. I, without doubt, belong to the former. Now in a transparent case with lighting and controlled humidity, I am accompanied by a little sign which says, "Silk fragment, Han Dynasty, circa. 150 BCE. Recovered from the Taklamakan Desert."

And in the neighbouring case, with its own small spotlight, is that skull. The sign reads: "Skeletal remains of an Asian male, Han Dynasty period, found in the Taklamakan Desert." Every day people pass by, take pictures, read the signs, nod as if they know everything about us after reading the captions. To them we are only an interesting old piece of silk and a fractured skull.

I try to talk to him, or it, and to remind him, or it, of the short journey we had together. My words fell on deaf ears – if only he still had at least one of them. He reposes still, and not even that cute little girl who visits today can put life back into him. She stares at both of us for a long time, first at me, and then at him. "They knew each other," she told her mom. "A long time ago. They're sad because the road is gone and they're still separated by thin glasses."

The mother smiles and says maybe, but the kid insists before she shoves her away. The museum lights soon shut off for the night. The darkness doesn't frighten me, not only because the years have swept away my fear of the dark, but also because he has finally come back to my side, even though the hands which caressed me and the eyes which sparkled with appreciation have long evaporated into the thin and dry air of that accursed desert.

Porcelain in the Fire

Harrow International School Hong Kong, Du, Tina – 11

The energy of the Silk Road never truly settles, not even here within the walls of a caravanserai. The air inside the Rabat-i-Malik caravanserai near Samarkand was a tapestry of scents: the metallic tang of spices from India, cinnamon and ginger layered over the musk of camels, and the rich, earthy smell of sun-baked mudbrick.

Li Hua pulled her maroon silk pifeng closer around her shoulders. Even in the height of summer, the desert evenings held a chill. She had been given the simple job of buying some local dried apricots for the journey ahead, one made more difficult by the aggressive merchant. He was a small, squat man with a booming voice. His hands were gesturing wildly as he quoted a price that was frankly, an insult.

"Two silver dirhams for that much?" Li Hua said in Turkic, keeping her voice sturdy. "My father would get this much in Kashgar for half a coin."

The merchant slammed a fist onto his low wooden stall, sending a few apricots tumbling. "This is Samarkand, woman! The heart of the world! The quality is unmatched!" He eyed her fine Chinese silk with a glint in his eye. "Unless the merchant's daughter cannot afford it?"

Li Hua tightened her jaw. It was a common thing to question a woman's authority. A shadow fell over the stall. A man's hand reached down, not towards the apricots, but towards a small, roughly spun sack that had been mostly hidden from view. His fingers, calloused, sifted through a handful of the dried fruits inside.

"He speaks truth of the quality," a deep voice said, the accent Central Asian, but clear. "These are the 'Hunza' apricots, sweeter and smaller than the usual. But he is a liar about the price."

Li Hua looked up. The man was tall, perhaps the tallest person in the crowded courtyard. He wore a knee-length, wide-sleeved cotton chapin in a muted blue, a patterned sash keeping it closed at the waist. His eyes, a deep, chocolatey brown, met hers. He had a sharp jaw, covered in the rough stubble of a long journey, and a quiet presence that instantly made the noisy merchant quiet down.

"This is last season's crop," the man continued, looking at the merchant now, a subtle challenge in his eyes. "The new harvest comes in two weeks. A fair price would be three copper coins."

The merchant began to stutter, but the man simply dropped the apricots back into the sack and nodded once at Li Hua before turning to walk away.

Li Hua didn't hesitate. She threw three copper coins onto the table and snatched the sack of fruit, calling after the stranger, "Wait!"

He stopped near a well in the center of the courtyard, where camels were being watered.

"Thank you," she said, catching her breath. "That was... helpful. You know the market well."

He turned, his expression neutral. "I know the routes, the people...and the lies they tell. I am Arslan, a guide." He inclined his head slightly.

"Li Hua," she replied. "My father and I are with the porcelain caravan headed for Bukhara."

"Ah," he said, a flicker of a smile touching the corners of his mouth. "Valuable cargo." "You seem to travel with many guards, but there is talk."

Li Hua frowned. "Talk?"

"Of bandits. The Copperhead Outlaws," Arslan said, his voice dropping to a low murmur. "They struck a small caravan three days east of here. Took everything."

Her smile faded. The Copperhead Outlaws are notorious. "We have sixteen men."

"Not enough," Arslan said. "But worry about that tomorrow. Tonight, eat well. The food at the main fire is good tonight." He offered a brief nod and disappeared into the shadows of the ground-floor stables.

Over the next two days, the tension in the caravanserai grew. More caravans arrived, all with similar stories of danger on the road East. It was decided that for safety, several smaller groups would merge into a large one. Arslan had been hired to guide one of the other groups— a wealthy Persian trader with a shipment of shimmering carpets.

Under the pale crescent moon of the desert sky, their journey began. Li Hua and Arslan often found themselves walking near the front of the camel train. The vast, empty expanse of the desert night was a stark contrast to the chaotic bazaar.

One evening, by a quiet campfire away from the main area of the camp, Arslan was meticulously sharpening his curved knife on a whetstone. The rhythmic scrape—scrape—scrape was the only sound besides the crackle of the fire.

"Has it ever gotten easier?" Li Hua asked quietly, watching the sparks fly from the blade.

Arslan paused, testing the edge with his thumb. "The travel? No. The world is a hard place, Li Hua. You just have to learn to be harder."

He looked up at her, the firelight catching the strong lines of his face. Li Hua reached into her satchel and pulled out a small, perfectly formed blue—and—white porcelain bowl, no bigger than her palm. The glaze shimmered in the firelight.

"My family's work," she said, handing it to him. "See? Strong enough to travel thousands of li without a crack, but look at the art. The beauty comes from the fire, Arslan, not the cold."

Arslan took the bowl with a surprising gentleness. His rough, sun-weathered hands cradled the bowl. He traced a finger over the painted pattern of a single petal. "It's beautiful." He looked from the bowl back to her. "Like you."

A blush crept up Li Hua's neck, the first time in her life a man's compliment had left her speechless. Their hands brushed as she took the bowl back, the contact sending sparks through her. Standing up, Arslan gave her a last smile before retreating to his tent.

The next day, as the sun dipped below the horizon, the silence of the desert was shattered. "Bandits!" The shout ripped through the camp.

Li Hua's heart hammered against her ribs. The Copperhead Outlaws.

Arslan was instantly on his feet, knife in hand, shouting orders to the guards. The attack was brutal. Riders emerged from the twilight, their faces masked, and swords glinting. Li Hua was an experienced traveler; she knew the drill. She grabbed a small dagger and dropped down behind a crate of tea. She watched Arslan as he fought fiercely— a blur of blue cotton and steel.

A bandit, wild-eyed and heavily armed, headed straight for the section where the porcelain was stored. Li Hua saw the danger— not just to the cargo, but to another older guard who was frozen in fear. Without a thought, she launched herself from her hiding spot, but she was too slow.

Arslan saw it all unfold. With a roar that seemed to shake the ground, he threw himself in the path of the bandit. They clashed violently. Arslan was a better fighter, but the bandit was reckless. The bandit's sword came straight at his side.

Arslan blocked it, but the force sent him reeling backward, his head slamming against a wooden crate with a sickening thud. He slumped to the ground, his eyes closed.

"Arslan!" Li Hua screamed, her voice lost in the chaos.

Adrenaline roared through her veins. She had her little dagger but it was useless against the bandit's sword, but she saw something else: a heavy iron pan left from dinner preparation. She snatched it up and swung it wildly, and it hit the side of the bandit's head. He stumbled, dazed, and another guard finally ran him through.

The battle ended as quickly as it began. The bandits, realizing they were outmatched by their force, retreated into the night, leaving several dead behind.

Li Hua rushed to Arslan's side. He was breathing, thank the stars, but a nasty cut had opened above his temple.

"He saved my father's cargo," she told the caravan leader, her voice shaking. "He needs my help."

They made a makeshift bed for him in her father's warmer, nicer tent. All through the night, as a nervous calm settled over the camp, Li Hua tended to his wound, using clean linen and a little of her father's expensive alcohol to clean the gash.

He woke near dawn and groaned, eyes fluttering. His dark eyes focused on her face with a look of confusion.

"Thanks," he whispered, a weak smile forming on his lips. "You fight better than you trade."

Li Hua couldn't help but laugh, tears welling in her eyes. "And you, Arslan, are a terrible patient."

She dabbed at his wound gently. The sun was rising, casting a golden light through the tent flaps.

"You were right," she said softly.

He raised an eyebrow. "About what?"

She traced a finger over the painted dragon winding around one of the many bowls that adorned the tent.

"The world is a hard place."

For the first time, Arslan smiled. A real smile. "Then you have to learn to be harder."

Takhudh Al'Arwah

Harrow International School Hong Kong, Ellis, Dylan – 12

The golden medallion in the sky hung above the fiery red horizon and the endless dunes. Sand was swiftly blowing along in the wind and finding its place amongst the millions of grains.

The camel stumbled on the trail, hit by the rays from above. They'd been traveling for days. All of them were exhausted, but they had to reach Dunhuang. They stayed at a good pace until finally, they made camp for the night. Once the tents were up, Jin had to start a fire before they froze to death in the crisp, frigid air.

"Jin?"

The man turned to look at the boy he'd taken under his wing after finding him along the trail a year ago.

"What is it Hakim?"

"Do you ever look up at the stars and think..."

"What?"

"If it all matters? Being a merchant, looking after your dad or..."

"Is this because of your mother?"

"No... it doesn't matter."

The boy turned over with his back to Jin and pulled the rough wool blanket up to his shoulders.

"Remember we have an early start so get a good rest," Jin said.

"I'll try."

The morning sun beamed on their faces; they washed away yesterday's dust, but Jin felt the camp seemed mildly eerie and...quiet. It was Taka, a spice merchants they were travelling with. He'd gone. His bed and camel were still there but it was like he'd vanished into thin air. No trail of footsteps or any sign he was ever there. None of the other merchants had seen him either. They couldn't just stay there and wait without the group, so they set off on their last stretch of the trail.

Finally, they could hear the noticeable noise of crowds and festive music over the dunes. Relieved, they headed to the gates of Dunhuang.

As they rode through the gates, Jin glanced up and saw a shadow peering over the wall, watching the caravan. Jin met a pair of startling green eyes before a woman backed away, revealing a beautiful pearl bracelet from under her dark cloak. She disappeared into the shadows.

They set up their stalls. They didn't get many sales the first day, but on the second day, after much bargaining, they made a good day's profit. Jin was about to head back to camp when a woman appeared.

"Hello! All the other stalls are closed. Can you help me?"

He fought the urge to act like he hadn't heard her and smiled.

"This stall is open if there is one more buyer," he said cheerfully.

"Do you have any type of cloth like linen or cotton?"

Jin scavenged around and found a little slither of cotton.

"Here."

The woman smiled gratefully, and Jin noticed her green eyes. He glanced down at her wrist and saw the pearl bangle he'd spotted earlier.

"Were you the woman at the gate?"

She nodded, smiling. Jin noticed her beautiful smooth hair; he had never seen anything like it.

"My name is Yaoguai, but everyone I know calls me Jin"

"Like the desert spirit, djinn?"

He had never heard of this 'spirit' before, but he wasn't from the desert, being a city man. He shook his head.

"They are the spirits of the old travellers that roam the silk Road and make anyone who passes disappear."

Jin thought of his friend Taka. Then she laughed and he felt a little spark of life in his heart.

“Well Jin the desert spirit, my name is Zaya.”

They chatted at the stall for a while as Hakim watched from the shadows. Zaya mentioned the Crescent Lake next to town and said she would show him.

When they reached the water, they sat on the sand together and admired the crescent shaped lake surrounded by palm trees. It was time for Jin to head back but as he sat there next to Zaya, he felt almost whole. She leaned against him as they both dozed off listening to the soothing water drifting across the sand.

He woke up suddenly and sprang up. Why was he in his bed? Leaving the tent, he looked around. How had he got home? Thoughts of Zaya filled his mind. He had to see her again. He was due to leave that day. He searched through alleyways and winding streets. Then the lake, to where they fell asleep. No footprints, only the smell of her midnight dark hair lingered in the air.

Everything was packed but Jin still had a feeling in his gut, like he should stay and find her, but he snapped himself back to reality; he had to leave because of his father. Jin had only left him a week's worth of food and if he didn't make it back in time, he'd be risking his dad's life. Did he want to do that for a girl he only met last night?

The first gruelling day of riding felt endless. He mindlessly daydreamed of Zaya until They finally hit their first stop. The essence of cold, burnt charcoal scarred the ground from the last fire which seemed so long ago. Hakim had noticed that Jin was quiet.

They lit the fire, and Jin watched the crackling flames spread from log to log.

“What's wrong Jin? Who was that girl you were talking to last night?”

Jin dragged his attention to Hakim and silence fell upon them for a moment.

“Her name was Zaya.”

“Was?”

“She went missing, this morning.”

“How? Wasn't she with you?”

“We fell asleep and when I woke up, I was in the tent and she was gone.”

They didn't speak for the rest of the night until they were lying under their blankets.

“Have you heard tales of the djinn?” Hakim whispered, staring at the stars.

Jin was asleep. Hakim lay awake for a long time.

Jin awoke in the dead of night; he saw a shadow flit through the moonlight and as he watched, it ran.

He got up to chase, and he spotted it on the ridge of a dune. A dark cloak and familiar green eyes that felt as if they pierced his mind. They stared at each other until Jin turned back but the tent was gone. A faint whisper rose from below him. It rose, louder and louder until his ears felt as if they would explode. Then, suddenly, it stopped.

The figure stood in front of him.

“Don't hide.”

Jin fainted.

Wind whistled past his ear bringing up a small pile of sand that fell as a blanket on his face. He awoke in a strange place. He'd never seen this anywhere on the trail. He sprang up and climbed the nearest dune. He searched all around for any sign of life but there was just barren wasteland for miles without end. His cracked lips stung, and his dry eyes squinted in the sunlight.

He walked and walked. He saw the sun fall and rise. He saw black figures on top of buildings. In the distance he spotted a palm tree. A tall luscious green tower, but it also meant there was water. He ran like his life depended on it but it ended in a waste of energy and time. It was a mirage.

Time started to slow, and life felt like a punishment. His friend, lost. The only woman he had ever loved, missing. His father too would die if he didn't get back in time.

As he stumbled across the endless dunes, he saw something: A dark patch in the sky, like smoke. He thought he was dreaming again but he ran anyway. Finally, he saw it in all its beauty: he was back at camp. He fell down the dune and flew into the tent. Something was wrong. Hakim was sitting slumped on the floor holding Jin's bag.

He looked up, revealing horror-filled eyes.

"What is this?" He asked quietly.

He held a small wooden figure drenched in dried blood. Jewellery and other figures fell from Jin's bag.

"How do you have my mum's' charm? I remember her wearing it when I was a small child. Before she went missing. How do you have it?!"

Jin stood in silence.

"And that girl's bracelet, Zaya? I saw her wearing it."

He held up Zaya's pearl bracelet and in that moment it all came crashing down.

Jin's mind flashed back to the lake.

He saw Zaya's crying face.

"Please, I beg you, I have family that love me!" She was pleading with him.

He saw the flash of a knife. And blood.

He saw her lifeless corpse drifting on the lake.

He had never fallen asleep with her on the beach.

His mind had made it up.

"Tell me, *how do you have the charm?!*"

Jin spoke in a dark, low voice.

"Trophies... They're trophies."

Jin slumped over the camel's back; his lifeless eyes stared at the sand ahead.

He rode off over the edge of the horizon.

Without Hakim.

The Merchant's Redemption

Harrow International School Hong Kong, Huang, Derek – 11

Running, panting, gasping for air, beads of sweat formed on Bo's forehead. Coins clattered in his pocket, and a wave of guilt washed over him. What had he done? Glimpses of his crime made his hair stand on end. In the distance, two men charged towards him, like hungry lions that hadn't eaten for days. Bo's feet kicked up dust in the warm breeze as he sped away into a sea of shifting people.

He forced his way through the crowd, weaving left and right. The already narrow alley felt like it was closing in on him, trapping him in this living hell. Foul odors filled his nostrils—he struggled to breathe. Had God found out about his sins? Did He intervene?

Bo was an ancient Chinese merchant, but not just any merchant—he was a greedy one. Even if you had a single dime, he would try to secure a deal. His strategies weren't honest; he scammed people, taking advantage of those who trusted him.

Just when all hope seemed lost, Bo spotted something at the edge of his vision. His eyes lit up at the sight of a heavy stone disk. With great effort, he lifted it, straining as if trying to pick up a mountain. The stampede of the raging crowd trampled around him; he felt like his skull was being crushed by a herd of elephants.

In that moment, flickering lights of his past haunted him. He could almost see the cackling flames of hell, mocking the sinful souls like his. All eighteen levels of that fiery prison flashed before his eyes—people crushed, boiled, and drowned.

He dropped the disk, collapsing to his knees. "I have a wife and kids. I must feed my family! Spare me!" Tears streamed down his face. "I swear, I won't scam ever again!" he promised, biting his lip in desperation.

Suddenly, a BOOM echoed in his ears, reverberating through his body. A thunderclap pierced the sky, and lightning slashed down in a streak of neon white against the blue. Energy surged through him, hypercharging every single cell. Bo's eyes filled with determination. Newly gained muscles rippled with power as he effortlessly lifted the heavy stone disk. Veins emerged from his skin.

Finally, Bo had a chance to breathe. He looked into the darkness of the sewers and felt a new sense of purpose. With determination, he plunged into the depths.

SPLASH! A cascade of water soaked Bo's clothes. Each step sent murky water swirling around his sandals, reeking of rotten fish and eggs. The musty air clung to him like a heavy cloak, while the darkness blinded his sight. He could only use his hands to navigate this eerie maze, feeling the moist, sticky surfaces of the walls covered in clinging vines and ivy.

Suddenly, a sound made him whirl around, instinctively entering a fighting stance. What creatures lurked in the shadows?

Fwoosh. A lone fire flickered in the dark, casting shadows of men on the walls. "What do you want?" Bo called, his voice hollow in the sewers.

“That’s exactly what we want to ask you,” came a whisper, tinged with menace. The dark figures advanced slowly towards Bo, pushing him against the grimy walls. Shadows reached out with bony fingers. Bo’s eyes darted across the room, desperate.

“Do not come near me!” Bo’s voice wavered. “God, forgive me this once. Allow me permission.” He muttered to himself while looking towards the invisible heavens. “I have a knife!” he declared, even though he was clearly empty-handed. In the darkness, there was no glint of a blade. The gang backed away in shock, their heads shaking in doubt.

Seizing the opportunity, Bo broke into a sprint. Every step vibrated through his body like a drumbeat toward liberation.

As Bo’s heart raced, he remembered the ancient Silk Road, where merchants once bravely journeyed to connect East and West. Just like them, he felt a spark of bravery ignite within him. He was not just a scam artist—he could choose to change his fate.

Summoning every ounce of courage, Bo stepped deeper into the darkness. Perhaps he could find a way to right his wrongs. This could be the start of a new trade route—not one of deceit, but of honesty and goodwill. As he trudged through the murky waters, he envisioned tales of redemption spreading across the lands, weaving hope through the threads of the new Silk Road.

With each step, Bo knew he was not just running from something; he was running toward the chance to become something better.

Ashes of Paradise

Harrow International School Hong Kong, Huang, Zixi – 14

Strokes of vibrant reds and pinks caressed the sky in a canvas of deep blues, shimmering through the reflecting water below as the sun dipped below the horizon. There we were, sitting before paradise. In a field of verdant heaven, overlooking a lake, shining in the golden sunset. A wonderful stop from the long journey. Her hand touched mine, as I looked over my shoulder to see a soft smile illuminating her face. Pure paradise. Her hair, glistening in the warm sunlight as her eyes sparkled just like the crystal water reflecting the amber sky above.

“Whatever happens, whether we succeed or not, promise me one thing, Zi Chen.” she whispered, her voice as gentle as the breeze that rustled through the leaves.

“Yes, Ai Yang?”

“Always remember who you are, even through the hardest of times. You are brave, kind, and you will always have someone by your side. That someone being me of course.” she chuckled, and we both started laughing, the stars above us peering down through the serene moonlight.

My boot crushed through his hand, as blood stained the pure silk carpet floor.

“Are you stupid, or just deaf? Did you not hear my clear instructions? I said to go to Hangzhou to sell silk for a profit, not to just come back with a handful of coins, idiot.” I barked; my voice laced with fury as I tossed the sagging bags of gold coins aside.

“But sir, Hangzhou is almost a month’s walk away from here in Xi An, I’m sorry!” he pleaded, trembling on his knees. “Not many people there were willing to buy silk, I couldn’t— ”

Excuses. I pressed my foot further down into his hand, the thrill of power pulsing through me as his screams of agony echoed through my mind. Pain. Pain teaches people the right lessons.

“Leave, and tell your stupid other traders to get their jobs right. I won’t be paying you until you make a profit for me. You know how hard it was for me to get here?” I shouted, signaling my guards to quickly usher him out of the palace.

As he was dragged away, I caught a glimpse of Ai Yang’s eyes, grey and tired. I hurriedly walked over to ask what was wrong, the heel of my boots still staining the golden palace floors with crimson.

“Zi Chen, I think you should give those workers a break, it wasn’t easy getting here and it won’t be easy for them either.”, her hands shook silently as she clasped mine.

“But Ai Yang, look where we are now! No longer just living in an old shack by a lake, but in a royal palace of gold. Don’t you love this? We’ve come so far, and we can only go farther by making other people work harder.” I exclaimed, raising my head to admire the crystalline lanterns of deep red hanging from the jade engraved ceiling. Money had transformed our lives; I was just inspiring other people, wasn’t I. Teaching the workers the way I taught myself. I smiled happily, proud of my achievements.

The clangs of the heavy doors shook the palace awake, as I was surprised by a familiar voice.

“Governor Liu! It’s been so long! What brings you here?” I smiled, the unease chipping away at me like a dagger.

“Zi Chen, you’ve come so far. Now your palace of gold, once your humble shack. But old friend, the workers are unhappy.” he cautioned, his eyes searching for a look of worry on my face.

Wow. An old friend came to visit me, just to tell me I was treating my workers wrongly. I pay them almost double what normal traders are offered! What else do they expect, a mansion of their own? I scoffed, almost laughing as I looked at this figure of my friend with simmering anger as I examined his earnest expression.

“Look at me, Liu. I’ve built all this from nothing!” I exclaimed, gesturing grandly around the glorious hall. “They should be grateful.”

His silence was almost suffocating. He was envious— here just to attack my glory.

A wave of disgust flooded me as I knelt over to his ear.

“You’re a businessman too, Liu.” I whispered, tossing a bag of gold coins into his arms.

“Zi Chen...” he started, but the weight of my wealth silenced his escaping words. He glanced at me one last time – his eyes of disappointment, before walking out the marble gates.

I walked into my glorious castle after a visit to the city, the strange silence echoing through the empty halls of gold. A strange sense of unease ticked through me, but was cured by the sounds of clinking coins in my mind. I slowly pushed the grandiose marble doors open, my eyes catching the sight of what was ahead.

My grand room destroyed, each and every corner ransacked and crushed. Jade crystals scattered across the floor, pieces of gold pulled out from my very walls. Horror pulsed through my veins as I scanned the room for my true treasure.

“Ai Yang? Ai Yang! Where are you?” I yelled, panic surging through my body as my heart beat as if restrained for time out of mind, ramming against my ribcage like an unruly animal as it pleaded to be free.

I searched every corner of the palace, the very halls I admired turning into a maze of thoughts burning through my head. Every second rang through my ears, blaring and deafening. She was nowhere to be found. Nowhere.

I ran to the guard room, the air suffocating, each breath like a thousand knives being pierced into my throat. When I arrived, I immediately signaled them to search everywhere. Every corner of Xi An.

The sound of rapid footsteps echoed through the empty chambers, breaking the long silence.

“Every guard. Dead. By the lake– on the silk road. Bandits– they were everywhere– I –” he panted, gasping for air as his arm bled profusely.

Sweat trickled down my forehead as I stared into his eyes. My last guard. He collapsed before me, his hands grasping my pure white robe as he trembled.

“They want you–” he muttered, before passing out completely.

Strokes of deep reds and pinks caressed the sky in a canvas of grey blues, shimmering through the reflecting water below as the sun dipped below the horizon. The silver moonlight shrouded the lake as a cold misty breeze swept through the ground. A small hut sat opposite the lake, overgrown with vines of ivy creeping up the dilapidated walls, wrinkling and eating away at the decaying wood. My old shack. But inside, was the person who guided me all this time, sitting before the scythe of death from the people I used for money. I walked towards it, and a figure stepped out, pulling Ai Yang. Thank God. She was alive. I took a step forward, but the shimmer of a sword stopped me.

“What do you want? A million gold coins? A mansion? I can give that to you. Just bring her back.” I pleaded with the bandit, his cold eyes glaring at me.

The figure laughed, almost cackling as he drew his sword closer to Ai Yang’s neck.

“Have you learnt nothing? We don’t want money, we want to witness your pain. Your suffering. You broke my brother’s hand for three fewer coins than you demanded. And here you are, scared to pay the final sacrifice.

Coward.”

A tang of fear broke through me. They don’t want money? Impossible. I thought – I thought it would fix things. My knees dropped to the ground as a deafening ringing sensation blasted through my head like a raging wildfire, engulfing every thought of what I had before.

Ai Yang’s voice rippled through my ears, silencing the ringing.

“You are brave, kind, and you will always have someone by your side.”

Brave, I thought. When I always used money to shield myself. But now, I had to be brave.

I got up to my feet and walked slowly towards Ai Yang. My wealth had become my own shackles, binding me to a life of greed, and binding the one dearest to me to the hands of death. But I was going to free us. Free us from the chains I forged.

With grief tightening my throat, I reached for the blade hanging at my side. An icy smirk formed on the face of the bandit.

As my fingers closed around the hilt, memories flooded my mind, each dreams of wonder. But those dreams had slipped through my fingers like grains of sand, crushed by my own greed.

I plunged the blade into my chest, embracing the one I loved at the same time. The warm feeling of her presence, leading me on into a world of darkness. Maybe in another life, we would be free, in paradise.

The (Un)solved Mystery of the Artefact

Harrow International School Hong Kong, Hui, Wun Hei Miles – 12

Geography trip

It was the second day of my school trip to Uzbekistan, a place I had never heard of in my twelve years on the planet. Well, at least until my recent topic in Geography – The Silk Road. Uzbekistan is a country in Central Asia, a long twelve-hour flight from my home, Hong Kong.

Today's itinerary was The Silk Road Museum. As a history lover, I was extremely looking forward to it. There were three main sections in the museum: Treasure of the Silk Road, Traditions of the Silk Road, and the section I was mostly excited about, Unsolved Mysteries of the Silk Road.

I rushed straight to that part of the museum, my mind filled with dozens of unsolved mysteries I have read in my favourite DK collection. Strolling around for fifteen minutes, I have already encountered the Tarim Mummies discovered in Xinjiang province, the vanishing of the Sogdian language, and the lost Roman prisoners who marched East and was never heard of again. Then something on the wall caught my eye. It was an artifact on display inside a silk frame so smooth that it reflected a white glow. I moved closer to see what was inside and my hand touched the frame. Suddenly, the lights in the museum hall flashed, so bright that it blinded my eyes. Within seconds, everything went black.

Samarkand

Loud cries and conversations echoed around me as I slowly opened my eyes. It was almost as bright as it was before I blacked out, only that it was now the blazing sun. I woke up in a busy, chaotic market. In the brightness of the sun, I made out a shadow of some four-legged animal chewing on my zipper. I tilted my head to see it more clearly and was horrified to see the enormous camel right on top of me. I looked around some more, staring at me were people wrapped in weird clothing, some with baskets on their heads. No, I then realised, it wasn't these people who were in funny clothing. It was me, looking oddly different from everyone else, in my baggy cargo shorts, bright yellow sneakers and Nike backpack.

People started to talk to me, but I couldn't understand. Then I remembered, packed for a school overseas excursion, I had a translator in my bag. I pressed the button and it started to capture the voices of the crowd. The translator blurted out in English, "Poor boy, he's dressed in rags."

"Maybe he is from the East," it continued.

Then a boy around my age came closer. "Hello, are you okay?" the translator spoke almost simultaneously as the boy. The boy jumped back, obviously alarmed by the sound coming from the black box.

I spoke into the translator, "Hello, I'm okay. I'm from Hong Kong. Can you show me the way back to the Silk Road Museum?" The crowd looked at each other, not understanding a word. "I flew here from Hong Kong", I continued. Everyone looked even more confused. "Where is this place?" I tried again.

"Here is Samarkand", the boy finally spoke, "who are you, what is 'this'?" He pointed at my black box. Oh yes, Samarkand, I learned of this place from Geography lesson. It was a major city that existed and flourished during the Silk Road era. Located in what is now Uzbekistan. Wait... what! Samarkand?

“What’s today date,” I asked. The crowd responded with silence. It didn’t seem like they understood my question. Perhaps they don’t keep track of dates the way we do. I can’t believe that this was happening, based on the scenes in every science fiction book I have ever read, I am now almost certain where I am. I have timed travelled.

Ahmad

The kind-hearted boy took me home. His name was Ahmad. His family sold dried spices and fruits in the market. According to the translator, his family thought I was lost and that I had travelled by foot a long way from another country where we don’t speak Sogdian. Yes, Sogdian, the language they spoke here in Samarkand, I learned about it in one of my DK books. I wanted so much to explain that the reason I couldn’t speak it was not only because I was from another country, but more so I was from the future.

For a few days, I helped Ahmad’s family manned their stall. Their stall smelled very nicely of cinnamon, pepper and dried apricots. Their shop has been very busy these few days, thanks to the gadgets in my backpack. These were all fascinating items to the people. They would come and look at me perform tricks and would usually pick up something from the stall before they walked off.

I used my laser pointer on people’s faces, they tried to wipe it off but I was the only one who could make it disappear; they thought it was hilarious. I played music on my iPhone. I no longer have access to the Internet here but fortunately I had enough cool apps saved on my phone to do the trick. I also had a power bank which was helpful, but seeing its battery percentage gradually coming down to the 20s made me worried.

The departure

One night, I attempted to explain to Ahmad and his family where I actually came from. I spoke about the modern-day Belt and Road Initiative; how we built on their idea of the Silk Road but ours was connected by flights and vessels; and how I was visiting the country of Uzbekistan which is where the city they live now would be located in the future. From the reaction on their faces, I didn’t think I had too much of a success.

I didn’t know when or if I could ever go back home, just as I didn’t know how or why I got here. I wanted to thank Ahmad and his family before I might suddenly disappear. I sketched a portrait of myself together with Ahmad, him in his “normal” clothes of course, and me in my “rags”. The background was their family’s dried spice stall. I passed the sketch to Ahmad and thanked him for his friendship. Then all of a sudden, that same flash blinded me again. I blacked out.

The artefact

“Hey, you are here! The bus is leaving,” I vaguely heard Jake’s voice from a distance, “quickly come, we need to go now!”

I found myself sitting on the floor of the museum, leaning against the wall with that magical frame that brought me back in time. Apparently only an hour had passed here in the present when it had been a few days where I was. I stood up and finally was able to see the artefact in the frame.

In awe, I read the caption: “This unique artifact, found in a sealed pottery spice jar in Samarkand, depicts two boys in front of a market stall, one in a style unlike any other from the period. The detailed, realistic portrayal of the boy on the right, in his unconventional clothing and backpack, remains a profound mystery. It is considered by some scholars to be the earliest evidence of cultural exchange on the Silk Road.”

“Or something far more extraordinary,” I smiled and ran after Jake for the bus.

Dream of a Lifetime

Harrow International School Hong Kong, Hung, Catherine – 12

Once, when I was barely two years old, I woke up to the smiling face of my mother. However, this wasn't the smile that I was used to, it was forced and sorrowful. I never understood why – why I'd never seen my father after that day, why she kept on toiling through the fields, why she hadn't given me up the way I'd seen the other villagers do to their children.

I had just passed my twentieth birthday – much older than before, but clearly I was just as ignorant. I had known that Chang'an, the 'City of Perpetual Peace', was a wonder of architecture and people, and I wanted to see it. Word had been spreading through Damascus about a war starting up in China and grounding our trade, though, but that didn't stop me from telling my mum that I was going to leave to see what I could earn there. Didn't stop me from packing up my things and leaving. My mum warned me; so did the neighbours; so did anyone who knew me. They said: "A war is brewing in Chang'an. Don't go there, or you will be caught in it!" But I ignored them.

As dawn was breaking the morning I left, I did a final check of my things, said my farewells, and left with a precession of traders. They had come from China, and when I asked to go with them they'd quickly agreed – though how much they understood of what I said is still a mystery. Of course, I was travelling along the road pretending to be male – otherwise I would have been kidnapped and taken away quite quickly. I had worn a pair of some of my only trousers and tunics, and as I attempted to vault onto the donkey the traders had lent me, they proved extremely valuable. Had I worn one of my dresses instead, I would have been useless in riding.

Things being what they were, I jumped onto the donkey, landing on my belly, and carefully pulling myself up. Not careful enough, though, because the donkey groaned and bucked with me on it, nearly catapulting me off. But before long, and after an awful lot of tugging and complaining, the donkey and I were on well-trodden paths that led to Chang'an with our entourage.

As we went, we struck up a conversation. The Chinese traders, still learning my language, frequently got words wrong, but I did my best to help. The desert between Damascus and Tehran wasn't what I had expected – there was lots of water and loads of trees, but it was quite sandy too. We frequently stopped to drink at the oases and let our donkeys rest. Before the end of the month, we'd gotten to Tehran.

We spent a good night's rest in the cheapest inn we found, the first night in a bed for a long time. It was quite a relief. When we woke up, we went to the town square, and we sold a good deal of what we had. The prices were much better than I'd expected – we turned a tidy profit with animals we'd gotten and quickly I found a better donkey who I could comfortably ride. Then after another night's stay at the inn, we set off for our next stop, Tashkent.

Hours, days, weeks passed as we rode. When we got to Tashkent, we did exactly what we did at Tehran – we spent the night in an inn, traded the day away, and the next day we were riding off towards Chang'an and my life's dream. Riding was exhilarating in the best sense – but it was really quite uncomfortable. Luckily, at Tashkent the Chinese traders managed to get an enclosed caravan drawn by horses – I kept my donkey (I'd named her Sally) though.

After another long month, we'd reached Ürümqi, but it was outside its gates that Sally and I had a mild accident. A crazy trader on a mud-coloured horse sped towards Sally and the caravan, and the horses on the caravan quickly swerved in front of Sally's path. As a result, I was thrown off her front and straight into the walls of the caravan. Luckily, I wasn't hurt, but my hair, which was usually kept tightly in a bun, came out in tangles. Between strands of jet-black hair, the jewels that my mum had given me (they were only for girls) showed. And at once I knew that this would be a problem.

I heard the shouting, the sly whispering. I heard all of it. I heard all of it, while I was tied to a chair and blindfolded and gagged. I knew what could, would happen to me. The caravan rattled. Somehow I knew that I wouldn't be saved by anyone other than myself. But... where was I? The words were scythes through my mind. Although it was hard, I drifted off.

I awoke when the caravan suddenly lurched backward and I flew up into the air still tied to the chair. Screams and yells started. And I thought: *What a perfect time to get out of this hell!* My hands were tied with low-strength rope, and I quickly broke free. I ripped off my blindfold and I managed (after lots of choking) to get my gag out. Slowly, the shouts dulled, and I knew I didn't have much time. Unbound, I sprinted out the caravan and took off on the worn path. Before long, I noticed that Sally had somehow caught up to me. Immediately I got on her and together, we bolted down the road. I risked a fleeting glance backwards as we thundered forwards, shivering to see the horse-drawn caravan matching our pace. Sally would tire quickly – I had to find a place to hide.

Luck was on my side that fateful day. As the sun set, Sally hadn't tired a bit, and the caravan was slowing behind us. I didn't know how much time I had lost trapped. I just knew that I would make it to Chang'an if I died for it.

As the sun set, to my relief I noticed an inn by the side of the road. Just before we entered, I remembered that I should tie up my hair lest I was taken again. Grateful to have my pack on me – I had managed to take it from the caravan as I left – I paid for a room and a stable for Sally. In the morning, we would continue.

Again, days and weeks passed. With the caravan nowhere in sight, Sally and I set a leisurely pace, and we stopped where we could.

At least until the caravan sped up to us.

We had just passed Lanzhou, within sight of Chang'an. It looked nothing like how I had imagined. I told myself that it was just the distance. When we got there, it would look much different. That's when what I was dreading happened – the kidnappers caught up to us. Sally put on an unnatural burst of speed and we rocketed forward, but the caravan did too. I could feel her starting to tire. Without the adrenaline of the escape, she couldn't keep up. However, I urged her forward and much to my surprise, she held it together. We kept our pace, but again the caravan did not. It slowly backed away, and I was relieved for it.

As I got closer to Chang'an, it never changed to what I hoped. It stayed dark, abandoned, and quiet. The closer we got, the more my uneasiness grew. It was reaching the breaking point when I spotted the first house. Or, what used to be a house. It was cracked, half the roof caved in, two of its walls missing, and I tried not to think what had happened to the owner. And as Sally trotted down the streets, I was ready to vomit off the side of her. The streets were stained with blood and lined with corpses.

It was at this moment that a warning rang through me. It was the words of my mum, my neighbours, of anyone that knew me. *A war is brewing in Chang'an. Don't go there, or you'll be caught in it!*

There wasn't a war brewing in Chang'an. It had ravaged the city, destroyed its core, left it broken, and here I was, wishing it to be undone. I just sat there then, waiting. The soft sound of horse hooves and wheels slowly drifted through the air.

I turned. The thing I had been dreading had just happened. The other thing I was dreading was happening too. From the edge of the horizon, from the road, from my only route back to home, came a caravan.

I'd done it. I'd gotten to Chang'an, the so-called 'City of Perpetual Peace'. Completed my life's dream. But there was no city to be found.

And what had I paid to get there?

Sabotage, Betrayal and Glory

Harrow International School Hong Kong, Jiang, Elton – 13

The vibrant Han caravan slithered quietly out of the thick, vermillion gates of Chang'An, the camels' bells jingles fading into the layers of darkness hidden by forests of deep green hills in the distance where the sun sank slowly as the city hushed between the dim, flickering lights under the scattered diamonds of the dome of the sky.

Camels brayed, merchants' golden coins on their robes jingled delicately, as piles of indigo silk, each thread originating from silkworm cocoons in hidden valleys deep in the mountains of the far east dangled from bright red strings tied in huge knots. The Parthian pathfinders shared their insights with passion, cheering occasionally amongst themselves, as Chief Li laughed along, amused by the enthusiasm parthians had for trade, and the never ending, harsh and even deadly journeys it required. Near the end of the caravan, a Parthian scribe knelt on a crimson carpet covered in intricate patterns, scribbling a letter. By winter, they would return with spices, ornaments, and creatures — heroic, wealthy and prideful.

At the center, Lao Chen, a grizzled, wrinkly merchant in dull gray robes, marched with the caravan, squinting as he observed the surroundings. His father had been an experienced merchant as well – he tried to reach Greater Qin thirty years ago, only to vanish in the Parthian deserts. As several mercenaries lifted the frail man onto a camel, even Chief Li looked back in regard.

“We will reach the uncharted lands of Greater Qin, beyond the Parthia,” he boomed “then the world will kneel before Han. Even if we bleed for it.”

Kang, the Sogdian translator, who was rumoured to have been held hostage by the Xiongnu as a child, shifted nervously. Ink stained his fingers, and a thin scar traced his temple. He watched Mithridates, the most respected of the pathfinders, as he carefully wrote, in tiny characters, his hands trembling: “Parthians rely on blocking the route. No amount of money can waver their loyalty.”

“Fear is just an illusion,” Lao Chen smiled, patting Mithridates' shoulder “Ignore it, and it will be gone.”

Kang translated, and Mithridates' jaw tightened. He glanced at Kang, then at Lao Chen, as the air seemed to tense between them.

The sun glared down at the saffron sand dunes, scarring the earth with its stinging rays, as they trudged through the deep piles of sand that devoured half their legs every time they stepped down. A soft whisper came from the distance.

“Sandstorm” Chief Li whispered.

The ground burst upwards, vomiting yellow dust that teared through the once tranquil sky, the violent winds howling like a demon. The merchants scrambled as camels screeched in the merciless, churning sea of dust and chaos. As they shuffled through the shadows, the winds calmed, and the dust lingered in the air, swirling whenever someone walked past. Somewhere at the front, two camels fell, bellowing in agony then sighing in despair, as blood trickled down long, dirty wounds, still fresh, dripping into the sand. Their eyes were still open in disbelief, eerily blank, as if they'd been slaughtered by someone, not the sand. Chief Li and Lao Chen glanced at each other, then dismissively signalled to march on.

Three days into the Pamir Pass, midnight was silent and coated in blackness. An eerie shriek of a horse at the end of the valley shattered the stillness, echoing through the cold, barren peaks nobody could reach. A torch was dumped

onto the rocks, as Temir, a sogdian mercenary stumbled coughing, shirt torn, face stained with blood and dust. Little Zhang, an officer's six-year-old son awoke to find Kang motionless, slumped over the horse — pale, his bloodshot eyes wide open in horror, a Parthian dagger in his back. He gasped. Temir spun around, tense, his heart racing. The glare shifted into a warm smile as he saw it was Little Zhang.

“Little Zhang,” he whispered softly, still trying to catch his breath “your uncle Kang was going to tell the bad guys secrets — secrets about how we make the silk your father sells.”

The child nodded, still glancing nervously at Kang. It was true that Kang had spoken less after the sandstorm. A fresh tear filled with guilt, regret and remorse splattered onto the cold, grey rocks, as Kang closed his eyelids for the last time.

The whole caravan celebrated Little Zhang's birthday surrounded by the bazaars still bustling downstairs between the warm glow of flickering lanterns — the old musician played his new, jolly tunes as the cook, Old Wang served an enormous bowl of hot noodles, his lips curling into a soft smile, his eyes sparkling with warmth and pride to have fulfilled the child's simple wishes. Under the moonlight, Lao Chen gazed wistfully at Little Zhang, leaning on the complex, hued tiles reflecting the gentle flicker of the flames, quietly wishing that these moments could happen again, after they returned to Chang'An.

At dawn, the caravan emerged from the city gates like ghosts — even the camels fell silent under the thick air. Beneath helmets and headscarves, eyes were fixed down, only tracking the footsteps of the people before them. Chief Li and the pathfinders moved with the group with furrowed brows, hurriedly discussing the route in passionate whispers. Desperate, Mithridates sternly stated that he knew a quiet, hidden valley.

“It's safe.” He insisted, gritting his teeth, his ocean blue eyes staring right into Chief Li's “Parthians don't go there.”

Lao Chen sat in silence on the camel, staring at Temir's note, a warning of spies he had slipped into Lao Chen's pocket before the sandstorm. He couldn't shake the feeling: “Someone was watching.” And perhaps, they still were.

An eagle's piercing shriek in the sky rippled through the air, as a haunting battle cry echoed from the end of the valley. Chief Li spun around, eyes wide, waiting for an answer from Mithridates. Blood rushed up through the traveler's temples, their heads throbbed, their vision blurred, as the smell of death lingered in the air.

“No Han merchant will bypass the laws of the great Parthian Empire.” A stern, hollow voice dryly rasped behind Old Wang — Mithridates. He drew his dagger, followed by the pathfinders, slowly, calmly, dangerously. Then, they disappeared behind the rocks.

“As I said,” Lao Chen yelled, his sharp voice wavering, his face red from fury “we will reach Greater Qin, even if we bleed for it!”

Warriors, covered in dark armour, glared out from their helmets glittering under the sun, oozed into the valley, like an infinite river of black ink, humming a haunting tune, marching steadfast at the traders. Suddenly, the threatening stare of the Han Warriors turned into quick, uncertain glances at Chief Li, secretly praying he would accept defeat.

Depressing weeks went by, as the camels trudged with cinnamon, dates, and delicately carved coins, quietly. On the precious plains between the Taklamakan desert Pamir mountains, they sat in silence, lethargic, dispirited to walk on.

Old Wang, who had been on the road for the past thirty years, roasted a goat, steamed rice and stuffed dates with almonds. The aroma smelt like home — the warmth and happiness already forgotten by the travelers. He grinned as he fanned the roaring flame. Smoke billowed, thick and black.

Lao Chen frowned. “Too much smoke.”

Old Wang shrugged. “Keeps the bugs away.”

He was wrong.

Shadows emerged from the mountains — Xiongnu-backed bandits, horses cloaked in deep red, faces wrapped in grey cloth. Jeering, they charged, flooding the camp. Children cried, whimpering quietly. Old Wang stood, confident by his fire. Swiftly, he walked away — he filed into the crowd of bandits, refusing to look back at those who once trusted him so deeply.

Tiny words were engraved on Old Wang’s spoon, as Lao Chen stared, lost in his inarticulate emotions: “Han glory is at the cost of negligence, betrayal and hatred.” The old man, once a child, who was exchanged as a hostage by his own father’s caravan to bandits for protection, who was fed and taught by the Xiongnu, ignored the screams of merchants that blindly pursued profit and glory.

At dawn, Little Zhang clutched his stuffed silk rabbit, solemnly walking in silence, as the old musician played a slow tune on a broken flute, trekking eastwards sorrowfully. The wind howled, and somewhere far away, Old Wang laughed, mockingly.

Then, the desert stayed silent, as it always will.

The Land of Silk and Song

Harrow International School Hong Kong, Jiang, Vincent – 13

The air in the Parthian city of Ctesiphon was thick with the scent of spices, camel dung, and the dry, ancient dust of the Silk Road. For eighteen years, this was the world of Lin. His parents, earnest and quiet, were merchants, who came from China, the heart of the Silk Road and settled here in the flourishing capital of the Parthian Empire, which dominated a large section of the trade route.

Lin's childhood was a tapestry woven from two worlds: the sun-baked brick and bustling bazaars of Parthia, and the cool, ordered calligraphy and Confucian texts of his parents' small compound. He spoke Parthian and Chinese with equal fluency, a bridge between the two great empires.

When he turned eighteen, the wanderlust that had been a quiet hum in his soul became a roar. He yearned to see the fabled "Great Qin" (Rome) that the Parthian merchants spoke of with a mixture of awe and suspicion. He bid his parents a tearful farewell and joined a caravan heading west, a motley collection of Chinese traders, Indian jewelers, and a few grizzled Parthian guards.

The journey was arduous but exhilarating, until the third week. They were deep in the mountains, a desolate, rocky pass, when the attack came. It was swift, silent, and terrifyingly organized. The attackers wore no tribal colors, only dark, heavy robes and featureless bronze masks that reflected the weak sunlight. They were not bandits; they moved with the precision of soldiers.

Lin fought, but was quickly subdued. He was not harmed, nor were the others. Instead, he was separated and placed in a sturdy, iron-barred cage on the back of a cart, a strange, bewildered prisoner.

His captivity was a very strange thing indeed. He was caged, yet fed well—rich stews and fresh water. His captors, the masked men, were silent and efficient. They treated him with a strange, almost respectful distance, never speaking, never meeting his eyes. He was a valuable cargo, not a slave. The confusion was a greater torment than any physical hardship. Why was he here? Who were these men? They were not Parthian, their movements too rigid, their discipline too severe or the nomadic Xiongnu, their equipment too fine.

The only thing that could help him pass time was playing his erhu, which he did prodigiously well, and look at his surroundings. Day after day, the only view that met his eye was desert and sand. Once, they passed by another trader, draped in expensively embroidered silk and carrying satchels that smelled of spices and herbs. Sometimes at night, he could hear the distant sounds of the music of others travelling the well worn roads of a flourishing trade.

One evening, as the caravan rested by a small oasis, Lin watched from his cage. The masked men were gathered around a small fire, and one of them was carefully unfolding a piece of silk parchment. The light of the fire caught the surface, and Lin's breath hitched.

The parchment was a letter, but what drew his eye was the seal pressed into the wax at the bottom. It was a large, square impression, and though the details were blurred by the firelight, the style was unmistakable. It was a Han Imperial Seal. He had seen drawings of such seals in his father's texts—the square shape, the stylized characters, the dragon-tortoise knob. But more than that, the specific, powerful script, the sheer authority it conveyed, spoke of one man, the man whose name was synonymous with the expansion of the Silk Road itself: Emperor Wu of Han.

These are not bandits, Lin realized with a jolt that cleared his confusion. These are agents of the Han court. They are not taking me to Rome; they are taking me somewhere else, for some purpose I do not know. The thought of being a pawn in the distant, powerful game of the Han Emperor filled him with a sudden, desperate need for control.

That night, Lin used a small, sharpened piece of bone he had saved from a meal. The lock on his cage was well-made, but the men had grown complacent. After hours of painstaking work, the tumbler clicked.

He slipped out, a shadow among the sleeping forms. He took nothing but a small waterskin and a knife. He did not head west. He turned his back on the setting sun and began to walk east, toward the rising moon, toward the land of his ancestors.

His journey was a grueling, solitary reversal of the Silk Road. He traveled by night, hiding in caves and dry riverbeds by day. He bartered his small knife for food in remote villages, speaking in the local dialects he had picked up in the bazaars. He crossed the vast, unforgiving expanse of the Taklamakan Desert, guided by the stars and the desperate hope of seeing the land of the Han.

He passed through the Jade Gate, a monumental archway that marked the official boundary of the Han Empire, a moment that brought him to his knees in exhausted relief. From there, the road became easier, the settlements more frequent, the language his own. He was in Gansu, then Shaanxi, following the Wei River.

Finally, after months of travel, he saw it. The massive, imposing walls of the capital city, a sight that dwarfed anything in the Parthian West. The city of Chang'an (Xi'an), the center of the world, the home of the emperor whose seal had set him free.

He stood before the towering gates, his clothes ragged, his face weathered, but his eyes bright with a fierce, new determination. He had come home to a land he had never known, a land that had reached out and claimed him from across the world. Lin, the child of the Parthian Silk Road, had reached the gates of Xi'an. His journey was over, and his story was about to begin in the land of Silk and Song.

A Boy and the Restoration of Time

Harrow International School Hong Kong, Li, Favian – 12

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

As Arin travelled, he pieced together fragments of forgotten history. He spent nights in ruined watchtowers, copying old symbols into the margins of his book. He talked to shepherds, traders, monks, anyone with a story about ancient routes. Slowly, a pattern emerged. The Silk Road wasn't just a road. It was a plan, one that history was waiting for someone to restart. And Arin realised something terrifying: He fit the missing founder's story. Not perfectly, but close enough. Whenever he hesitated, he felt the desert tug at him, as if time itself was nudging him

onward. So, he began building. He mapped safe passes through mountains. He convinced villages to set up rest stops. He helped merchants connect their routes. He carved markings into stones so travellers would know the safest path. At night he collapsed from exhaustion. At dawn, he rose again, because the world felt unfinished until he worked. And above him, I watched. A silent witness to the first breaths of a road that should have existed centuries ago. But not everyone wanted the new road.

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

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

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

A Prince's Journey to the East.

Harrow International School Hong Kong, Li, Ziqian – 13

There was once a prince called Muhammad. He was born in Bukhara, Uzbekistan. He wasn't like other spoiled, rich children, who enjoyed the comfort of their mansions, fancy toys and breakfast in bed. No. He was a prince who marvelled in adventure. When he was young, he would explore the palace roof and basement, climb the tallest tower in the city, and sneak through the city's wine cellar (and get caught in all three scenarios, sadly). One of the things he loved the most was watching famous traders leaving to trade along a path to the East called the "Silk Road". Although he loved watching them depart for adventures, he often wondered why many didn't return.

When Muhammad was seventeen, his father died, leaving him, the only heir, to inherit the wealth of his country. Many greedy eyes noticed this. More doubted a young man could keep the wealth or run a country. By now, Muhammad had thoroughly explored the entire country and wanted to explore beyond before he took over the crown. He heard many stories of traders making a fortune trading along the Silk Road, especially in a country called "China". Therefore, he spent much of the wealth preparing for a journey through the Silk Road, buying spices, gems and other goods to trade, hiring mapmakers to plan the safest route, preparing camels and crew, and gathering information wherever he could. At last, when Muhammad was eighteen, everything was ready.

There was a huge parade for Muhammad's departure. He said to himself, "Muhammad, you're finally having your own adventure. You might be richer when you are back and prove you are capable of being a king." He chuckled, with a hopeful heart and high spirits, he and his crew left.

In the first few weeks, everyone in his crew was happy and laughing. They passed a few cities and traded goods and replenished supplies. Soon everything went downhill. The men who have been eyeing Muhammad's wealth also had preparations, but for a bad intention. They gathered a crew of bandits, silently following their tracks, which Muhammad's crew carelessly left behind, waiting for the perfect chance to begin the assault. They had the advantage of numbers and surprise, but they wouldn't strike carelessly. They decided to wait for the perfect chance to strike their unsuspecting prey.

One night, while Muhammad's crew camped for the night and drank wine and ate roast meat, Muhammad was updating his diary on the Silk Road. *Always remember*, he wrote in his diary, *bring enough food and water. Keep track of the time and stay on schedule. One thing I learned so far is to bring some games. It's quite boring facing the desert every day and having nothing to do at night except counting supplies.* Muhammad chuckled picturing the thought of a bunch of grown men fighting over games made for children.

Suddenly, the sound of a war horn echoed through the camp. Many of his crew came out of their tents wondering what happened. "Everyone, protect yourselves!" Muhammad screamed at the top of his lungs, "It's the bandits' war horn!" The bandits began unleashing a rain of arrows. Thanks to Muhammad's warning, most of his crew was unharmed. The battle had begun.

Thankfully, the bandits didn't plan on a quick raid. Instead, they wanted to unleash a siege and wait until Muhammad ran out of resources, then achieve a quick victory. Muhammad's crew prepared defences while still eating and drinking as usual. There was no cheering or laughing though, and everyone slept with a shield covering their body and a spear or axe in hand.

Muhammad was worried. The bandits' siege had caused delay in his schedule and their supplies were running out. If they didn't break out soon, the water supply wouldn't last his crew to the next city. Muhammad came up with a strategy to charge out at a midnight.

During the first few days of the siege, the bandits expected attempts to charge out. But after several weeks of hardly any commotion from Muhammad's camp, their guard were completely lowered. Now was the perfect chance to escape.

Muhammad and his team packed the most essential supplies, leaving the tents and other unnecessary items. As soon as everything was ready, he whispered, "Alright, everyone. We have one shot at this, we're escaping through the west barrier, be quick and swift, or else we'll all be captured!" They charged quickly and suddenly, slaying bandits along the way. When the remaining bandits finally woke up, Muhammad and his team already took flight. The bandits left behind nearly everything to chase Muhammad, the prey has escaped.

The bandits chased them for a few days, neither team stopping day or night to rest. Exhausted, the bandits eventually gave up and headed back to camp. Muhammad and his crew's stronger will prevailed. Muhammad's team celebrated. Only Muhammad was troubled, because he realized they had lost their direction in the chase.

The next few weeks were miseries that would forever remain in Muhammad's mind. Due to the lack of water, each person was only allowed half a litre of water a day. At first it was bearable, but the intense heat caused them to see mirages of oasis. Once he thought it was so real, he ran over and licked the "water", and the sting on his tongue told him he had licked sand. He cried in despair.

They were only a few weeks short from the next city, but the water supply had already run out. Many collapsed in the heat and were carried by others. Again, Muhammad murmured an oasis was in front of him, thinking it was his only hope. He charged forward to yet find another mirage. That night, Muhammad's team gave up all hope, and many laid down waiting for death. But Muhammad was not one of them. He decided to explore a bit on his camel and calm his mind for a solution.

This time, he spotted an oasis. He decided to ride his camel through it, thinking it was an illusion again. But the camel put its head down and sipped the cool refreshing water. "I must be dreaming," thought Muhammad. When he attempted to sip the water, it wasn't sand but was water! He drank gulps of the cool, refreshing, delicious, sweet nectar, and thought it was the best thing he drank in his life. He reported back to his team. Everybody cheered with delight. They knew they were saved.

Thanks to the oasis, they made it safely to the next city, Aksu. The government was so impressed by their story that they decided to help Muhammad with his mission. The rest of the journey was smooth trading in every city, buying exotic items at a tremendously cheap price compared to Uzbekistan. He sold nearly all his gems, camels, and spices, making fortune after fortune in each city he passed.

Muhammad never forgot his last destination: Xi'an. He bought silk smooth to the touch, exotic peacock feathers and ate the local food (duck, rice and vegetables, a huge feast). They even met the Emperor of China. The emperor was so impressed by his story that he sent a massive crew to escort him back to Uzbekistan, planning to remain faithful trade partners. The emperor told Muhammad that years ago, like Muhammad's journey to the East, he sent a monk to the West not for goods, but for sacred scriptures. The monk was called Xuanzang. The emperor even heard a rumour that the monk recruited a monkey and a pig as his disciples along the way. "Interesting," Muhammad thought to himself, "our stories would both make good novels!"

One day, in Uzbekistan, a child reported seeing Muhammad returning. The citizens thought he was lying. "Are you out of your mind?! How can it be possible he lived in the desert for five years?" They questioned the boy. When Muhammad arrived in front of the city gate, at first it was an awkward silence, then it turned to a massive cheer. The cheerful citizens crowned Muhammad the king.

After the adventure through the Silk Road, Muhammad was now a handsome, grown man. Twenty-three years old, he was already rich, successful and experienced. At twenty-five, he married the king's daughter in the neighbouring Kazakhstan, who marvelled his bravery. He could easily retire and stay rich for the rest of his life. But he loved adventure. Once again, he embarked on the adventure on the Silk Road, this time bringing two hundred men and his wife. The trip took half the time needed on his first trip, since he was more experienced (He also didn't forget to bring board games). In his lifetime he went through this whole journey three times! "The Silk Road was the marvel of my life." Muhammad proudly claimed, "My soul of adventure will never cease to a stop. I await my next adventure!"

Stars of the heavens

Harrow International School Hong Kong, Ongvises, Hatty – 13

Present day

Hafiza

“Bye ma! Bye dad!” Hafiza said hastily as she hopped off the little car her father drove, barely waiting for it to scuttle to a stop outside her grandmother’s house, which stood in solitude in the plains, surrounded by nothingness except for a cobblestone road their car came by.

“Careful!” her father called out, chuckling at the pure ecstasy in Hafiza’s bounding steps.

Behind her, her mother stepped gracefully out of the car, sashaying towards a severely overgrown garden, sighing fondly at the energetic mess that was her daughter. Meanwhile, Hafiza had already reached the front door and rang the doorbell. A moment after, there was some shuffling and a few muffled words in Arabic.

Finally, the door creaked open, revealing a stout elderly woman with an endearing smile, who opened her arms as Hafiza rushed into her. Hafiza’s parents soon caught up, halting behind her.

“I’ll take good care of Hafiza, don’t you two worry.” Tita assured them. “She needs to sleep soon now. It’s late already!” She pat Hafiza on the back with a mischievous wink, and ushered her inside after another round of farewells.

After some dinner and some fuss over bath time, it was time for stargazing, which she had waited for all day. They got the tent, carpets, blankets, and jackets, then ambled through the crisp grass field to pick a spot to stay for the night.

About 1,500 years ago

Siara

The sun was crimson red as it rose up from the dunes of the Gobi desert, and the world itself seemed to rouse from its sleep, yawning in reply to the comforting, familiar glow, shaking off the remnants of a forgotten dream. The air was hazy from the dust and sand, aimlessly drifting in the air, landing on everything. Warmth radiated from its golden-red core like freshly baked naan, just hoisted out of the oven a few moments ago. Siara was already neatly rolling up her sleeping bag, as she had done so for the previous two months of this seemingly unending journey and repeated loops. Their family was from Rishtan, and planned to travel to Chang’an, something they have never done before. Yawning languidly, she hauled the roll beneath her arm and crawled out of her snug little tent and was met by the breathtaking view of the snow-tipped mountain behind them, almost out of sight. Her parents were roasting a leg of lamb by the campfire, and she could identify the enticing scent of sumac wafting over.

“Come over! The lamb’s done!” her father yelled, beckoning her over with a wave of his hand. Siara rolled her eyes and strolled towards the crackling flames. Her mother ripped strips of dusty meat and passed it around. Siara chewed it reluctantly, as it sat sand-covered on her tongue. After the meal, her father wrapped the leftovers in cloth with a salt coating. They then loaded their possessions onto their horses with no time to waste, and set off towards Hami, their first eastern destination.

It was known as a city where the east meets the west, a curious place where it wasn’t western, or eastern, just perpetually stuck somewhere in between, a clash between two worlds. The buildings had a unique style of their own, with pillars built like those in Chinese palaces, but arches with a European essence. It was an abrupt change in scenery, shocking to the senses. After setting up the stall, she listened to the chatter in the market and merchants bartering for low prices aloofly, as she sat next to her father. Her mother was off to do some trading of her own and had left with a bag of coins. As Siara sat there, merchants coming and going, time trickled along slowly, until the stars came out and she drifted off into a dream.

The travel across the center of the Gobi was a journey most perilous, a patch of desolate emptiness on the map. But the route around the center was too long, and simply could not be done if they wanted to reach Chang'an. So they packed again, rented some camels, joined another trader party, and set off on the most treacherous part of their travels.

After four days of travel, they came to a settlement. The locals were Mongolian, nomads that lived in yurts and rode horses before they could walk. They were usually carefree and welcoming, but this time, their expressions were strained and worried.

"The bandits are becoming braver," the elder told her parents grimly. "They attacked one of our tribes a few days ago."

As night fell, there was an eerie quality as the hazy fading light came with yips and howls that echoed across the night. Bandits.

Everyone readied their weapons, waiting for the attack, but nothing came. *They may have found other victims*, Siara thought nervously.

As they set off to another camp, she heard the elder's warning to her father: *Proceed with caution*.

As the party traveled out of sight from the nomads, the ground thundered, the dust vibrating lightly, then stronger. "Stand your ground!" someone shouted as another voice shouted "Run!" but it was too late. Bandits rushed in on all sides, riding scarred stallions that neighed crazily as they charged. The procession collapsed into chaos. Blades were drawn, daggers thrown. Siara had dismounted clumsily and hid behind her camel, her heart pumping hard in fear. Then one bandit turned suddenly to her direction, zoning in on her. With a menacing snarl, he lunged at her, just missing Siara as she dodged to the side. He made another attempt, grasping her wrist—then another cacophony of voices and footsteps, and a fist flying towards her face.

Hafiza

As she lay down beneath the vast night sky, she felt crushed by the space above her, the sky stretching further than ever with no end.

"Grandma, do you know how to find your way using the stars?" Hafiza asked, as she raised a hand up as if to touch the sky.

"Sadly, I do not. But our ancestors did..." her grandmother replied softly, "So they were never lost. The road was their home."

Siara

She woke to the gentle rustling of sand and camels grunting in the distance, her vision waning and wavering, unable to focus. The punch had left her with a headache, but the pain was wearing off. Touching her face, she felt the blood around her nose. Was it broken? She decided not to test it further, and got up stiffly, her very bones aching and vibrating as she surveyed her surroundings. The wind whistled dismally around the nothingness around her; only a few camels clopping around. No one to call for help, not a soul on the horizon. Her heart dropped dangerously low as her head pounded painfully. Her instincts cried out, *get on a camel, ride for a settlement, something do something, no time to waste*, and she blindly crawled onto a camel. She kicked it into action and headed towards nothingness.

She moved on for days, endless sand, sand, sand. Hope faded into glimmers like the stars ahead she checked nightly to determine her direction, her skills faulty and mind panicked. She occasionally ate from the bits of food in the packs on her camel, and sparingly used the waterskins she collected. *The closest camp was miles away, but should be reachable*, she reassured herself. *But would my parents be there? Are they...?*

She traveled for more than a week, her food and water already spent. If she doesn't reach camp soon, she will die of thirst. As she settled down for yet another night in the freezing winds of the desert, already worn out, starving and

trembling, she longed for her mother's embrace, her father's laughter. As her eyes shut, through her tears, she saw stars, uncountable, always far away.

Hafiza

Hafiza lay there beside her grandmother. The stars were watching her, ready to whisk her into the heavens beside them as she fell asleep.

Siara

She woke up with sand blown all over her, into her mouth, hair, eyes... And her camel was gone without a trace. It was dawn, the stars slowly fading as the sun peeked over the knolls of sand. Her throat clogged in panic as she sprung to her feet and spun around. Miles of waves like a golden sea, no stars to guide her, unescapable. Then, a lake, hidden in the roiling sands. She stubbornly trudged mindlessly towards the oasis, light-headed, until her mind blurred into raw emotions.

*This is the end give up there is no hope
Just a bit further you might get there*

In a dreamy haze, she heard voices, two voices she recognized unmistakably... Mom? Dad? Or was it the wind? Siara limped further, inching forward. She almost burst into tears, running blissfully towards the sunrise, as her heart pounded in beat with her footsteps, *one two one two one two*, when she saw them there on the horizon—or was it just a mirage?

The Link Between Commerce, Integrity, And Kindness

Harrow International School Hong Kong, Qi, James – 12

cosmos. Stars played, smiled, and danced in the sky, illuminating the ground, making a path for people. The moon and stars shined and brightened everything. In the cool desert night, Wang and his caravan lay. Down there, Junli was thinking. Thinking what glory and fame he would achieve

Everyday back in China, Junli lived in poverty. Every mealtime, he ate a measly bowl of rice and was left freezing. Despite that, he was on a mission that would make him famous. Although he worked for a businessman, he was not renowned. However, this mission would turn him into a deity. This mission would propel his career and transform his life into glory. Fame was the direct opposite of describing Junli. In his sleep, Junli dreamt of glory, the glory his father possessed in abundance. Now, it was his chance. In Junli's eyes, his life had culminated into this moment. . In Chinese, Jun (君) meant gentlemen, while Li (礼) meant kindness

Rich and affluent, Junli's father was a silk merchant who had garnered a massive power base from his extensive dealings. His father always downgraded and neglected quality to extract revenue. Whenever someone lodged a complaint, his father would threaten or bribe the official in charge. Workers were no more than an asset to him, something that existed so his life could be eased. During meals, religious ceremonies and family events, conversations were steered back to himself, while other's achievements were belittled. Growing up, bribery, fraud, arrogance became second nature to Junli while kindness was alien.

Yet, since Junli was the second son, his father refused to give Junli any support or inheritance. Thus, Junli had to make a place for himself in the world.

As soon as Junli grew up, a businessman hired him, believing he was an honest and righteous person who possessed the skill and rigour for commerce. However, he failed to see what was inside Junli. Throughout his stint, customers were regularly bereft of their money. Whenever a report was hatched, he desperately made sure that it was not heard. Finally, to earn raises and appease his guilt, he lied and aggrandised the profits.

However, his post was not the most influential or important. People who went on trading trips were the revered ones. Although he was yearning to go on such as trip, he did not believe the businessman would ever consider him. However, because of Junli's meticulous acting and ability to garner profits, the businessman gradually trusted him and ordered him to go on an important commercial expedition to Dunhuang, which was a gleaming jewel along trade routes.

Long and treacherous, the mission would drain Junli. Yet, Junli knew that it was his chance. His chance to accumulate money. His chance to become wealthy. His chance to become revered. Although the mission was arduous, without it, his life would be meaningless. Therefore, the risk had to be taken.

A few days later, Junli and his caravan were ready. Laden and packed, the entire caravan was full of silk.

Accompanying him were camels to transport the goods and cameleers. Meanwhile two guides and two guards led the trip. Similar to his father, Wang did not value the people aiding him.

On some nights, the caravan stopped in the middle of the desert. The moon shined brightly in the sky illuminating everything below, like a white pearl. Sand dunes rose all round, towering over them. Civilisation was nowhere to be seen, something that became a memory, like a dim candle shining in the darkness. Unlike the boiling hot day, the weather became bristling cold. As Junli shivered, he tied the camels to a pole. Ignoring the guard's exhaustion, Junli would force the guards to stand outside. Meanwhile, the guides were cramped into a tent. Looking up at the night sky, a tiny grin emerged on Junli's face. This was the dream throughout his life and he was living it. In Junli's eyes, he, himself was flawless. Despite the adrenaline inside, his heart was still beating rapidly. Bandits roamed around in the desert, and they could emerge anytime to plunder and kill. Every sound sent a shiver down his spin.

On other nights, they would stay in a caravanserai. They would enter the caravanserai right after the imposing and towering gates opened. Various traders such as Sogdians, Persians and Chinese were all gathered inside, resting, chatting and interacting. After securing a room for himself and a place for the camels, Wang went and rested soundly

in his room knowing that bandits could not attack him. In the morning, after paying the cost, he dragged the caravan out of the caravansera.

Eventually, after one long and gruelling month of travelling, the caravan slugged into Dunhuang. Finally, after his efforts, he entered the city of his dreams, the city where he would become rich and powerful. When he entered, the cosmopolitan and diverse make-up of the city caused his jaw to drop. The city was like a piece of artwork, something full of detail, colour, and atmosphere. After entering through the intimidating city gate, he went straight towards the market. Loud and packed, the market was the place where Junli would make his name. His heart skipped a beat as he entered, since he knew that his caravan would be something that everyone desired. There were people of every ethnicity imaginable. Dark skinned nomads speaking in an alien tongue were tucked away chatting with Arabs wearing traditional dresses. Meanwhile, other Chinese were there, ready to engineer a profit.

Unpacking the goods, Junli displayed the silk and embroidery onto the table. Immediately, the crowd dissolved into chaos. People screamed as they rushed over to purchase all the silk they could afford. Everyone poured out bags upon bags of gold and silver, in a desperate attempt to get this white, soft material that reigned in their imaginations. The prices of his goods reached higher and higher, while people kept screaming louder and louder. A large smile wrapped around his face, as he soaked in the attention he was receiving. Very quickly, the silk ran out as the popularity of the item sucked people in.

Despite being close to wealth, charity was nothing to him. It was a pointless idiotic way to extract his hard-earned money from his pockets. To him, poor people were just lazy and brainless idiots that manufactured their suffering. After that, Junli hopped on a camel and decided to go visit and admire the Buddhist Mogao Caves. When he arrived, Junli entered the vast amalgamation of caves. It was simply beautiful. In the myriad caves, the soft and beautiful blend of colours made the artwork feel ever more realistic. In one of the main chambers, he was awestruck by the painting of the Buddha and his disciples. The shades and hues seemed to speak to him. Although the paintings made him feel a pang of guilt for his uncharitable and impious way of life, he swiftly suppressed the guilt.

Next morning, flaunting his wealth around, Junli ordered the guides to take him back to China. Despite obvious warnings from people of the stupidity of showing off, he left ignoring them. His guards and guides toiled and worked in the gruelling heat. Yet, they never received relief. Gradually, a grudge against Junli was formed and they all secretly plotted to desert him.

With the scorching sun firing at his caravan, everyone became fatigued. Eventually, they had to stop and rest, as they were about to collapse. When they got ready to leave a few minutes later, his guards screamed and raced away.

Muscular and wearing practical shirts while armed with swords and bows, the bandits took over the caravan. With anger boiling inside, Junli decided to confront them. Immediately, a sword was slashed at him and the world turned black. Pain exploded all over Junli's body. He felt warm and dizzy. Collapsing on the sand, he lay there expressionless. The life in him quickly evaporated as he breathed what felt like his final breath...

Groggy and confused, Junli woke up in a dark room. Light shined through the window, illuminating just enough. Sitting up, Junli felt a pain. However, he felt better. Joy rushed through his body because he was still alive. Suddenly, an old, wrinkled man emerged from another room. Seeing the confused look on Junli's face, a warm smile appeared. He explained how traders found him lying severely wounded, and unconscious. The traders took Junli back and the old man treated him. Now, he was healed. Immediately, a sense of warmth exploded across his body. Never had anyone done something similar. Seeing Junli's realisation, the man explained to him kindness and love, and how they were the most powerful forces. After that, Junli realised that he was ready to change and live a better life.

The Journey of a Lifetime

Harrow International School Hong Kong, Read, Abigail – 13

His fingers danced ferociously on the keys that lay in front of him. He was alone in that room, solitary in his own thoughts, spewing out creativity and code onto his laptop. Click clack, the sounds of his keys, tip tap, the sounds of his foot tapping hurriedly on the plain wooden floor. These were the only sounds filling the bare, desolate silence that encased the room.

He was working on something new, previously unseen by mankind. Something that harnessed a power so great and tremendous that in ways it could've been best to keep it hidden. It was a time machine, a gadget that could take you into lands far off or lands long past. So distant and far that it was forgotten by the world, covered up or lost in space. He would be the first to test it out, the first human being to bend the limits of time. He got his phone out of his pocket then clicked start on the red audio button, shiny and waiting. "Hello, this is Caleb. Caleb Wakowski. Reporting from Minnesota. If you're watching this, it means I have successfully invented the first-time machine. Don't try to find me, I may be anywhere, 1000 years before or behind. This is Caleb, signing off." He sighed, put it back then, within the click of a few buttons, the machine roared like a beast and transported him.

He woke feeling dizzy, his head running in circles and a slight but constant pounding feeling in his body. He inspected the room he was in. It was decorated with a dim red glow of oriental lanterns, humming silently and swaying from side to side. He observed the details of the ceiling containing illustrations of ancient Chinese folk passing tea to one another or planting flowers in the garden. He could smell jasmine tea brewing at his bedside table. The bed where he woke, the bedsheets were made of silk and were just about thick enough to keep him warm in the cold winter's breeze, harsh and unforgiving. He checked his watch, 9:02 am. That was strange, he remembered teleporting at 9:00pm. He started wondering. Had he really pulled the strings to the universe? Had he really gotten his machine to work? After all, after so many times of error, this must have been the case. Could this really be the case? Or maybe—

"Sir, the King commands your presence now." Interrupted a man wearing long yellow trousers and a coat made of the finest purple silk and on his neck dangled a beautiful jade necklace, crafted so that every jade was as shiny as the last. For a man wearing such fine clothes, he thought, he certainly had an odd look of pure remiss.

He was confused, to say the least. But nevertheless, he dragged himself up to his feet from his state of confusion and slowly trudged towards the strange man. His legs felt limp and frail, as if a gust of wind could knock him right out of his feet. The man walked at a constant pace. A quick, sharp walk and a cunning, snake-like face that could slice a stone in half.

Eventually, they reached a room which looked as if it was a castle itself. The door was made of paper-thin sheets and wood, decorated with drawings of ancient Chinese legends and lettering of sorts, telling tales of fear, triumph, loss and gain. Ming stared at in confusion. Upon entering, he was met with yet another new face, but this one was different. For one thing, he was sitting on a grand throne with his legs propped up, truly like a king, looking down on Ming. Ming felt his gaze looking up and down his attire, eyeing every little stitch out of place or spotting the slouch in his posture.

"You. I need you to deliver a parcel to the king of Türkiye. It's on the table outside, never lose it, never open it, and never, never let someone else get their hands on it. Understood?" he snapped at Ming, waiting impatiently for an answer. Ming didn't know what to say. If he declined, then he would be automatically sentenced to life in prison or banished from the kingdom forever. Then what would he do? He didn't even expect his machine to work, and he was incredibly unfamiliar with such a land. Yet, if he accepted, he would be forced to trek on a journey so long that when he was done, he wouldn't come back as a young adult. But then again, he had always wanted to go to the silk road, he had heard of its tales, he always loved the thought of trekking on a journey so vast and glorious. After tapping his foot and occasionally pacing back and forth, he decided.

"Okay then, I accept." Ming stated with bravado. This was when his journey began.

He first started walking on the 28th of April 1256. He was given a small can of water, a rough map of his journey, some money to buy food and the item. It was wrapped in paper the color of moonshine and laced with glorious golden paper that could light up a room dark as the night, possibly even darker.

The first thing he noticed on the trail was the number of different people all going the same direction. It was peculiar to him, that so many people, all with different lives, appearances, stories and backgrounds all came together to achieve the same purpose. How could they all be going the same way when each journey had a different purpose? Lost in thought, he almost didn't notice his stomach begin to grumble, churn and twist in all different directions, urging him to replenish. So, he sat down on a curb and opened his packed foods prepared for him. Lay in front of him, there was a small serving of tuna, rice, and some peas: a meal hardly enough for one. Although disappointed, it was his only choice. So, he sat down and started to feast. Oh, how he was famished, he was scraping every last crumb off the plate and drinking every pathetic last drop of water in his canister. That was it. All his food, gone, In one sitting.

A hand crept stealthily from behind Ming's view. It balanced delicately on the grubby dirt floor and silently made its way towards his parcel. Slinking through his grasp, it pulled gently on the parcel and took it away into its new owners' possession. It was only after the whole body altogether had started running was when Ming noticed it was gone. Quickly, he turned around to see a small child sprinting away into what looked like a bazaar. He knew it was his, it had the same golden lacing, the same ominous glow on the packaging. Most importantly, he knew it was not meant to be opened. He started a chase, with the child swerving through the crowd with Ming just a few paces behind, always close.

Then, they reached the bazaar.

At first whiff, Ming could smell the spices mixed in with the air. The rays of sun shining down onto him, causing him to sneeze. In front of him lay hundreds of stores, all lined up selling unique antiques all different to the vendor. Some stores sold copper pots and pans, reflecting the sun's rays, while other stores sold fabrics of all kinds, embellished with bright colors and patterns. Other products were there too, baskets, fruits, clothes. Surrounding Ming was a hoard of Arabic men, all wearing the same keffiyehs and the same draping coat-like clothes, shading them from the unforgiving sun. They bustled, they pushed, they shoved and cursed at Ming as they went through. But Ming couldn't get distracted, he had to climb on a vendor's stall to overlook the crowd for the child. He ignored the vendor's shouts and continued to look.

Finally, he spotted him, slinking through the tall men and hiding behind the women. The chase started again. But this time, the enraged vendor was part of the act too. It could almost be described as a circus; with the way they all pranced around like a dance.

"Stop there now!" Cried the vendor, as a sign of defeat. He fell to the floor, hurt, then trudged back to his stall. This was life for him, the constant chase and exhaustion, he couldn't keep up with being a vendor.

But, for Ming, he was wild as ever. Cutting corners, barging past people and sprinting for what seemed like a lifetime. Finally, he got the package, collapsing on the floor in anguish. He dragged himself up and limped back towards the road, hoping to hitchhike onto a buggy of some sort, to take him to his destination. Finally, a kind looking gentleman offered to take him as far as France. So, as he stared back into the distance, onlooking the amber sunset, completing the journey of a lifetime.

A Vow Fulfilled

Harrow International School Hong Kong, Wong, Arthur – 13

It was a warm afternoon when they first met.

He walked along a dirt path through the woods and beside it flowed a stream that made its way down to the eastern wall. The wall was tall and grey and dark. He tilted his head to gaze at the pink, evanescent streaks of sunlight that luridly receded westwards. From that westering blush the forest that embraced the village sang a lullaby of swaying leaves. A murmuration of starlings danced above as a cool wind encroached.

He looked across. There were coarse barks and slender branches; the dried fallen twigs and dark green leaves lay aground. A jay called a merry tune somewhere above, although the man could not see it. He stepped closer toward the gatehouse. It was closed, without a hum or a whisper around.

Within the village walls, sat a marketplace out of which extended narrow alleyways. A sparrow hopped under the tin gutter of a *siheyuan* village house.

It was a quiet hour, but there she was in her soft glow. She came up to him with her feet lifted. She was sweet and life felt beautiful in her presence. Her eyes were closed. A straw bracelet wrapped around her right-hand wrist. He looked away to peer at the dust glow and the sunlit purple houses in the moment she was about to touch him with her dusty brown eyes. He turned around to see her again, but this time she was gone.

In the night, he witnessed her. But she would always vanish in his awakening. In one dark dream, her face touched his and he could feel her rose, warm cheeks. But then the bells began to ring, and she was no longer there.

A vow.

Ten winters have passed since they gave each other a promise.

As time passed, his life became increasingly empty. His heart yearned to return to a place his mind hoped to forget. He walked, emptily, as willows swayed like blind gods to the rhythm of the incoming northern steppe winds. Yet he could not forget her. No matter how much he tried to revision his future, her scent and warmth were embedded deep within his ribcage and shoulder bones.

Fires burnt softly, but the top of their flames veered like blinking fireflies.

Dust lifted and settled as his feet marched along the dry, cruel soil. Suddenly, he stood still and perched against a wooden beam. 'Solitude will break you,' said the voice of his ancestors. 'And with it, the light of your youth.' He stood, ossified, but his wrist began to tremble when a wild thought came into his head.

Perturbed, he felt that he had forgotten her face.

'How do I avoid becoming cold like bone?' he pondered.

He hesitantly admitted that as time passed, his love fluttered with it. It was not the first time his mind gave way to these tragic thoughts. Eventually, he settled on something that made his heart feel cosier and his mind less lonely. 'I have to love, or else death will brush me over.' It took him a while to entrench that feeling of insecurity and death with his love of ten years since. It was time for him to return to the birthplace of that dying glow.

The ground bled with every step that he took.

He moved along the road at a steady pace. In the depths of the horizon, he could see the silhouettes of broken dreams, dry, dead mountains that spoke out a deafening silence. In the crevasses, he could make out the outlines of reddish, stone-bricked buildings that rested in the nooks of the mountains that stood above Lanzhou.

Along the way, he could see faces. Faces of physical toil, faces of deprivation. He could see men from afar. Turbans, caravans, and caged magpies. He could feel excitement, and he could see death. He saw a lot of faces, unfamiliar glows of someplace far.

In a remote village, some place along the stretch of the road between Yumen and Anxi, he met an elderly man. That man was a shepherd, a local who herded sheep and sold milk at the marketplace to where he headed.

‘You must be fueled by devotion,’ said the shepherd, ‘for there is nothing else that would bring a man so far to a place with so few.’

‘There is somebody waiting for me,’ he replied.

It was early morning, and the smooth, orange petals of the sun began to fall onto the valley floor.

‘Sometimes, I almost forget my way around here,’ said the shepherd. He held an unvarnished staff made of wood, possibly made from a hickory bough that fell alongside the road.

‘It is an abyss,’ the man uttered, gently, ‘but in our lives we perform tasks that require a will to power to survive,’ he continued, ‘often, I wonder whether there is something more to it, life, apart from the paths passed onto us by our ancestors, truth paths that only we, the living, can make out from suffering.’

‘Gods,’ whispered the shepherd, ‘look into the sky.’

‘Constellations,’ he replied, ‘they have not helped me console.’

At night, he dreamt of the wall and the gatehouse and her face, but when he touched them, they turned into dust. When he woke up, for a moment, he could feel a thin shroud covering his body, but then he could see the deep blue heavens above him and that way he knew that he was not dead.

It took him another month to reach the gates of Turfan. He heard the hush and felt the sand neatly piercing through the open plateau. The landscape was flat, but he could see the brooding shadow of the mountains to the north of the city. He neared the city gates.

There was a risk.

The air was cold, and the place was arid. The dust spun over the horizon, but he could still see the sparkle of the stars that looked down upon him in indifference. It was night and he spotted the silhouettes of two men, like stick figures, who held out straight swords.

The man fastened his pace.

He sprung his feet forward and, like a helpless creature, ran toward the gatehouse. He glimpsed from the corner of his right eye to see the brutish figurines vanish into the basin of sand that inundated the eastern flank of the city. When he reached the gate, he stopped abruptly. He came face-close to the speculatorium but moved away to avoid touching it. In moments like this, when the hand of death almost made its grasp, he had a mindset of a chicken.

It was nighttime again, and the blue hour turned black. The streets were silent. The elemental force of the wind that held the city captive was reinforced by the sand that sifted through the air. At the far end of the square stood a tall gaunt man. He wore a hat made of straw and carried a basket of picked dandelions. An herbalist.

‘You have come far,’ hailed the herbalist, ‘what is it that you are looking for?’ his voice cracked, but then as he turned his head up to the expansive darkness, with grey dreary eyes, said, ‘I could hear the golden birds sing in the mornings but now they are all gone.’

‘Oh, I have come to answer the echo in my heart,’ replied the man, ‘it aches like the singing birds you speak of.’

‘The dark woods have shifted under heavy sand,’ said the herbalist.

‘But its people?’ asked the man.

‘The people have been dealt with a heavy blow.’

The man’s spring turned into autumn, and the leaves that he grew out on the road plunged onto the dead soil. They plunged into the cold. Endless solitude. A black desert beheld him. The carriers of sand encroached.

‘We all live on borrowed time; time borrowed from the universe. What we do with it, how we spend it, how we figure out the beauty of the cosmos, its places and feelings, and the invisible connections that tie our bodies back to the stars, it’s all infinitely interweaved,’ continued the herbalist.

‘I will take you to her, discreetly,’ he whispered.

The man followed.

In the darkness through which they stepped the man began to feel a leafy bedding. He felt the dampness in the air, and the chill of the forest slowly trickled down his spine. The nature of the universe and the human soul was mystic; it demanded time; it demanded thought. It is necessary to experience the universe to be part of it – not only its grandeur, its splendid riches, but also its other equal, the silence.

He stood at the edge of the western wall.

The wind crept closer but there she was. Subtly clothed all white, green, and bright. And he knew, because after all this struggle for all these years, he could still taste her sweetness in the air.

Silk and Sacrifice

Harrow International School Hong Kong, Xie, SiHan Amber – 11

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

As the months passed as quickly as does tides, the marketplace buzzed with the same loving energy. Stalls were as bright as ever, and the chatting sounds of customers grew to it’s fullest capacity. But, as one cannot escape the poverty one is assigned to, our little store, sadly, was unable to share the privileges around us. For no wave of enthusiasm ever

washed our way; our customers remained few, and the earnings scant. I watched, my heart sinking, as the once vibrant smile that lit grandpapa's face faded little by little every day. A sharp frown that I tried to avoid started forming on my face as I carefully whispered the words: "I'm tired of being poor."

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

The emerald silk.

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

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

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

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

Grandpapa didn't yell back. He didn't even look angry. His face, weathered by years under the sun and brightened by constant smiles, just... fell. Like a paper airplane caught in a sudden breeze. The light in his eyes dimmed, just for a second, and then he sighed, a long, slow breath that seemed as heavy as the waves and as painful as a person who has just lost their dreams.

"I'm sorry," I whispered, but the words felt too small. Too useless.

He looked at me then, really looking at me, and for a moment, the noise of the market faded. The calls of the merchants, the clinking of coins, the sound of horses chewing on hay— it all vanished. It was just him and me.

"I work hard every day," he said gently. "Not because I want riches, but because I want to give you a good life — a life better than mine. That silk..." He gestured towards it with a tilt of his head, his voice softening even more. "It's beautiful. I see why you want it. But some things are more important than having everything you want right away."

I didn't say anything. My fists were still clenched at my sides, but slowly, slowly, they began to loosen.

He placed a warm, calloused hand on my shoulder. "How about this," he said, pointing to a smaller stall nearby, one I hadn't noticed before. "How about we find you something else? Something that is just as special — but maybe means even more because we chose it... together?"

I hesitated, then nodded. Not because I had forgotten the silk, no, but because I realised, at that moment, that the real gift wasn't the silk. It was him — his patience, his love, and the fact that he was always trying, even when I didn't see it.

We walked over to the other stall, and though I didn't know it then, that day would become one of the best birthdays in my whole life — not because of what I got, but what I learned.

The Journey Of The Heart: The Silk Road

Harrow International School Hong Kong, Xin, Haruka – 14

Jing

Jiazi Daye 2nd year (604CE)

She knew she had to go. It was the only choice. How else is her mother going to survive?

“Jing, please be careful on the journey,” her mother said in her soft weakened voice, “you really don’t have to go. I can still survive without the medicine. I can also get herbs from the market. ”

But inside, they both knew that death was slowly getting closer. The Silk Road, which Jing had heard many merchants, who returned with foreign goods and tales, had told stories of. It was the way to keep her mother alive and save her from the death creeping up behind her shoulder. Even if she wasn’t a merchant, who would usually be the ones to travel the Silk Road, she packed her prized possessions in her bag and some of the very few gold coins she had to trade for the medicine.

As Jing packed her bag for the long journey ahead, she couldn’t help but think of the people who couldn’t make the end of the journey. What if she doesn’t make it back and her mother doesn’t get her medicine? Even without her sickness, her fragile porcelain heart would shatter at the word of her failure.

She shook the thoughts away. She had to come back with the medicine.

Jing boarded the camel, which she had worked tirelessly for months to save up, and strapped her bag on. She waved goodbye to her mother and took a last look at her before turning away to the long and harsh journey ahead. She couldn’t help but let a tear roll down her bony, grimy cheeks.

Eldar

1455AD

He sat there, waiting. Waiting for them to come.

Passersby stared at the peculiar old man, who had a great white beard that stretched down to his waist, like spiderwebs formed and woven delicately yet strong. Wrinkles formed around his skin; the silent story tellers of age and wisdom. They pondered on why he sat on that same bench everyday as if he were waiting for something.

Eldar sat at the same bench in front of the grand entrance leading to the square that had been a bustling trading hub once upon a time. The place was a trading hub no more. Not even a single shout of bargaining, not even a herd of traders crowding and fighting to get what they want, not even a caravan to be seen.

But he still waited. He needed them for the final piece of his artwork. The artwork that would represent the cultural fusion of the Silk Road, which he had loved: the Herat school miniatures. The Herat school miniatures incorporated techniques from the artificial lighting from India to linear perspectives from Europe to harmonious colour palettes from Persia to symbolic figures of china.

The ultramarine blue dye was the final puzzle piece to the masterpiece of culture, alliances and peace.

He had not seen them for 5 years. And yet he still sat there, waiting. Waiting for them to come: The Chinese traders of the Silk Road.

Jing

Bingyin Daye 2nd year (606CE)

Jing rode her camel through long roads of endless desert, riding as the sun rose and settled so many times that she had lost count. The glaring sun struck her like the flames of a phoenix; her throat was as dry as the very desert she was in. But she kept going. Stopping for even a few minutes could cost her mother’s life.

As the camel took her further through the mountains of golden sand, she could make out something in the distance. She rubbed her eyes. It was still there. She blinked and blinked again. It was still there. She wasn’t imagining it. She wasn’t hallucinating like what other traders have said in their stories. There, standing in the middle of the barren desert of the dead, was the gate. The gate of her victory. The gate of Uzbekistan.

The ornate arched gate glistened in a beautiful cobalt blue. Intricate patterns and designs were made with colourful stones: lines crisscrossed and curved and twisted while vivid and colourful shapes formed and this mark of success .

The whiff of spices filled her nostrils and she walked into the trade hub. Traders bartered beneath the arched gateways

in the languages of Persia, China, and India in their caravans, filled with goods with some familiar and some alien: luxurious silk, metals gleaming under the sun, exotic spices, intricate textiles, beautiful work of porcelain, glistening jewels and so much more. Storytellers wove stories of Marco Polo's great travels, the disastrous spread of the black plague, Buddha, and classic fables that taught important messages. Scholars debated on philosophical questions, their intellectual exchanges echoing across the market. The trade hub was a tapestry of shared cultures weaving into a masterpiece of alliances and cultural fusion.

As she searched the caravans, she finally found one that had the medicine. Her eyes filled up with tears of joy knowing that her mother could survive now as she payed her golden coins. She quickly boarded the camel again and set out back home, riding towards the desert, leaving the bustling and lively trade hub behind. The blazing heat of the sun hit her but she didn't care anymore. Her mother was saved.

Eldar

1457AD

Eldar had not moved a single bit from the bench. More wrinkles had creased his skin, like the crazing of porcelain of age. There was still a spark of hope in his heart, ready to be set ablaze and burn. Without his painting, not the memories, but the feeling of mixed culture, the feeling of peace would be forgotten. The pugnaciousness of the world would smother it all up without his painting — the representation of peace and cultural fusion.

As Eldar looked towards the distance of the gate of the used-to-be trading hub, he saw a silhouette of a man. A man and a camel. It could not be! Eldar rubbed his serene grey eyes again and again but the silhouette only came closer and closer. A trader of the Silk Road had finally come!

His legs trembled as Eldar stood up but it didn't stop him from running towards the trader. The trader's face was grubby and his cheeks were sunken of hunger. After giving some water to the trader, the trader showed him the items he had available to trade: tea, silk, porcelain, spices, paper and dyes. Among the dyes was one that stood out and Eldar immediately recognised. Ultramarine blue. His patience and hope had finally paid off as he quickly traded it with 1,000,00 soms as delicately took it to his workshop.

His unfinished painting still sat on the very table he had left it on 7 years ago. He quickly mixed the dye with alum and filtered it with a cloth. He then mixed it with egg yolk as a binder to form the final paint. He dipped his brush into the precious paint mixture and carefully added it onto his piece.

When he finished he stood back to admire the painting that took him almost a decade to complete. Figures of traders on camels, caravans filled with exotic treasure from around the world, people crowding to buy their desired items, the cobalt blue of the registan square and most importantly the peace and alliances wove into a beautiful piece. Each section of the painting told a different story. Eldar had finally finished it. The symbol of peace, alliance and culture.

The Two Markets

Harrow International School Hong Kong, Zhang, Tsun Wai Adrian – 12

The market buzzed with excitement, the shopkeepers all screaming at the top of their lungs trying to get innocent tourists' attention. This was the current reality of Billy, a 12-year-old child travelling with his family in one of the most historical places in China, Xian. Although Billy was tempted to try free samples of everything, he knew better than to fight against the hordes of tourists. This was unfamiliar territory, and he did not want to get lost in such a large maze of concrete walls and ancient architecture. This was his first time in China, in one of the starting points of the Silk Road. Even though, he didn't realise it at the time, he was walking on one of the biggest trading complexes both past and present.

Suddenly, a sparkling coin gleamed in distance, in a place so blatantly hidden, certainly somebody would have seen or have taken it. Cautiously, Billy slipped away from his parent's watchful gaze and edged closer to the sparkling coin. The coin shined in the middle of a small crevice in between two shops. With two tall towers overshadowing it, it seemed as if it was placed on purpose rather than by accident. Nearby, a tall shadow with tied back hair walked speedily across the rushing crowds. Could she have been the one that put the coin here? As Billy swiftly picked up the coin to give it back, he suddenly realised that the mysterious figure was nowhere to be found.

As Billy pocketed the rusty coin, he looked in up and realised that he was in the middle of nowhere. He realised that he was a 12-year-old boy stuck in the middle of the biggest shopping malls in one of the biggest cities in China. Him, an American tourist who was unable to speak Chinese, stuck without his parents. Billy felt a million thoughts rush into his head, but he knew that he was doomed.

In the same place 1218 years ago, Paul was walking on the streets of one of the biggest trading complexes in the world. With the sound of shifting footsteps ringing in his head, Paul looked around for a victim for his nefarious scheme. Paul was a pickpocket, and now, to have food on his table, he had to steal from the rich. In the corner of his eye, Paul saw a person dressed in all purple. The person had a personal carriage and a jade bracelet. At that moment, Paul knew who his next victim would be.

Paul grew up in an underprivileged family; at a small age Paul had to help out in the house while his family worked many different jobs. As a kid, Paul's mother died of tuberculosis when he was 5. With the passing of his mother, his father lost interest in everything. On some occasions, Paul had to beg his father to help him cook his dinner. On some occasions, his dad would forget about Paul and sleep late into the afternoon. On some occasions, his dad would even lose interest in life and glide into a world full of despair and darkness. Consequentially, this led to Paul having to take over the farming job in the family. With the help of his brothers, they barely managed to scrape enough food on his family's table. Not soon later, his father stepped on the roof of their house and dropped to his demise. As a last goodbye, Paul and his brothers pooled all off their money together and gave their father a proper burial.

Now, Paul was forced to live empty-handed in the streets of the West Market. Without another option, Paul and his brothers were forced to resort to pickpocketing to earn money. Today, with their next victim in sight, Paul prepared himself for another chance to earn money. He crept closer, being careful not to expose himself. He crept closer, with the shadows of buildings covering him he felt safer. He crept closer, he waited for his brother's signal. With the smell of soybean milk and dumplings in his nose he got ready to steal. Then, he ran.

Paul ran on the rooftops, with guards twice his age he knew that escaping would not be easy. However, with the wind blowing in his hair, it seemed as though the sun was purposely trying to radiate its warmth to him. At that time, the sun seemed as if it was trying to send a message. Could this have been his mom saying hello? The chase did not slow down, the sound of sizzling Mantou (Steamed wheat buns) rang in his ears. But he knew that he had to run. Soon after, his brothers joined the chase, each taking a flank. As the guards tried to catch up, they widened the distance, making sure that they would not be caught. In a flash, something hit his head and he blacked out.

With the sound of arguments bombarding Paul, he woke up. His brothers had dragged him into a safe spot, and the bag of coins that they stole dangled on the floor. Yet, his brothers had sustained great damage, both had heavy bruises from battle. But in the back of his mind, Paul could not shake the feeling that his mother was telling him something.

It felt as though the warmth she gave Paul when he was a child, came back. Behind him, Paul heard a rattling noise. “Did you hear something” he asked, “No” his brothers retorted “Did you?” Suddenly, something appeared and grabbed his back.

Back in the present day, Billy was trying to look for his parents. The sound of loud locals and the smell of fresh food tried to soothe him, but to no avail. The panic of losing his parents still repeated rapidly in his head. His anxiety started to overwhelm him, with the sun rapidly setting he had no choice but to stay and wait. Would he ever see his parents again? He did not know. Would he rot and be forced to live on the streets? He did not know. Would he find his parents and live happily ever after? He did not know. It seemed as if time seemed to tease him, each minute felt like a year. The tourist-filled streets died down a little and the streets started to become artificially illuminated. How long would it take for someone to rescue him?

Billy’s stomach rumbled louder the more he worried, so he decided to eat something with his pocket money. Looking around nothing seemed to catch his attention, so he chose the most well-known. The soft inside of the Mantou bun filled him with warmth and comfort. The smell made him momentarily forget about his worries. Yet, as he was about to leave he saw a figure slowly walking down the street. Was it the police? The shadow moved its mouth and anxiously shouted “Billy where are you?” Too shocked to speak, Billy tried to open his mouth, but no sound came out. Soon, the shadow said something else “Billy. Thank God you’re here, I thought you were lost, don’t go running around like that again.” Reunited with his family he felt at peace, all of his anxiety washed out of him. He was safe. Yet, in his pocket the ancient coin was nowhere to be seen. Was it a figment of his imagination? Was the lost coin passed through generations? I guess we will never know.

The Silk Road in the Mirror

Harrow International School Hong Kong, Zhao, Yingying – 13

Present day, Zhejiang, China

“Where’s the dress?” Lily hollered from the doorway, her hands flying through Grandma’s wardrobe. She growled as she pulled the bottom drawer with a harsh yank. With a small clink, something fell out. She stopped abruptly to pick up the object. It was a round piece of bronze, with one side smooth and shiny, the other etched with swirling and twisting carvings. The coldness of it soothed and stirred her curiosity.

Lily moved to the windowsill. The early sun’s rays glazed over the room like a sheet of silk. Under the sunlight, the object dazzled and the polished surface reflected her face. She raised the mirror higher and rearranged her hair. A mirror, she thought, in awe.

At the breakfast table, Lily took a seat opposite Grandmother, eyeing the portrait on the wall: a younger her in mid-air between Mom and Dad, all laughing. Lily sighed.

“So, when did Mom and Dad leave?”

“They left for Tajikistan this morning,” Grandmother said softly, as if afraid that the words would hurt. Mom and Dad were always leaving to “help lead efforts on the Belt and Road Initiative.” Because of it, every birthday she has had since five had been celebrated with a quick, rushed phone call. It was a miracle that her parents even remembered her birthday at all.

Back in her room, leaning against the door, Lily studied the bronze mirror. It showed a curious face, but behind her was not her room—it was a dusky sky. In the reflection, the girl who looked exactly like her turned away and walked out of view.

Lily blinked. That wasn’t her.

Suddenly, she felt a pull towards the mirror. It was a great gush of wind, blinding her momentarily.

90 BC, Dunhuang, China

Dust and herbs filled her nose. A cool breeze swept around, fiddling with her hair. The sky was streaked with fiery oranges that softened into rose golds. Around her, kids in embroidered tunics squealed as they ran across the sand, their figures silhouettes in the light.

At the edge of her sight, Lily saw the girl from the mirror, her double, with the same eyes and hair but thinner, harsher. Dirt freckled her face, but her richly woven clothes would cost a fortune nowadays. The girl slipped into a hut. Lily followed.

Inside, the air was dim, the only light source being the last shreds of sunlight trickling through the windows. She strode to the bed in the corner. A woman lay on the bed, her face ashen.

“Mom, I’ve asked the doctor. The cure is somewhere down the west. I’m going to find it for you. Tonight.” The girl’s voice was determined as she pulled the woman upright.

“Xing, don’t go,” the woman rasped. “But I know I can’t stop you...” She walked shakily to the table. “Take these,” she muttered, shoving a handful of silk into the girl’s hands. “Wear them when you’re cold. Trade it for food and water if you must. Take these... and that as well, see?”

Lily's heart throbbed. Tears pricked her eyes, and suddenly she realised the feelings weren't hers, but Xing's, pouring through her.

"Don't worry, just take care of yourself till I get back." Xing replied.

The world tugged at Lily again, as if someone grabbed the back of her shirt and pulled. In a blink she was back in her bedroom, heart pounding, head spinning. Where was that? A desert? Was it her world, or somewhere else?

The next day, Lily ran home from school. Panting, she shut her door, dug through her books, and found the mirror. Her fingers brushed its surface tenderly.

The scent of fresh bread greeted her. She stood in a crowded market with pots, plates, leather, and steaming baskets of buns cluttering the stalls. Wheels rumbled, hooves clacked, shopkeepers shouted, and people in tunics laughed as they walked. Scanning the crowd, Lily spotted Xing carrying a rucksack.

Xing stopped at a bun stall and hesitantly pulled out a strip of fine silk, the threads shimmering even under the dust. "Can this buy some buns?" she asked. The shopkeeper turned the silk over in his hands, then nodded, passing her three fat buns. Xing devoured one in large bites, saving the rest with care.

The scene blurred. Lily gasped as she suddenly felt sucked away from the market.

Lily couldn't sleep, tossing and turning, staring at the stars outside. She felt a rising sense of trouble, but she couldn't explain why. Sighing, she fumbled for the mirror on her bedside table and looked in.

Blankness.

Then she was choking on sand. Stuffed with it in her mouth. Lily forced her eyes open. She was back in the desert, but chaos was unfolding around her. The storm appeared like a tidal wave, howling, surging relentlessly towards her. Her feet sank into the soft sand and her lungs felt rubbed with coarse sandpaper. She saw only swirling dust and the glow of the sun fading away. Lily doubled over and crawled toward a large rock. She curled behind it, shaking, until the roar slowly faded. When it finally stopped, the world was eerily quiet. A few metres away, a figure rose from the sand, rasping. Clothes gritty, face almost unrecognisable—but Lily knew it was Xing.

Xing staggered and took a long pull from her waterskin. A thought crashed into Lily's mind, sharp: *I must leave some markers, or I'll never find my way back.*

Xing knelt, clawing away sand to drag out heavy stones. She stacked them, building a small tower. When she finished, she nodded and walked on.

The next time Lily looked into the mirror, Xing was travelling with a caravan of merchants. Plants of emerald green grew on the sides of roads, swaying softly in the wind. In the distance, mountains capped with snow stood quietly.

At last, Xing reached a small town of wooden cabins and tents. In one hut, an old man sat cross-legged, lips moving wordlessly. Xing dropped to her knees. “Sir, I have come from the far east to beg for a cure for my mother.” She described the fever, aches, and weakness. The old man listened, eyes closed, then reached into a drawer.

“This will help her,” he said, handing her a small parcel. “She must drink it with water.”

“Thank you,” Xing breathed, already rising.

“Halt, young girl.” His voice was firm. “The journey is too long. One of my men will carry it. He is faster.” He snapped his fingers; a boy appeared at the doorway.

“Follow my markers,” Xing told him. “I piled stones every five Li. If you reach the Kingdom of Loulan, you are not far away.” The boy nodded, took the parcel, and left.

Xing stayed with the people for many months. They treated her like family, and Xing repaid them by teaching her mom’s embroidery, letting silk thread slip between her fingers as she guided their hands. She wove patches of colour on their clothes—colourful flowers, snow mountains, soaring eagles, flying freely.

Watching through the mirror, Lily finally let out the breath she’d been holding.

A few days later, Lily looked again. Xing was running into her mother’s arms, and villagers crowded the doorway, laughing, hugging, brushing tears from their cheeks. Lily’s chest swelled, as if caramel were melting through her heart.

All of a sudden, Lily heard an actual door click, and then low murmurings of people. She crept out of her room.

“Mom? Dad?” Lily asked incredulously. “You’re back early?” Her parents grinned.

“We thought we should be on time for your birthday this year,” Mom said, pulling out a brown parcel from her pocket. “Open it.”

Lily opened the parcel with trembling fingers. Inside was a dress embroidered with flowers and birds.

“It’s Chakan, a traditional embroidery from Tajikistan,” Dad said. “They made this dress especially for you.”

Lily knew the method, she could even picture hands, weaving in and out, like how Xing taught them thousands of years ago.

“Thank you,” Lily smiled, tracing over the threads and fabric. “Tell me more about what you did there,” she said breathlessly. Her parents described the new roads and highways across mountains and deserts, transport lines and energy projects linking villages.

As she listened, Lily suddenly understood. The Belt and Road Initiative was the new Silk Road, continuing the road that Xing walked for her mother. Xing never knew her heavy stone markers would become signposts for hundreds of

people from China, Europe and the Middle East, nor did she know how her desperate trades in silk for food would eventually start the most famous trade route ever.

The route is a piece of silk, connecting the world. It was—and still is—the key for people of all ages, languages, and nations to come together, sharing their stories and skills, and weaving the world as one.

Road of Silk and Fate

Harrow International School Hong Kong, Zhu, Cindee – 12

“Líng Yuè shall travel along the Silk Road. Let her bring back the most precious item, and if it is good enough, she shall live in the palace as the Emperor’s combat instructor. She will be provided with food, water and clothing, with a monthly salary. If not, she will be killed. On this journey, you will give her a horse of her choosing, with a sword and provisions. Yue will leave tomorrow at dawn.” The voice sounded in my ears, sounding the same as it did before, when I was sentenced to... whatever that was for simply being homeless.

It was somehow both exciting and terrifying, this new chance at living before me.

Yesterday, I was given a sword. Here in BingHua, every weapon has a special element, and this sword could channel ice, with strands of diamond and crystal threading its way through the blade. A canteen of water had also appeared on my doorstep, beside a sack of food. Next to it, was a surprising amount of \$5,000 ban liang coins. It was more than I could ever ask for.

I slipped on a simple white pao, tied a pale blue sash around my waist, and put my hair up in a silver ji, a hairpin with a crystalline butterfly on it, a gift from my sister that I would cherish forever.

I stuffed a veil, travelling clothes and robes, and the things left on my doorstep into the bottomless compartment in my sword, and I stuck it in the sheath at my waist, making my way to the abode of the Emperor.

The palace was exceptionally beautiful. There were fish swimming in a pond, and breathtaking reliefs of cranes taking flight. A butler led me through the halls, and— wait, right, left, left—

I’m lost.

Anyways, thankfully the butler was here to guide me, otherwise I wouldn’t have been able to arrive at the great golden door marking the emperor’s hall.

The moment I stepped in, my eyes went straight to the man sitting on the throne.

I knelt. “Emperor Zhang.”

So this was the person I was meant to teach combat.

“Ling Yue.”

“Your Majesty.”

He stood with a slight smile. “No need. Just call me Xuān. You’re going to be my instructor when you come back, right?”

He’s asking me if I’m going to even try on this mission.

“Of course, Xuan.” I looked up and cut straight to the point. “It was said that I would be provided with a horse...?”

“Yes, yes.” He nodded at a lady standing off to the side in a golden dress that flowed around her like a river. “Pin’er, sister, will you take her to the stables?”

And I was led, once again, through the winding halls of the palace.

The stables were clean, but the horses had braided hair and chest plates or random stuff like that. I didn’t want my horse to look good; I wanted it to be fast. Strong. None of the steeds looked up as I passed, but one mare caught my eye; she was the only one that wasn’t braided and had no accessories on her except for a saddle. She had a snow-white coat, and her hair was brushed but wasn’t braided as if a little girl had come here to play.

“I’ll take her.” I decided.

Pin’er raised an eyebrow. “Are you sure? She never lets anyone touch her. She doesn’t even let anyone ride her; she just throws them off.”

“Yes. I’m sure.” I am not giving up this horse.

“Her name’s Xuě. Snow.” Pin’er sighed. “Except that snow goes where you want it to.”

I was led to the gates of the palace, and after that, the start of the Silk Road. I vaulted onto Xue, (without falling off, I might add) spurred her on and rode into the rising sun.

Days passed, and nothing eventful happened. Same went for the nights, except the whistling wind reminded me of the day my mother died. The only thing that kept the nightmares at bay was the consistent chanting of my favourite quote in my head, telling me that the night wasn't so bad, it was the people who murdered my mother.

"Though my soul may set in darkness, it will rise in perfect light; I have loved the stars to fondly to be fearful of the night." It kept me going with enough sleep those days.

Unfortunately, nothing remarkably precious popped up as well. I had travelled along the Silk Road for days now, and Xue and I were taking a stop at an inn, yù lóng. Jade Cage. It was a... questionable choice of name, but it was the only inn that had a space for me and a horse. I had also eaten about all of my food, and I was here to stock up.

As I passed a girl around my age carrying the tea tray, I recognised her look. One of pain and helplessness. One that looked for a chance to escape. One that looked for a way out.

I knocked her tray down, and her eyes widened in panic. "No. No. No." Her trembling whispers reached my ears. "My mother will never let me off for this."

I knelt down next to her. "Do you want to get away from this place?" I whispered as we collected the shattered porcelain.

"I can't. My mother will know. She knows everything I do."

"I'll help you. Do you have a horse? A fast one?"

She nodded.

"Tonight, at 10, I want you to bring me dinner to my room. I'm room 98, right above the stables. We'll climb out of the windows and run."

"I'll come. Of course. Anything to get away."

I could tell that this was her first time where she had a choice. What a cruel mother she must have. "What's your name?" I asked.

And she replied: "Yù Bì Yáo. Just call me Bì'yao."

Jade. So that was why this place was Jade Cage. Yù Lóng.

That night, a soft knock in my door woke me from my light slumber. I opened the door, and there was Bì'yao, holding a tray of buns and fruit and pastries that I put away. I listened.

Silence.

Good. I helped Bì'yao down the windowsill and landed neatly on Xue. "Go get your horse," I whispered, and Bì'yao made her way to a cream stallion named Fei'cui. She put my veil on, and we galloped out of the city gates.

Immediately, we ran into trouble. A gang of mean-looking men stood on our path, forming a line that stopped our steeds from charging through. The middle one unsheathed his sword and drawled, "Such pleasant little girls. What sweet voices will you have when you beg for your lives, darlings?" He cocked his head, then pointed at us as if we were pieces of treasure to be stolen. "Well, what are we waiting for, my friends? Attack!"

I unsheathed my sword and pointed it at them, gesturing for Bì'yao to get behind me. I swiped my hands up and down, and a wall of ice formed between us, slowly advancing towards the men.

But too slow. They darted around the wall, charging us at full force. Suddenly, Bì'yao took out a pair of golden green bells and rang them. The jingling fanned out around us, knocking the men unconscious.

Whoa.

When I turned around, Bì'yao was behind me, smiling. She said, "You're not the only one with a weapon, and you're not the only one that knows how to use it. Coming?"

We rode on for five days more, then we arrived at Xi'an. I was once again escorted to Jade Dragon Lake, with Bì'yao next to me because apparently, she was not to be trusted.

"And what do you have here? You have brought nothing back except a poor girl. How are you going to explain yourself?" The old man asked, Pin'er and Xuan looking on with obvious amusement.

“I have brought a friend, sir. A kind, generously powerful friend. I believe that having someone there to help you, to lift your spirits up is the best thing you could ever have, and I will not let you take her to abuse her power.”

Again, a piece of jade shot up in front of me. It read, “That is fair. You may live on and the terms I have described earlier will be met.”

I did it.

I did it!

I would live a normal life along with other people. I would once again see my father and sister.

I did it!

Hours of paperwork later, I was released from the court, and Bi’yao and I decided to see what it was like on the roof. The stars were everywhere, and it brought back to me;

“Though my soul may set in darkness, it will rise in perfect light; I have loved the stars too fondly to be fearful of the night.” ~ Sarah Williams

The Sea, the Sky, and the Infinite Night

Harrow International School Hong Kong, Zhu, Olivia – 13

Probably you already know me.

You may not have met me yet, but eventually, everything will. I hope you do not fear me. Most people do. They fear the end of things. But I do not cause the end. I am only the Reaper. And in the billions of years the universe had existed, I have collected stories.

It is a way of coping.

A way of coping with the injustice in the world. Every moment, I hear the screeching of war, the falling of tears.

The human mind cannot begin to imagine what it is like. The vast, cold, eternity of my existence.

So I've kept these stories, harvested them, tucked them away to tell.

There are thousands.

This is one.

★ ★ ★

It had happened hundreds of years ago on rugged waves of the South China Sea. The sun was just beginning to rise from behind the water, painting the pale skies pink and blue, casting golden light over purple shadows. There was a boat, with great white sails like the fins of a flying fish. Sitting near the bow was a girl, barely seventeen, who seemed to accumulate piles of books no matter where she went.

The boat was no different. There were heaps of books by her. She'd found as many as she could and started reading as soon as the sun began to show its rays. One book was spread out in front of her. If you had looked through the pages, you would have seen maps of the stars, notes from books she'd read, and sketches of everything—the sea, the meals, the ship, the crew. Then, she had been painting the sunset, with paints, almost finished, that she'd been using the whole trip. It was messy and unrefined, her art teacher would have said, but there was something about it, a sort of else-ness combined with concrete reality.

Still, she grew frustrated, and ripped the page out of the book, despite being told otherwise in the past. It fluttered away in the breeze. She slumped against the wall.

The ship she was on had come from Europe, packed with silk, metals, fabrics, and books, some scrolls, some with pages. Sometimes, the girl thought she could still smell the spices from the dock. Sometimes, she thought that she had been on the ship so long that she could see traces of her village in it.

Sometimes, she thought she could still feel her parents beside her.

But she couldn't. Because the sea breeze had long washed away any scent of the spices. Because her home was hundreds of kilometres away in the mountains of China. Because after you die...

The girl squeezed her eyes shut. She knew she was lucky. The family of her father's friend had decided to take her in after the—the accident. It could've been worse. She knew she should be glad to be alive. But this part of her mind kept nagging her: what if—

She opened her eyes, breathing heavily. That was the past. This is the present. She'd have to find the boy, and begin on the day's work.

It was turning out to be a clear day, unusual for the area. The girl and the boy swept around the boat, cleaning floors, washing plates, helping with the fishing nets, all the while laughing and talking. Talking about the size of the boat, the material of the plates, the species of the fish.

When they had finished for the morning, it was about noon. Fluffy clouds were starting to form, as birds' calls rang through the blue sky. The crew was eating lunch, which was the rice they'd bought in Europe, and the fish they'd caught. After the girl finished, she stared up at the birds circling overhead, sketching out rough shapes with her brush.

Days passed. The girl observed the birds frequently: writing in her book, making notes, scribbling drawings. She searched through the books they were shipping for notes on birds. She hardly slept, but persisted. And as the pages went on, the drawings seemed to be aimed towards a certain goal. Nearing the end of the book, you could see designs of a sort of machine start to emerge.

A flying machine.

Five hundred years before Leonardo da Vinci had even dreamed of it. One thousand years before the first working one. It was a logical outcome of the Silk Road, of the trading of information and ideas. That is when creativity flourishes. But an idea is not enough. You need enough time to implement it, to create it.

She could have built it. She had the potential.

But she hadn't enough time.

★ ★ ★

She was happy when she went to sleep that night. She'd told the boy about the machine, and they'd discussed it the rest of the afternoon. The girls had planned out some materials, and had done a few tests with the paper of her book. They said that when they got home, they'd build a pair for each person in the whole village. They'd soar through the skies with the silver cranes, through the clouded mountains and crisp damp air, into the bamboo forests, over the endless seas, forever into the sunrise.

But when she fell asleep that night, she'd had the dream again. It was why she'd been trying to avoid sleep.

She was in the desert, beneath a moonless sky. They'd set up camp hours ago, early. Her father was inside the tent, along with his friend.

Her mother wasn't there. She never met her before. The day she came into the world, her mother left.

There was hushed speaking from inside, with the occasional cough. Finally, her father's friend came out of the tent. He shook his head.

The girl rushed inside the tent. She waited there all night, but he had gone.

I had been there too, and had stayed with her until sunrise, watching, wanting to comfort her, but I could do nothing. I can never do anything. I am only the Reaper. I cannot control the harvest.

Slowly, her eyes flickered open. Rain pattered outside on the deck. She closed her eyes again, curling into a ball, trembling.

★ ★ ★

The morning came dark and foggy, the clouds a bluish grey and the rain still drizzling. The sea was thrashing about, tossing the ship in its waves like a toy. Still, the girl went out onto the soaking deck, trying to read her notes and the books in the dim light and howling gusts of wind.

Some time later, the boy came out, and asked her what she was doing. The rain had started to pour, the wind growing angry, a storm beginning to rise. She looked up from her notebook, about to respond.

Suddenly, the wind rushed forward, dragging the notebook into the air, tearing away pages. The girl chased after it towards the edge of the boat, leaning forward, reaching out, but the papers had all fallen into the sea, ink bleeding away. The ship rocked violently. Preparing to go back to her room, she turned around.

There was a crack.

The ship broke in half like a twig.

Through the thick torrent of flying rain, the boy saw the ship snap. The waves were growing higher, almost two thirds the size of the ship. He could see the girl on the other half, running as far towards the edge as possible, as the broken piece of wood started to sink. They reached out to each other, fingertips brushing. He opened his mouth to speak, but a wave crashed down upon the broken ship, breaking their touch.

His words turned to a scream that echoed through the tempest.

“Anrui!”

He leapt into the frigid water, salt stinging his eyes, but he could see nothing in the tumult and chaos. For a moment, it was only him in this dark, murky world. He started to relax. I saw his soul begin to pulse and grow brighter.

Go, I’d urged him.

I know he didn’t hear me. But moments later, he resurfaced, gasping for air. Seeing his family waving at him, he swam towards them and clambered onto the remains of the ship.

They made it back to land, eventually. Slowly, they moved on from the tragedy.

But they never forgot.

For the girl, I had gone down to the bottom of the sea, found her with the silver fish and tangled seaweed. I picked up the shining soul, and guided it to an open desert beneath an endless sky.

Because after you die, there is a desert that you must cross. And when you reach the end, when you reach the place where the stars and ground become one, when you reach the campfire illuminating the infinite night, you will go back into the world, part of everything, as your heart beats in time with the universe.

New Tales of China's Silk Road

Harrow International School Beijing, Gao, Haoyang Jaden – 12

Long ago, a group of friends were touring the bustling streets of China. They were incredibly rich and were proud owners of massive silk storages (although silk was very cheap back then as there was so much of it around). Andrew was chatting with Filip and Jack, while Bill and John were just wandering around, when suddenly he saw an unusual stalker lurking nearby. For a moment, Andrew's instincts prickled, but he ignored it as a simple coincidence. "Perhaps it was just a passerby?" He thought. He chose to ignore it and, instead, he looked around at the busy streets around them.

The stalker began his move towards the unsuspecting group. He swiped their coin purses without even making a sound. In the chaos of the busy street, no one even noticed the theft until a sudden cry was heard; Andrew froze with shock, but then Filip shouted "HEY! STOP THIEF!". Seconds later, soldiers swarmed to block all exits, but the thief was smart and quick, blending into the crowd and going into a secret door in an abandoned building. Andrew signed with disappointment as they had just lost everything they had. Even Jack Z, who was normally as cool as an ice cream, was mumbling absolute nonsense, with frustration clearly shown in his voice.

The group stood in silence as their wealth had just slipped through their fingers, and they didn't even realize. Andrew's mind suddenly filled with worry.

"What will we do now? Beg? We don't have any money at all..." he said.

"I don't know," Bill replied.

"We will have to think of something fast, as we will need money to survive. By the looks of it, we don't even have enough to survive for two days. We were rich, but now we are poor," he continued.

"Any plans or ideas of what to do?" Andrew asked.

"Maybe we could improvise," Filip suggested. "Getting some quick jobs and tracking the thief down or perhaps starting a new business in China. I think gunpowder might be good; we could innovate it into a weapon," Filip added.

"Nah, I have a better idea. Let's steal some silk and a silkworm," Bill proposed.

"Wait what?!" The usually quiet John shouted, "but that's wrong, stealing is wrong, besides, the police will chase us, and silk is cheap here in China because there is so much of it that almost everyone has some of it." He continued.

Bill smiled mischievously and whispered "well, of course we are not going to sell silk here in China, it's cheap as you said and we definitely won't be able to stay if we stole some silk, I mean it's illegal, but listen we could explore to the east and try to find other people to sell the silk."

"Wait a minute, the Chinese law says that if we take a silkworm outside China, all our descendants will be killed, and silk should only be traded within China; it is a Chinese product and why East? John argued.

"Well, we need money and we can make money with my plan and to answer your question, all the other directions have been explored and besides, we have nothing to lose. "Bill responded.

So, the plan went into motion. They quickly gathered what little they could: some spare silk, a few coins, and a small bundle of silkworms carefully wrapped in cloth that they stole from a sleeping person. Under the cover of night, they slipped away from the bustling streets, determined to venture eastward beyond the borders of China.

The next day, the group were travelling through the desert unsure of their destination and where they were. What they did know was that the army was after them, and they were running short of food and water. John moaned to Bill “we should have never followed your plan, we will definitely die here” “come on, it was the only way” Bill argued. “Look guys, we barely have any food so can we work together and stop arguing” Andrew said.

“Look let’s focus on surviving first; the army is after us” Filip added. As the endless sand stretched for eternity, Filip sighed “we are never getting out of here...., what now?” Andrew looked around “Sand, Sand, Sand and more sand, let’s check out that valley over there” pointing to a random valley. “OK” everyone else replied.

They walked towards the valley. As the scorching sun shined mercilessly, it made every single step torture. As they approached, they noticed the valley was covered by cliffs and some bushes, a place for shelter and rest. John, who was still worried about soldiers chasing them, said, “Do you think they will stop chasing us? Or will we have to wander forever?” Filip tried to keep everyone’s spirits up. “We must stay calm. If we can find some water here, we might still have a chance to rest and plan what to do next, we cannot give up now.” Bill looked around and spotted a small, dry stream passing through the valley. “Look! There might be some water in that stream,” he said hopefully. The others hurried over, digging into the cracked earth where the dry stream was. To their relief they had found a pool of water.

After setting up a small, temporary camp, the group took a few hours of rest and were off again. “I am so hungry” Andrew grumbled, “Look, we will eat after we cross this valley. It is not safe here,” Filip replied. As they kept wandering, Bill could not help but notice some soldiers extremely far away looking randomly. “Um I ...” He stopped himself from finishing his sentence, he knew it would only create more pressure for his friends and he did not want that, so he just kept it secret. As they wandered into more uncharted terrain, Andrew noticed a big problem “Wait a second, we are running low on food and water. “I agree, at this rate we will only be able to survive for another few days,” Filip added.

“Guys, we have a big problem,” Bill said anxiously. “Look over there.” He pointed towards a mountain. An entire army of soldiers had surrounded their position.

“What do we do now?” Filip whispered, voice trembling.

“Just go...” Bill’s muttered. “It’s my fault we’re in this mess. I tried to buy you time.” Without hesitation, he charged toward the advancing army, shouting, “I’m here!” The soldiers roared and charged after him.

“NOOOOOO!” Andrew shouted, his eyes full of horror. “Come on, we must go now! Bill can only buy us so much time,” Filip shouted.

They ran for hours, until exhaustion finally overcame them and they collapsed. Andrew broke the silence with a whisper, “Is Bill safe?”

“Um... probably not,” Filip admitted. “But we have to finish this journey for him.”

As they continued, after a few more hours, just when they lost all hope, they found a small oasis.

They drank from the water, ate fruit from the bushes, and set up a small camp to have a short rest. After lighting a fire and sharing a meal of fruit and what remaining supplies that they had stored, the group gathered to discuss their next move.

“It was Bill’s plan,” Andrew said. “But now he’s not here.”

Filip looked around. “Let’s sleep tonight. Tomorrow, we will figure out what to do.”

The next day, they felt much better after eating some more fruit. They were off again. “Look over there” Andrew suddenly shouted pointing to a city in the distance, “Come one, this may be our destination!” Filip said excitedly, as they ran towards the city, full of excitement, they quickly arranged their stuff.

After arriving, although they couldn't communicate well, everyone knew the concept of trade and after discussing prices, the group were amazed to find that the other people would pay a fortune for silk, they ended up with enough money to in fact become rich.

After a short journey of returning to China, the group decided that this could be an excellent business opportunity for people to make money, so they went straight to the emperor and told him about it. Although at first there was some doubt, he chose to trust the group and choose to not execute them and accept this opportunity, but with one condition. “You guys will lead the next expedition.” The emperor said, “Okay” the group replied. After relaxing for a while with their newly earned money, they were off again.

New Tales of China's Silk Road

Harrow International School Beijing, Lyu, Yitong Mia – 11

The desert was a never-ending maze; a maze so treacherous and harsh that it led to death. Camels and cactuses? These were only the bright side of deserts; the dark side comes only when you experience it. The pictures of them tried to create an amicable tableau, luring people inside like a cake luring a hungry kid, but none of the colourless pictures dared to show their true colours. Their black and ruthless hearts hid deeply inside them, and not as people forenamed, the sands aren't dancing beside the wind but stamping nastily to ambush you for your poor little life. But as Molly knew, the precarious journey hadn't even begun.

One step inside, the sand swirled and turned beneath Molly's feet. Another step, the sky turned darker as the clouds gathered to meet. The third step, a sandstorm blurred in front of Molly's vision; she was lost and capsized. Vaguely, Molly saw a faint outline of a fluffy, four-legged mammal walking burdensomely towards her. Suddenly, the little creature yelled: "Help! Help! Water! I need water!" The little creature howled and cried. When they walked closer, Molly saw the creature, it was... A dog! Molly picked it up and hugged it, she was amazed by how it talked like human. The dog suddenly spoke again: "I can understand you, but it's you who can understand me as well, all thanks to that", the dog said as she pointed to something on Molly's foot. A strand of baroque pearls, layered with nacre and seemed elegant because of their ethereal luminescence. There laid a pearl necklace shining under the sun light. Molly cried: "It must have been blown on my foot by the sandstorm!" Molly then saw a matching one on the dog's neck. At night, Molly slept under the moonlight as she asked the dog: "Well, what is your name?"

"I don't have a name, I won't need one, won't I?" Asked the dog confused.

Helplessly Molly answered: "Then, what shall I call you?"

"Well, I like dirt and water but when it mixes together, it makes mud which makes mud my favourite!"

"Then, do you like the name 'Muddy'?"

"Yes, I loved it!" cried Muddy enraptured.

The friends cheered and laughed, all night as Molly told Muddy about her trip onto the silk road.

"What an exciting journey you have had, could I come with you?!" asked Muddy.

"Of course, why not? We could go together!" Replied Molly rapturously.

The second day, Molly and Muddy set off into the desert, the desert, the desert was much drier than any towel or crispy instant noodles. The friends thought that it was just a normal day as they walked lumberly on the sand. As they walked, Muddy suddenly looked towards the northern direction like a newborn puppy and ran rapidly towards it. Molly followed as they arrived at a small pond. "Water!" A loud whisper came through both of their minds as Molly took out large jars and started scooping water into them. On the other hand, Muddy was too excited that he started gulping water non-stop, the sound gulping echoed like distant thunder across the pond. gulp gulp gulp. Molly imagined herself on the beach resting by the vast, serene and harmonious sea. Next to it, laid a cave fully carved of ancient paintings and dry grass, there are stacks of firewood placed on the edge of the rock walls.

"This place is perfect!" cried Molly as she dusts off the dust from the rocky walls

"We could live here!" Molly exclaimed to Muddy

"Why not?" Muddy replied.

Molly and Muddy stepped in the cave as they planned how they could live in it. They cleaned up the dusty floor and painted the colourless walls with bright colours and nature decorations, the dishevelled cave soon became a cozy and lush dream cavern. The friends fought for the big rooms, and both knew that night will be different. To be safe, Molly made a door using a rope and some rocks, this stopped the evil animals hunting animals from going inside and GOBBLING them up into pieces. At night, everything was so different. The room was silent and dark, not even the rustle of sands, the stuffy room was reticent and was filled with nothing but them.

A few days later, it had already been the 20th day Molly and Muddy lived in the cave. As they walked, a sound echoed through the desert, 'sssssss'. An evil and violet sound, Sam made some noise, they were up to no good. The

sound louder and closer as a king, Molly and Maddy couldn't be there to not look backwards. Molly turned around a creature surely frightened her, it was... A Cobra snake!

"Quick! Climb on the rock!" Molly yelled as she grabbed muddy and ran towards the rock beside her. She twisted two branches from the tree and made it into a fork like equipment. She held it, use it to hook up his neck as the snake yelled:

"I didn't mean to harm you." Molly almost forgotten that she has the pearl necklace. What do you want to do? Molly asked impatiently.

"I just want food! If you let me go, I will fulfil three of your wishes!" The snake pleaded and terrified.

"You're sure?" Molly asked suspiciously.

"Yes, certainly! I swear on my tail" cried the snake panicking. I will trust you one more time. Molly explained.

"Yeah, we were only trust you one more time." Muddy barked as Molly saw a matching necklace on the snake's tail. Molly hesitated as she disentwined the wooden weapon.

"As I promised, I will give you 3 wishes and they will come true, now you can start making your wishes?" The snake said.

"As my first wish, I want to make the silk road joined". Molly said excitedly. the snake said bothered

"OK, it has came true." the snake said bothered

As my second wish, I want there to be bridges and traffic lights to help guide transports.

"OK, it has came true." The snake murmured

As my last wish, I want the silk road to be modified and make people on their way travel easier, also to let everyone know more about the silk road.

"OK, everything has now came true." The snake said as he disappeared into the darkness.

Now, we have our silk road, busy with cars and traders of technology. This all happened thanks to Molly!

Anecdotes of the Silk Road

Harrow International School Beijing, Ren, Yicheng Tina – 15

The sun shone on the sand and it made the desert into a golden world. Not far away, there was a group of camels. They moved slowly and there were a couple of people walking with the camels. The people only wore shorts because in the desert, it's quite hard to wear a jacket or jeans. (Unless you are crazy or you want to give yourself heatstroke.) Now the only purpose of the people was to find a place where they could spend tonight.

“ Marlene! Can we just stop? We have walked a long time. Now everyone is tired! We need to rest!”

“ No no no, we have to keep going. The sun is as soon as to raise down but we still haven't found an inn or somewhere we can sleep at night!”

“ Oh man, please please please! I mean it, I have no energy now. Em, Henley, you feel tired too! Aren't you?”

“ Kind of, I think.” Henley replied.

“ Alright, girls, listen up. If you want this trip be succeed, you must be strong and never give up! This is just a start, we have to work together. Now, Tyler stop asking for a rest, I won't agree to this. There is no excuse for taking a break now!” shouted Marlene.

Now no one talked.

The sky turned to dark blue, the wind blow strongly. It seemed like the desert was a house-free zone. As the leader of the group, Marlene had no idea about where they should live tonight. Now you might get confused. Why are these people walking in the desert? That's a fantastic question, because I won't tell you, so let's just keep it a secret now. What I can tell you is that they were on the way to another country. Wait,what? You want to know more about “Marlene”?! Alright fine, Marlene is not a part of the secret.Well, Marlene, a 26 year-old girl of mixed-blood. Her dad was Chinese and her mom was Spanish. Yet she didn't know lots of Spanish. She had brown curly hair and green eyes.Marlene had considerable strength and was often able to move heavy boxes. Tyler, Henley and Qiqi were the partners of Marlene. They were all from the same family and their ages were basically the same. (Except Tyler,she was the smallest one among these. She was only 17 years old!)

It was already midnight now. The group of people and the camels were all sleeping on a flat patch of sand. Marlene, who would never think that after a few weeks,there would be a big challenge waiting for them.

Half a month passed, Marlene, Tyler, Henley and Qiqi were still walking in the desert. The tinkling sound of the camel bells has mingled with the crisp clinking sound of the china bowls. These bowls were not for them to eat with , they might very well turn into money in the future! Why were they bringing these china bowls to another country? Let's make a bold guess: They took

the china bowls to another country and were even walking in the desert. Could it be that they were going to make a deal? Or they wanted to sell their family-produced china in another country? Probably you're right. They were currently on the Silk Road. They were going to sell the china produced by their family to another country, and that country was Iran.

On a cloudy day, the desert was covered in a dull grey mist. The group of people trudged slowly through the soft yellow sand, their legs as heavy as lead, dry lips muttering “hotel” over and over.

Finally, a small earth-colored building appeared. It was a small desert hotel. They were so exhausted that they stumbled inside. They hadn't tidied their bags and fell asleep immediately without any caution. In the middle of the night, the maid spotted the china in their luggage. Its smooth glaze caught his eye and greed felled his mind. He sneaked into their rooms quietly and stole half of the china. The maid planned to sell it to make money.

The next day, Marlene and her friends woke up. Qiqi found that the china had lost at least a half! The only person that had their room's key was the maid. Marlene found the maid and tried to get these bowls back from him.When this didn't have the desired effect, Henley rushed at the maid ,fists flying. Chairs scraped across the floor and crashed into walls as the fight broke out. Qiqi grabbed the maid's arm, while Marlene tried to snatch back the china. The

maid struggled wildly, shoving and swinging, but the group fought as a team. In the end, some of the china bowls broke into small pieces. They retrieved some bowls but Marlene felt so aggrieved. Even though she was the captain of this team, she had never faced such a thing before. She learned from this fight and encouraged her friends to be strong to keep going on the journey .

By the way, this current conflict is exactly the super challenge I mentioned earlier.....

After this fight three weeks later, the group finally reached Iran. Their faces gaunt and bodies thin from the journey. Marlene and her partners set up a small stall in a local market to sell their china. The Iranians were immediately drawn to the wonderful pieces——their smooth glaze and unique pattern. People gather around the stall, asking the prices and buying it to home. In less than three days, all the china was sold out.

Then they went back to China, tired but happy. As soon as they arrived, they told their family about the successful trade in Iran. The family saw a great business chance, so they made more high-quantity china and traded them with Iran. The trade brought a huge wealth to the family. Soon, their family become one of the riches in China, all because of the Silk Road china trade and the effort from Marlene, Henley, Qiqi and Tyler. Marlene, who is the bravest person in the group, made her family become more famous and rich.

New Tales of China's Silk Road

Harrow International School Beijing, Sun, Yuzhou Molly – 11

In the murky waters of the river, unknown dangers lurked. But, the treacherous hearts stood armed, ready to drag me from my future, my money, the precious goods and jewelry. One first step, the current was bitterly cold, and something was touching me. Another step. No, it was just a fisher's net. A third step. I stepped on something sharp. A fourth step. No, it was just a blunt blade. Every step was unsure. A fog was expanding. My vision was blurred. A few steps forward and I looked back. I didn't see anything. I didn't know where I was. Then, I saw a faint outline of an island. When I swam onto it, I realized I was stranded till the fog lifted.

I was born in poverty with my little sister, Julie. At one point, we were so poor we didn't have the money to buy some clothes. My mother realized we had to do something and the only thing we could do now was to look for the "Agra treasure": a myth but it was our only chance. Julie and I set off with little hope on the silk road to find it. But, a gang of burglars spotted us and took all our money forcing us to go into the never-ending river, and this was how it started.

"Mia, is it you?", croaked a small voice. "Where are you Julie?", I shouted. "I'm here!", a small, soaked, figure staggered painfully towards me. I ran to assist her. "Julie.", I cried as I wrapped her in some spare blankets that I carried. "What did they do to you, are you okay?", she nodded and said, "They forced me into the river and I swam here." Suddenly, I noticed this wasn't an island. It was a forest with thick, unwelcoming trees and shrubs. "We have to get back to the silk road, Mom and Dad will starve!", "Oh, and by the way, I found this compass, strange thing, it's not accurate but I still think we should follow it because we have nowhere to go!"

Julie and I followed the compass to a strange and unreal portal. It was like a hyper-detailed model. Suddenly, a strong force dragged us in it. "Julie!", I called as we were sucked into the portal by an impenetrable force. The world was black.

"Ugh", I grunted as I struggled to sit up. I was in a hot air balloon with Julie at sea on a sunny day. "Where are we?", Julie asked wearily.

"I don't know.", I replied. I stood up. A slight breeze brushed my wet soaked hair and the salty smell of the sea filled my nostrils. I scanned the horizon and spotted a glint of silver. "Julie, there's something odd here!", I shouted and she snapped to attention. Suddenly a look of pure fear appeared on her face. "Do something, it's a Viking ship", she urged desperately. I closed my eyes and when I opened them, I was still there as Julie was preparing to jump into the sea! Together, we splashed into the water. A silver lifeboat was approaching. A fat, hairy, covered-in-armour barbarian stood in front of us. He had a hammer in one hand, a horrifying hook on the other, a belt with a razor-sharp knife, a folded map, and boots with buckles that jingled at his every step. He had a red and fearsome face with battle scars all over it. He was the most horrifying man I've ever seen.

"I am the king of Vikings, Benker.", he with a hint of an accent. Benker hauled us out of the water, dripping wet. "Crazy children.", he muttered as another scary Viking called, "Take them to their cell!" Benker marched us to a dark cell and pushed us in. The door shut with a bang. We looked at each other in a daze. We were doomed to be devoured by these Vikings. Suddenly, Julie said, "I have a plan." I looked at her in surprise. "I got this plan from a book I read. The character was in prison tied some blankets into a rope and hung outside his window. When the jailer found the cell empty, he ran off to get help. Danny then climbed back in and escaped through the open door!" I stared at her, eyes wide open. "That's it!". For the next couple of days, we kept filing the bars till it broke. Julie had been fishing for information from Jack, the slightly friendly barbarian that was guarding us. She found out we were going to be fed to some cheetahs the next morning, so we tied the blankets and hung outside that night. Even though we only waited for a few minutes, it felt like ages. The cannons below looked like little ants.

Jack came and stared in shock at the empty cell. He shouted and immediately rang the alarm siren. A earsplitting screech filled my ears. "screeeech!" All the Vikings ran out on deck. The hallway was empty! Quickly, we climbed back in our cell and went into the hallway. We needed to get home or else our family would starve. It occurred to

me the ship must have some valuable jewels. The ship gleamed under the hot afternoon sun. Suddenly, I had an idea. "All we have to do is turn the heat up. We'll start a fire in 4 different places. The pirates will then jump ship, and it will be ours!", I explained to Julie. We immediately set to work. I found some gun powder and we got to our posts. 3,2,1, Fire! With a crackling noise, flames filled the air. We hid in a big box, covering it with wet towels to keep from burning. We heard the pirates shout, "Fire, fire, fire, fire, fire, I want my mommy, have we been attacked?"

Finally, the pirates started jumping overboard. "Stop, only I say when it is time to jump!", shouted the furious Benker. But for once, no one listened. As quick as mice, we closed the door to the cabins that were on fire. Without any air, the flames slowly began to cease. When the pirates realized what had happened, they tried to climb back on board, but, we were already speeding away!

That night, we checked out the supplies on board and luckily, it could sustain us for at least a few years. We found a map of the world and set off towards our home. One day, Julie called me to Benker's bedroom. We saw a trapdoor under his bed. It was chained shut with a huge silver lock. Finally, we picked the lock. Millions of precious jewels filled the room and spilled on the floor. It was an amazing sight! "With all these, we will never be hungry again!", cried Julie with delight.

A few weeks passed and we still didn't see land, only seagulls. Suddenly, clouds gathered and instantly, the sky became dark. I quickly informed Julie a storm was coming and I took hold of the wheel. Lightning crackled as raindrops were hurled onto the deck. Suddenly, a burst of wind toppled me and I fell hard on the edge of the deck. I tried to get up but another gust of wind pushed me straight into the cold sea. "Help!", I screamed. The water was churning and frozen cold, and I was trying very hard just to stay afloat. Julie appeared at my call. "I'm here in the water!" Instantly, she grabbed a life jacket and threw it to me. I quickly put it on and paddled to the deck. She hauled me out of the water. I was bitterly cold and I was shivering. Julie gave me a shower and after I came out, the sky was peaceful once more.

The next morning, I heard Julie say, "Land, land, quick Mia, come onto the deck!" I raced to the deck and saw what we were searching for. Land at last. We anchored the ship right next to our home. I rushed in, and there was my mother and father, healthy and well. My mother embraced us warmly and cried, "I was afraid you would never come back!" My sister sniffled, "And I thought I would never see you again!"

We never worried or thought of the treacherous silk road, the fierce barbarians, or the strange portal again.

"Karina, wake up!", Julie said warmly to me. "It's your birthday and my sister came to visit." I pretended not to wake up and after a few more failed attempts, my mother finally went away, saying, "I guess it's alright to give you some more time when it's your birthday." After she left, I sat up and looked out my window. The silk road, now full of cars and trains and modern technology, cast it's warmth on me, but I still could not forget what my mother and her sister, Mia had done to our family.

The Final Secret of the Taylor Family

Harrow International School Beijing, Wang, Sitong Hannah – 11

Sophie:

The Desert is a dangerous place to be. It is so treacherous and harsh. It holds our family secrets beneath the seeming-like perfect world above the desert. My twin Ivy Taylor and I must go through the Silkroad to find our family Secrets. Everyone in the Taylor family will go and find them and unlock our secret powers. I was a secret agent for His Majesty, and Ivy was a secret agent in training. The Silkroad lies before me, but I felt felicity. The never-ending desert was all around me, lurking at me if I stopped. But I don't care. I was always near to death that little threats never took hold of me. I do have another reason, which is I have my own shadow, who was my twin, Ivy. We have each other; nothing will scare us. We will always be together whatever happens.

Ivy:

I really want to find our Taylor family's secrets, to unlock our special powers to defeat an ancient monster that our family tried but never killed it. And their key to it was Silkroad. Somehow, we managed to get to the Silkroad, through a huge golden ring. I don't need to worry about anything because my twin Sophie Taylor was a secret agent for His Majesty! As she cheerfully said: "Here we are! The most magnificent Silkroad which will lead to our family secret! Ivy, we are final going to fulfill our duty!" I couldn't stop beaming too, but our destination was to kill the monster while unlock our secret powers! When I thought of that, I began to shiver a bit. Sophie looked at me and said: "Ivy, are you okay?" I said: "I guess so." "But why are you shivering under the Sun?" Sophie eyed me thoughtfully: "perhaps you are a coward?" We laughed, and I said: "Well, we are here at the Silkroad. We are going to unlock our secret weapons and earn a little cool tattoo on our forehead, but how are we going to defeat the monster?"

Sophie:

What Ivy had just said made sense, how are we going to defeat an ancient monster that our ancestors don't know how to defeat? As we walked into the never-ending desert, I did a little brainstorm. First, if we didn't kill the ancient monster, just like our ancestors, our lives would also be a joke. Another reason if we didn't win was, we may die or just simply disappear or vanish forever, just like what happened to some of our ancestors? Maybe now isn't the time to think about it, because we are on our way to unlock our secret weapon! Just as I finished my brainstorming, I heard Ivy cry out in the alarm and spun around to see what happened. Ivy disappeared beside me! My detective skills soon flush to work as I try to track down where Ivy might be and how did she disappear? My sixth sense told me that something is not quite right, but I couldn't work it out for what it is. "Sophie!" I heard Ivy cry out loud one last time before something pulled me into the sand and everything turned black.

Ivy:

I am noting in my diary which I always bring along. I noted down what happened, and what series of events happened in the day. When I finished noting, I saw a dark shadow looming behind us and I said: "Sophie, I think something is following us....." Before I finished the sentence, the dark shadow seized me up and something rough and hot burned my skin and I let out a cry. I don't know where I am. Something pulled me into the sand and I tried to get up, but I was defeated. I blacked out. When I finally opened my eyes, I was leaning against a huge Igneous rock. I felt out of breath and every part of me was sore and wanted to lie down. My black hair is partly yellow now and it is filled with sand. There were burns on my legs and arms, and a hole was beside me. I suddenly knew everything that had happened! I read our mother's diary before; she said that she has the same adventure. Our mother believes that the Silkroad wants to help us to reach our destiny quicker so it will pull us into the sand and push us forward towards our family secret! Realizing this, I stood up and ran across the stones and began to find my twin, Sophie.

Sophie:

I landed upon the sand softly, and a gush of water appeared behind me and lowered me onto the sand. I felt dizzy. My back was not wet and that is a mystery. I was often fond of water. There were burns on my arms and legs, and I saw a pair of hands steadying me up on my legs. When my vision occurred to be clear again, I found out it was Ivy who was standing beside me. We grinned at each because we all know what we are thinking about; we are one step closer to our powers! In front of us appeared two doors made of fire and water. We glanced at each other and said: "Sophie represents water and Ivy represents water. We showed Courage and fellowship along the journey. We shall unlock our secret weapons and defeat the monster." We both glanced at each other and stepped in their representing element's doors. Our powers are the most powerful weapons in the family, and we killed the monster by some strikes of fire and water and the monster, who seemed scary, was a piece of cake. Our gaze met each other and mine was blue and Ivy's were red. Our forehead had water and fire tattoos. We both boosted fire and water, and a magnificent cloud appeared, and we both stepped on it. We smiled below and disappeared into the blue sky.

New Tales of China's Silk Road

Harrow Shanghai International School, Hu, Winnie – 11

It was a mysterious evening, with the exotic horizon dancing in excitement, the trees whispering enthusiastically, and the wind mischievously peeping into the window of a raging house.

“Why won’t you let me go?” I screamed.

“You have already learned enough in school, your brother still has a long way to grow.”

“Don’t talk in that tone to me, and can you stop the way you roll your eyes?”

“Polly! Calm down! It is no concern—”

“No concern? Oh, I’m no concern, aren’t I?”

“Please Polly!”

Bang!

The slam of the door echoed in the night.

Hot sizzling tears ran down my face, I couldn’t see clearly, all I knew was that I wanted to place myself as far away from that wretched family and the ugly place I called home.

“Polly!”

“Polly, please come back!”

My name pierced through the clawing night again and again until I could only distinguish it from the roaring wind and the booming rustle of trees. Stumbling at first, I then sprinted wildly into a dark town, noiseless and peaceful. I walked along the pathway, seeking a place to hide and sleep.

Scarlet.

Emerald.

Indigo.

What was that in the distance?

It seemed to be a wagon but with something colorful peeping out. I approached cautiously, trying to make out what it was against the sweeping darkness.

I reached out my hand...

smooth, flowing, neat...

Silk!

Perfect for me to hide and sleep in.

I crawled under the layers of comfortable cloth, my eyes dry and empty, slowly the world drifted farther, farther, farther...

Was the wagon moving?

I opened my eyes drowsily, a cool wind brushing past my face. There was a strange, dry, salty taste on the tip of my tongue.

Clip clop, Clip clop.

What was that sound?

Could it possibly be horses ?

I couldn’t imagine why.

I heaved myself up, above the silk and...

“Aaah!”

The scream of horror and shock bellowed from my right.

“Who are you?” I asked to the boy beside me.

“Well, who are you appearing in the wagon?”

“I was just sleeping in it for the night!”

“You have slept a long time, so you can’t go back!”

“Go back? Where are we?”

I looked around, and saw a vast sheet of golden brown. There were only jagged peaks to be seen, and the occasional smattering of blue-green foliage

“In the Gobi desert.”

“Now where did this little girl come from?” A deeper voice came calling from an older man.

“She just appeared from the wagon!”

“But she can’t stay with us!” The man growled.

“But we can’t leave her!”

After a pause of deep consideration, the man answered.

“We’ll have to take her with us.”

The statement was more of an order, echoing powerfully away in the mounds of sand.

I had a million questions I wanted to ask but was too dumbfounded to move my mouth from its open gasp. I sat dazed and confused, the thoughts swimming in my mind, too many to even think about one properly.

Am I safe?

What is going to happen?

Am I going to be left here alone?

Nervous and frightened, I walked beside the two men and advanced towards the setting sun, in this never-ending expanse of dazzling land.

It was a long and arduous journey, and tensions were fraught – mainly my fault. But we soon arrived in a place like no other, a place with a cacophony of smells, sights and images were brought around us, as the wagon drew steadily into Istanbul.

We didn’t have enough eyes or noses to smell and look at every interesting shop, building or piece of clothing. We walked entranced in the colour-bursting city, astonished in the dyes and designs before our eyes.

Something glistened in the corner of my eye.

The sparkle shimmered, beckoning me to take it, to keep it, to be its owner...

I couldn’t stop myself, I rushed towards the glimmer, going straight for it. I wrapped my hands around the opal, its kaleidoscope like colours smiling welcomingly at me.

“Are you going to pay for this, young lady?”

I couldn’t hear the seller; her voice was muffled and distanced.

I stared into the diamond, into its rainbow world, delving deeper into its waves...

Then I ran.

I didn’t know why, but the opal seemed to lead me.

“Run, run, run!” a tiny voice screamed inside my head.

“Hey come back!”

I could hear quick footsteps behind me, my heart beating faster with each breath.

“Run, run!!!”

An explosion of pain burned into my shoulder. I cried out, tears pooling into my eyes.

“Hırsız (Thief)! Hırsız (Thief)!”

Sounds boomed into my ears, someone screamed, someone tried to take the gem.

“Give it back Polly, it is not yours.” The soothing voice of the Father cut into my ears.

I let go.

Thankfully there was a recompense of silk for my behavior, but I had already drifted away into the arms of darkness where there was still a tiny voice crying desperately to me...

We entered the lavish gates of Rome, looking around in awe of the beautiful, bustling city. The buildings were enchanting, made in every shape and material, the flowers and clothes seemed to be surreal, and there were colours of every kind and shade you could think of, all scattered in this energetic city.

We explored every corner and road until exhaustion took over and we settled in a wooden house that we found unwanted, yet cosy. After making repairs, exchanging silk for food and everyday resources, we ate a good meal and prepared to go to sleep.

“The stars are so beautiful tonight.” I stated to the Son, standing outside.

“And the sky, the most romantic shade of sapphire I have ever seen.” He answered, laughing.

We looked at each other, in thought.

“I’ve never actually thanked you and your dad for taking care of me on this trip.”

He smiled, and went inside.

I looked up at the night again, the stars have guided me, and so has the Silk Road.

The Silk Road is full of wonder and magic, so I invite you, the reader, to choose the ending of this adventure: a, b or c.

a.

I opened my eyes in a start.

Wait, I was dreaming?

A cool wind slapped my face as if to wake me up.

A dry taste entered my mouth.

Clip clop, Clip clop.

That sound...

The ground below me seemed to be moving.

I felt around, finding a smooth cloth resting above me, and a wooden feeling on the surface I was inside.

I pushed myself up, and piercing sunlight shone on my face.

“Aaah!”

A familiar scream came from my right.

I was in an endless sweep of sunlit gravel, the thin wind whipping sparkling quartz across a hard, tawny plain.

b.

Ten years has passed, and it felt like a flash, Polly and Li’an (the son), had developed their relationship over the last decade, and it had turned from friends, to almost siblings to finally... love. Polly knew how grateful she was to Li’an and his father, they took care of her and showed her a different path in life. She chose not to be angry, but to be grateful, she helped them with their other Silk Road journeys, to the point where they needed her expertise, and her ability to haggle with the dealers in Istanbul. they would always call upon the opal dealer Polly had stolen from when they passed through. She too had forgiven her, and saw what a change to Polly there was: she had grown up, matured and was a lovely young woman to be around. Now that she had Li’an she realised the opal was not a sign of bad luck, but actually her own lucky talisman.

c.

Another morning has gone, full of exploring and cheerfulness. We sat around a stubby table, eating lunch and talking about our plans.

“I really like this place,” the father said, “My son and I want to stay.”

He turned to me.

“What about you Polly?” the Father asked.

I stared into the roaring flames in the fire-place, the magical smell of food wafted into my nostrils, the taste of sweet and sour and spicy whirled smoothly in my mouth.

“You are my family now, one that I love and are grateful for, but I have to go back to the place I belong, to the family I left two years ago.”

“Please stay,” the Son pleaded

I looked at the wooden walls I now love, then back at the flames.

In the red glow I saw my mother’s face and the small house where I grew up.

I gave a sad but firm smile.

“No, I’m going home.”

New Tales of China's Silk Road – The Echo of the Silk Road

Harrow Shanghai International School, Yan, Mia – 12

The storm was not on any forecast. It rose from the Taklamakan's heart, a moving mountain of dust and static. Inside the pressure-sealed crawler, Tangia kept her hands steady on the wheel. Beside her, Dr. Lin monitored the cargo: SYNTHIA, the Synergistic Terrain & Hydrological Intelligence Array. Its nine nested spheres hummed like a sleeping dragon. It could calm storms and summon rain, a quantum lever to tilt the climate of nations. But its heart was a crystal grown in lunar gravity; the pressure shift of flight would shatter it. So, it travelled the oldest way—by land. The Silk Road had been resurrected not for silk, but for SYNTHIA.

Their mission was simple: escort Unit 07 from Dunhuang to Tehran. The team of seven was chosen for their skills and silence. Only Chen, the security liaison, seemed restless, his eyes often on the horizon.

When the storm blinded all sensors, Tangia remembered her grandfather's tales and a sketch in his journal. She steered the crawler off the magnetic track. Just as the sand began to scour the paint from the hull, the LiDAR found an opening: a cave forgotten by time and maps.

Inside, the world went quiet. Their lights revealed walls covered in ancient murals: camels, merchants, and vibrant oasis life. Then, without warning, SYNTHIA activated itself. A soft blue light emanated from its core, washing over the stone.

The murals began to move.

Caravans flowed in silent procession. But one panel was different. It showed people of different lands facing the wall, their mouths open in song. Stylized waves flowed from them into a diagram of underground channels and stars.

"Impossible," Lin whispered, her scanner chirping. "The pigments... they contain resonant metals. This is a user interface."

SYNTHIA projected a hologram into the cavern's center: a vast, luminous web of light, pulsing deep beneath the continent from Chang'an to Samarkand.

"A network," Lin breathed. "A geological climate system. The caravans didn't just use the Road... they maintained it. Their songs tuned it. The Silk Road was a shared machine."

The revelation hung in the air, profound and fragile.

Then, Chen moved. He plugged a device into SYNTHIA's console. "A machine that waited for a master," he said, his voice stripped of its usual neutrality. With a tap, he sent a command.

SYNTHIA's harmonious hum warped into a metallic shriek. The holographic web flared crimson. The cave shuddered. The air grew thick, smelling suddenly of ozone and ancient spices. Phantom outlines of camels and riders flickered through the solid rock. Chen's forced command—a protocol of control—was being rejected by the network's ancient, consensus-based logic. Reality at the intersection was unraveling.

"He's trying to overwrite its core directive with a command structure!" Lin yelled. "The system sees it as a corruption!"

Tangia's mind raced to her grandfather's final gift—not maps, but words. A lexicon of trade terms and greetings in a dozen dead Silk Road languages.

She didn't try to stop Chen. She ran to the mural's base, where lines of faint script were carved: contracts and prayers in old tongues. She placed her hands on the cool stone.

"Everyone, listen!" she commanded. "Read the script in front of you. In your first language. Now!"

Confusion, then understanding. Alexei, the geologist, began in resonant Russian. Parvaneh, the engineer, followed in flowing Persian. Yusuf, the medic, chanted in Uyghur. Lin joined in clear Mandarin.

Tangia closed her eyes and added the words from memory: Sogdian greetings, Tocharian numbers. A chorus of human voices filled the cave, clashing yet strangely harmonious.

It was not an attack. It was an introduction. A handshake across time.

SYNTHIA's shriek faltered, softened, began to find rhythm with the chorus. The crimson violence in the web gentled, weaving the new voices into its light. The flickering phantoms coalesced into a single figure—the Harmonist. Its face was all faces, its robe a tapestry of routes.

Its voice was the sound of wind and distant bells. "The Road tests the echo, not the step. Do you bring a new verse, or the silence?"

Chen watched, his hand frozen over the console. He saw the network respond not to domination, but to the offered chorus. His vision of control seemed small, a desert of one. He severed the connection.

Silence returned, whole and deep. The web pulsed calmly.

Tangia approached SYNTHIA. She input no command, only a request for synchronization in the protocol she now understood.

The Harmonist nodded. On SYNTHIA's bronze shell, a new mark etched itself: a bell embraced by a circuit.

Outside, the storm did not break—it settled. The winds gentled into a breeze, patiently shifting the dunes from the path.

At dawn, as they prepared to leave, Chen stayed. "I will learn the old songs," he said, his back to the crawler. "Someone must remember the tune."

Tangia's final report was brief: *SYNTHIA-07 integrated with legacy system 'The Sympathetic Web.' Mission updated from delivery to dialogue. Cargo is now an emissary.*

The crawler moved on. On the horizon, a mirage shimmered: modern tracks alongside ancient paths. SYNTHIA's hum was deeper now, a note in an older song.

They had not revived the Road. They had answered its call, and in answering, remembered: you do not conquer the road. You join its conversation. The only things that cross the deserts of time are the things shared—the song, the word, the trust.

The Road was awake. It was singing.

The Leaves of Longing

Heep Yunn School, Chau, Ching – 14

The canister was just a small, somber vessel of ancient bronze, crammed onto a shelf between her father's History of the Taklamakan and a box of dried-out highlighters. Li Na, fourteen and profoundly lonely, was supposed to be dusting. With a sigh, she picked it up. It was far heavier than it looked, cool and substantial in her palm, as if it held the weight of centuries rather than leaves. Its surface was a landscape of time itself—a mottled patina of malachite green and earthy umber bloomed across its shoulders. Below, the bronze shone through in smooth, worn bands, the colour of old honey, where hands had once clasped it, polishing doubt away.

The lid was sealed with a Fengyin mud seal, stamped with a winding road between moon and sun. A faded vermilion label declared its origin, and from the metal and clay rose a scent of petrichor and old parchment—the breath of slow time.

It was not a container meant to be opened lightly. It was a vault.

Beneath the bronze vault was a slip of rice paper, its script the spidery trail of a careful hand:

For the quiet heart.

One leaf, one life.

Let the water sing.

Let the mind be a clear desert night.

To drink is to remember.

To alter is to unravel.

The words 'For the quiet heart' seemed to pulse on the page. A quiet heart. Hers was quiet, she supposed. But it felt less like stillness and more like emptiness. One leaf, one life. Was this an answer, or just more of her family's mysterious poetry?

Her loneliness tightened. This was not simply another artifact. This was an invitation. She held her breath, and began to work at the Fengyin seal with her thumbnail. The clay-like mixture yielded slowly, like aged bark, peeling it back in delicate curls that released a concentrated scent of centuries.

The dark rim appeared. She lifted the heavy lid.

She plucked a single leaf, its texture like ancient parchment, and stole to the kitchen.

The electric kettle's grumble felt wrong. She remembered her grandmother's copper kettle, its whistle a silver needle stitching the quiet. Defeat tasted metallic. Then she saw the blackened stovetop pot.

She lit the flame and the water's song began—low, then rising, pure and plaintive. She poured it into her great-grandmother's celadon cup, a piece of green sky, chipped at the rim.

She drank.

The world did not dissolve. It bloomed.

The refrigerator's hum faded into the drone of a desert zither as new sensations painted themselves over the room.

Heat. The jangle of camel bells. She was amid a train of swaying Bactrian camels. A leathery-faced man passed, singing a beautifully sad song of a far green valley. She felt his loneliness, a vast and hollow thing, but also his simple pride. Then her gaze was pulled ahead, to the caravan master, his hunger sharp and acquisitive. She felt his thoughts as if they were fumes. More jade. Finer silk. Purer silver. His longing was not for home, but for wealth. It was a polished, metallic ache, a hollow that swallowed the song behind him. His was a heart that had become a ledger, every beat a calculation.

She was a ghost, a passenger in the Taklamakan. As the caravan crested a dune, a vast, star-speckled sky unfolded. She grasped the two lonelinesses: for what is lost, the other, colder, for what is never owned—a desert where every grain is a coin.

She gasped. And the scene evaporated. She was back in her kitchen, holding the warm cup, a cold tear on her cheek. For the first time, she saw her father's obsession not as passion, but as its own kind of hunger. Was it so different from the caravan master's? It, too, was a transaction: life traded for footnotes.

That marks the beginning of her double life—a schoolgirl by day, ghost by leaf. She witnessed the two threads of the Road: the warm weave of connection, and the cold filament of greed.

In the bustling markets of Samarkand, where a merchant watered his ink, his eyes reflecting coins. He sat on his pile of carpets, deaf to the bartered laughter nearby, his world reduced to a balance sheet. He sat down on a pile of carpets, counting, always counting, deaf to the bartered laughter nearby. She watched a Chinese scribe, his fingers numb with cold, patiently teaching an Uighur apprentice how to mix ink for free, their heads bent together in a communication that warmed her. Here, the currency was care, repaid in shared understanding.

Then, the glitch.

In Dunhuang's cave, the monk's brush stilled. A silent scream pierced the sanctuary's quiet, snapping the golden thread of his focus. He frantically rolled his scroll. The sanctuary of shared wisdom was breached by a paranoia that felt borrowed and sharp.

'To the Blue Beryl Seas!' The Roman's cup chimed against the Persian's. Then his smile vanished. 'Your grin hides a weight. Where is the sapphire?' The accusation felt metallic, paranoid, a poison in the wine. It was the sound of a contract snapping, a friendship valued and found counterfeit.

A toxin was in the timeline. A ripple, amplifying the innate, sleeping greed—polishing it, feeding it, making it shout.

Li Na's father spoke of a visitor. Kiran, from Uzbekistan. 'Intense young man,' he said, not looking up from a pottery fragment. 'Aggressive. Spoke of historical theft, of rebalancing scales. Bitter.'

The pieces clicked. The rival. Another canister. Kiran wasn't just trying to edit history; he was weaponizing it. He was punishing the past for its inequalities, starving the heart to fatten the ledger. He saw only greed, blind to the shared humanity that gave the Road its enduring currency. He fed hunger and starved the heart.

Li Na only had three leaves left. She brewed the next with a new and sole purpose: to hunt. The vision came: a caravanserai. Kiran's spectral form, whispered to the caravan master. 'The Dunhuang monks have a king's ransom. They are liars. Betray them. Keep all the gold.' Kiran was sculpting greed into a blade, to sever the sacred thread.

With her final leaf, she chose. She journeyed to a Khotan night. The sutra scribe, Ananda, sat beneath a pomegranate tree, laden with a dread not his own—the fear that his life's work was just a merchant's trap.

Li Na, a mute spirit, spoke in feeling. She poured into him not just the future beauty of the words he would save, but the other path. She let him feel, for a fleeting second, the profound, hollow loneliness of the caravan master, a man who would die decades later surrounded by untouched silks and unloved gold. As she poured the truth into Ananda, it was no longer observation, but a silent, urgent plea. Feel this, she urged, immersing him in the camelman's shared song, the scribe's patient touch—the fragile warmth that flows between transactions. And feel that, she whispered, laying bare the vast, silent desert of possession. Two futures shimmered before his spirit. For the first time, her ghostly witnessing became an act of hope: Choose the tapestry. Please, choose the threads of shared breath and meaning.

This is the choice, her presence whispered into his spirit. Carry the words and create a tapestry of meaning, or carry the weight and dwell in a desert of your own making.

Ananda's fear was joined by a resolve, hard as river stone. He touched his bundled sutras. His purpose became a quiet bell, tolling against the lie.

The brew spent itself. The cup held only dregs. The canister was empty.

That evening, her father murmured over a map. 'Kiran cancelled. He wrote, 'I was trying to cure a loneliness I only made deeper.'"

Li Na said nothing. She put the kettle on the stove and brewed two cups of Pu—erh. The steam, a frail bridge between them. She placed one beside her father's map.

He looked up, surprised, the scholar's hunger momentarily stilled in his eyes.

'Dad,' she said, her voice clear in the quiet room. 'Tell me about the people on the road. Not just what they carried, but what they carried inside.'

He blinked. Then a smile, old and deep as a desert well, broke across his face. The chase for citation—fortune forgotten. 'Ah,' he breathed, lifting his cup to meet hers in a silent chime. 'That,' his eyes on hers, 'is the only currency that outlasts the sand.'

And as he began to speak, Li Na listened. The tea was water and leaf. But in her soul, she smelled the rain on dry earth and the ink of devotion, forever woven against the metallic howl of greed.

The real journey—the one that mends the lonely tear in the tapestry—began not on an ancient road, but in the quiet of a once—lonely room, with steam from their cups weaving a new thread between them.

Etched of the Unspoken Road

Heep Yunn School, Li, Lok Sum – 13

The air in Dunhuang, 658 CE, layered with incense, and murmured prayers. In a hostel near the cave temples, the young Han monk Xuanjian presented his *guosuo* to the cavern master. He spoke of his errand: to seek original Indian texts in distant Kucha, to correct translations fumbled by time and distance.

“With sincerity,” he asked, politeness veiling a thread of anxiety, “might I secure a protector for the road down south?” The master nodded, and sent for a guard.

The guard arrived with dust still on his flaked boots. His name was Bhadra, a *Tocharian* from Kucha itself. When he reached for the advance silver, his sleeve fell back, revealing a badly knotted burn scar curled from wrist to elbow.

Xuanjian’s gaze caught on it, then flickered away.

“We speak *Sogdian*?” Bhadra asked, his voice rough with two languages.

“*Sogdian*,” Xuanjian agreed, the Chinese accent clinging, still, to his word.

Silk bolts waited in Xuanjian’s pack, payment upon safe arrival. Their duties were set: the monk’s spiritual blessings, the guard’s navigation and blade. Without other words, they left the hostel. The desert opened before them—silent, vast, where the past hung between their steps, unspoken.

The first night, they camped where the desert wind carved a dune. Bhadra placed his bedroll between Xuanjian and the desolate desert, then Bhadra built a small fire of dried dung.

The fire popped. Bhadra flinched, his hand drifting to his forearm. He shifted back from the flames. At meal, Xuanjian offered a steamed bun. Bhadra refused, chewing his dried mutton in the shadows.

When Xuanjian bowed to begin his evening ritual, Bhadra did not bow. Perhaps he prayed in his own way. The Chinese syllables hung in the cold air. As the chant rose, Bhadra’s jaw tightened. His gaze fixed far away, he stood, facing the horizon.

“I’ll check the camels,” he said in rough *Sogdian*, and walked off into the night.

Xuanjian’s chant faded into soft *Sanskrit*. The fire crackled. The desert was vast—and the past sat between them in the darkness, unspoken.

For the next five days, this was the pattern.

A week into the desert, endless yellow broke against polished dark stone. They came upon the ruins at midday: shattered walls, a half-buried plinth where a Buddha once sat.

Bhadra stopped.

The plinth was of stone, vines warping the side that remained. Broken at its base, it leaned between engraved patterns—once confluence, now fragmented remnants of spiritual sanctity.

Bhadra couldn’t look away, his body rigid. The wind through the ruins brushed his held breath. His left hand rose to his scar, silent.

Xuanjian’s head tilted. He took a step back, eyes moving from Bhadra to the plinth. He nodded. Perhaps the guard was pious after all—moved by ruins of faith.

A dead leaf fell in front of Bhadra. He turned away abruptly and resumed walking. Xuanjian followed.

Bhadra’s fists were clenched. Xuanjian walked behind him, the silence between them now deeper, like a faded painted eye staring from a broken wall.

They left the ruins behind. The wind picked up, carrying a new scent—not dust, but of dampness and rain. By afternoon, the sky had bruised the colour of rusted metal.

The sky bruised to rust, then black. The wind arrived not as air, but as howls, scraping sand and rock like fractured blades.

Bhadra shouted something lost in the storm, dragging Xuanjian toward a crack in the rock. They sheltered in a dark cramped cave, Bhadra positioned between Xuanjian and the opening.

Bhadra’s eyes scanned, the thunder like a war drum—tensing him for battle.

The wind screamed like dying horses. A rock split somewhere above.

“Bptt—Krrkk...”

Bhadra flinched at the sound, a choked cry escaping him.

“*Shàng yǒu shí!*” Xuanjian yelled—Rock from above!—the Chinese ripped from his throat before he could form the *Sogdian*.

Bhadra jerked back as if stabbed, his eyes wide in the half-dark.

His breath was shallow. The silence between them thickened. The storm raged outside. Bhadra’s scar tightened.

The guard feared the storm, Xuanjian thought, his own heart hammering. That’s all.

They stayed until orange-tinted light seeped through the cracks. The sandstorm passed, but something clung in the air between the left stones.

When they emerged, the desert had been rearranged. Dunes had migrated, paths were buried. They walked now in a newly scarred world.

They reached the first true oasis after sixteen days of travel. Green lashed against the yellow dust, the desolate replaced with the haggling sounds of trade.

Bhadra moved toward a trader’s stall, his voice low in *Turkic*. Xuanjian lingered, his eyes drifting across the bronzeware, until he saw it.

Among the merchant’s trinkets was a small bronze Buddha, its sheen blurred by heat, one shoulder slumped in weeping metal. It was Tocharian in style—Kucha, perhaps, or Kaashahr—melted not by time, but by intent.

Bhadra froze, his stare too long to be mere interest.

Xuanjian’s hand went to his stomach. That figurine... the reports in Chang’an had spoken of melted statues sent back as tribute.

As a boy in the monastic school halls, he’d heard the reports: melted sacred gold, sold wonders in the markets.

He paled. His breath caught, not of cumin, but of slight nausea.

Bhadra glanced at Xuanjian, and turned away to the textile stalls, his steps deliberate, a guard’s retreat.

Xuanjian followed without a word, the last glint of metal lingering behind his eyes.

With the life of commerce faded, they left the noise of the market behind. The silence between them now held a new weight—a recognised presence.

The desert began to shed. First came the mud in the air, then the stones, then the roar of the river itself—swollen and monstrous.

Bhadra tested the current with a pole, his scarred forearm tensed. He nodded once: they would cross.

The crossing demanded deliberate steps on slick stones. The waters warned of what could be. Yet near safety, a mishap: Xuanjian slipped on algae.

His heart dropped.

Cold shock swallowed his leg. Bhadra pulled him back, grip iron-tight.

They reached the shore panting, a moment of locked eyes.

He saved me. After everything.

Bhadra immediately pulled away, scrambling up the bank.

“Thank you,” Xuanjian said in *Sogdian*, as Bhadra turned away, compulsively washing his scarred arm in the river.

The silence settled heavier than before—born of that first touch. Xuanjian’s eyes stayed on Bhadra until he followed, wordless.

Nights grew colder as they climbed toward the foothills. The tension was a third traveller—watchful and silent.

The last night—they set camp at the foothills. The wind whispered, the cold etching painfully onto their moonlit slack bodies. And after weeks, they finally reached their last stop.

Bhadra finally collapsed. He slept, hard.

Yet a moment in the night, when the brittle stars flickered, a whimper—almost a coherent murmur—shot out from Bhadra’s twitching presence. Then, he started to sweat, curled stiff around his scarred arm. And then, a heart wrenching cry.

“*Puwar! Pācer!*”—Fire! Brother!—as if calling, helpless. For the lost.

Xuanjian heard one word from *Tocharian*—“Fire!”, a hell-tormented cry ripped him awake. But all that awaited was free of flame: a rigid shaking guard, and his own adrenaline pumping through his veins.

Then something clicked; the audible now gave clarity.

Brother. Fire. The burn.

The looting. The melted Buddha. The Chinese.

Me.

The survivor shook. Xuanjian almost reached out, then he paused. He took it back. He watched.

He carried something. But just held its weight, he held it until light rose upon the last, but first true horizon.

Bhadra woke up and packed his things, his gaze fixed, slowly scanning the horizon, a guard's instinct. Their eyes never met, but it was different. Their presence lingered between them, mutual but distant.

The gates of Kucha appear at dawn, mud-brick walls in the distance. At the gate, Xuanjian handed the silk bolts.

Bhadra took them, his eyes on the cloth.

Xuanjian's mouth parted, then held silent.

Bhadra nodded, then turned away.

Xuanjian remained at the gate as Bhadra approached the city.

The watcher watched as the space between them grew distant one last time. The dust stood still. The silence held the weight of time, unspoken.

Remains.

Once Upon a Time, the Dawn Was Mine

Heep Yunn School, Woo, Yan Lam – 14

Mind-log 01

Year 2094

Her thoughts disintegrated instantly as she felt a calloused hand clamping around her mouth.

Her thundering pulse roared in her ears. Pure terror gripped her airways, stealing her breath.

She elbowed their stomach and twisted around, a puff of tobacco-scented breath fanning over her face.

Released, she stumbled back maladroitly, not remotely hesitating before she bolted. And bolted. Faster than she could possibly run, feet barely pounding against the—

“Candidate 21. Please.”

Ruth fumbled with her fingers and reluctantly met those narrowed eyes of the Chancellor—who cleared her throat pointedly and delivered a condescending glare—then graced the others with a practiced smile, resuming her speech.

“Tied by blood and united spirits, we, the descendants of humanity, demand you, Legion candidates, to undergo the Trials. Through enduring hardships, you wield all three essential fragments demonstrated by the pioneers of the Silk Road—physical, mental, and emotional perseverance.”

“May you rise to spread your wings and soar. May the seeds of our ancestors strive and thrive within your very souls—blooming with tenacity. Dignity. Pride.”

An excited buzz coursed through her veins.

“Rise, warriors of tomorrow. Rise!” She howled.

Erupting in a cacophony of deafening cheers and applause, the crowd rose. Ruth, too, felt her body lift, her muscles obeying a current not her own—

The insistent pressure of a collective will.

Mind-log 02

Year 2094

Wind interwoven with coarse sand tore through her hair, relentlessly whipping against her cheeks.

Ruth narrowed her eyes in slits, desperately peering through the maelstrom of sand particles as their ruthless edges raked her cheeks, leaving a lingering sting.

“So that’s the Silk Road,” she muttered through gritted teeth.

On the harsh ridges of dunes that formed the horizon, indistinct silhouettes gradually melted from sight, as if making way for the first light of dawn.

One moment she was gazing at pristine shafts of amber light spilling across the dunes, then she was instinctively lurching to her left.

A wink of silver. A soft *whoosh* of air. She sucked in a sharp breath.

A blade.

She whirled around to face her assailant—tall stature, long limbs as sylphlike as her willowy physique, a leather scabbard protruding from her hip.

Long limbs enabled enhanced reach; tall stature provided superior angles; slender frame evaded inflexibility—absolute perfection.

“Arachne Hunter,” her assailant declared curtly.

With fingers nestled snugly on the pommel of her sword, Ruth lunged.

She sped towards Arachne, sword unsheathed, racing low enough to allow a rapid series of knives to whip past overhead—

Arachne’s blade shot out in a flurry of flowing, silvery light—like moonlight on rippling water, flickering as it caught the light of dawn.

Throwing herself to the side, Ruth avoided the final thrust just in time and clumsily fell to one knee, panting. Arachne didn’t hesitate to slice down in a keening arc, and Ruth frantically rolled out of the way.

The blade dove into sand ruthlessly.

Ruth heaved herself up and plunged in a quick succession of blow after blow, yet was faultlessly deflected by an aegis of sheer momentum and brilliance, the wailing shield sending her blade ricocheting.

All of a sudden, the shield abruptly retreated and Arachne’s blade slithered forth like a viper, sweeping low to claim her ankles then lashed upwards, forcing her to stumble hastily back.

Her cheek stung.

She parried as Arachne’s blade flawlessly danced through an onslaught of poised jabs—a swan cutting through water—weaving a seamless tapestry of silvery threads streaming into set after set with uninterrupted cadence...

She blinked. *That was it.*

Arachne was graceful, flawless, swift—but her movements were rhythmic. Regular. And that—predictability, was precisely her flaw.

Up, retreat; horizontal, duck; down the shin; jump—

Ruth sprang forth and slashed swiftly across Arachne’s shoulder.

A shallow cut, but enough to fracture the rhythm—then as a barely perceptible junction between the final and first set winked before her, she lashed forward.

Slinking forth, she ducked beneath the attack range and shoved her blade straight between Arachne’s ribs.

A simple stab, plain and unembellished.

Slick, wine-red blood oozed from the gash, slow and deliberate and painful.

Arachne hissed and pressed her hand on the wound, but it was futile effort to suppress the splotches soaking through her shirt, seeping further and further to form an ominous pool of deep carmine.

There was so much, so much blood dripping from her shirt, pristine ruby splattering on the Sands of Silk Road.

Breath by breath—bit by bit—drop by drop.

Sunlight broke fully over the dunes. Dawn poured over the sands, washing the blood in ivory and gold.

She stood, not just victorious, but fated. This was the path—perseverance, affirmation.

A promise.

Mind-log 03

Year 2094

Click.

It started innocently like a distant elusive melody.

Then—a full-swing symphony: trembling flutes, blaring brass, crashing cymbals—

It was bliss, *bliss*—the vehemence of unadulterated bliss as they swept her into its welcoming arms—of raw ecstasy that nibbled and itched and left her craving for more—of sirens' cries that summoned to her most primal needs.

Waves of divine happiness sloshed over her—flung her onto jagged rocks—swallowed her entire being—mind and body.

There was an undercurrent of sickly sweetness, cloying and artificial—like overripe fruit—but she couldn't remember why that mattered.

Without conscious thought, she swayed and twirled and spun until she stumbled and smacked onto the floor. A hysterical giggle bubbled up from deep within her, uncontrollably spilling from her lips.

Alive alive alive.

Clumsily picking herself up, she staggered over to where her sword resided and hastily dragged its gleaming tip across her palm. Once, twice.

A tingling pain bloomed from the wound and beads of rubies swelled from the shallow cut. A delighted shriek escaped her lips, and immediately she yearned for more. More intensity. More of *everything*.

She dug the blade into her forearm without another thought, a satisfied grin gracing her lips as searing agony shot through her arm. *Drag it. Now—*

Click—

The sound of Legion's release, cold and absolute.

Everything vanished—the colors, the hysteria, the need.

The ghost of a laugh, frozen mid-breath—a candle blown out, smoke still curling where the flame should be.

Her knees hit the ground.

Rivulets of blood slid down her arm, hot and wet.

Her hands trembled. She stared at them—those traitorous hands—hands that found Arachne's rhythm, now twitching with the echo of an impossible euphoria.

A guttural sound tore out from her lips, half-laugh, half-sob. Wrong. All *wrong*.

Wrong like a missed step, a misplaced fragment.

“*P—please*,” she whispered hoarsely, voice cracking like splintered glass.

For a heartbeat, nothing happened.

Then, nothing happened.

Mind-log 04

Year 2094

“...honour and for glory.” Ruth stuttered through the vow she had rehearsed since childhood.

One step away from being a Legionnaire.

Kneeling on velvet carpets, head inclined before the Chancellor, Ruth clenched her shaking fists at her sides.

Her pulse fluttered like a hummingbird’s wing charged with restless energy.

“Eyes lowered, Candidate 21.”

Blood roared in her ears. Sweat moistened her palms.

Then, heavy as an unspoken promise, the ceremonial sword alighted on her shoulder, nestled cozily like a dormant viper, steely coolness kissing her jugular—soft like conspiratorial whispers.

Anticipation swelled in her chest, a wave that rose and rose, silently urging the Chancellor’s words of acknowledgment.

A beat. And another.

Eyes lowered. Eyes—

She tore her gaze upwards and collided with the sight of the Chancellor’s sealed lips.

“You were never meant to be.”

Her pulse ceased thrumming. Her world grayed. Time itself lagged.

The Chancellor’s voice lost its ceremonial melody—replaced by a flat, diagnostic monotone.

“Your thoughts wander without consent. You fracture patterns. You *feel* death instead of registering it. You look up despite an order.”

Every word hit like frostbite.

“The Silk Road is discipline; you saw wilderness. The Legion is a perfect mechanism; but you, Candidate 21, are a *variable*—your emotions, friction; your unpredictability, noise. We do not integrate irregularities into the signal.”

“Your mind drums its own rhythm. That is not perseverance. That is *insurrection*.”

The ceremonial sword weighed down—nothing like her own. Where hers remembered sand and rhythm, this one knew only doctrine.

“You are a failure of our kind, Candidate 21. *Failure*.”

Cold and hard like facts. Like broken promises.

She felt it then—not shame— but a silent scream swelling inside her chest.

The last slant of sundown's radiance—the same amber that once gilded the Silk Road's sands—fled through the window, leaving the room blanketed in shadows.

The light was not hers to keep.

The blade lingered—lingered like a calculated caress.

A calculated caress of a viper's tongue preceding the killing blow. The flash of fangs. The glint of cruelty.

Mocking. Deadly. Final.

Mind-log 05

Year 2095

Somewhere, dawn would break over the dunes again.

But not for *her*.

Never, ever, for her.

Dear You

HKUGA College, Chan, Hei Man Natalie – 13

Dear you, I am carried by hands that never spoke my name. I am silk, and I write to you from the forgotten road. I write so you will remember. My nails scrape across the stone, as though the Silk Road resists being sewn into my skin. You walk as the last traveller remembered by silk, while the earth bruises beneath your touch and a tremor threads along my veins. I wonder — when the road forgets its pulse, who will hold the memory in the future?

Dear you, I call you my master, while others call you their merchant, for you have carried me with a devotion I never deserved. I thank you for your trade, each silk, spice, and shard of porcelain pressed into me as though the world itself were entrusted to my keeping. I rise from a little thread into something vast beneath your hands, carried toward our destined horizon, dreaming that the world will one day praise the pattern we have become. I wonder — will they remember us for good?

Dear you, salt knots my tongue. The road frays, its veins loosening into currents that carry silk from land to tide; the earth itself yields at the shoreline, and I am drawn into a silence deeper than stone. The sea inscribes itself into me, engraving “Road” upon the chambers of my throat with brine that sears like a flame veiled in water. Each syllable drowns before it can ascend, a fragile foam that dissolves against the tide like a prayer ended before completion. The scrape of a nail across my back splits the ambience. Blood. Blood is flame veiled in water — not a sea’s mark of forgetting, but my defiance carved in red. Choke on my name, I whisper, as a current bears down with scales, their weight stamping my skin with the sea’s claim. Only then, the weight constricts, ribs cinched as though salt and iron fuse into flesh. Scales rasp against my skin, each scale cold as iron minted in water; its ridges glinting blue before sinking into black.

I claw back, nails splitting as agony writes its sentence into my bone. Red threads drift like prayers torn loose, drowned until black seals it shut. I hammer my knuckles raw against the serpent’s armour, red saturating my lungs until every breath tastes of rust. It thrashes forward, vast coils collapsing like harbours seized from their anchors, its eyes glinting as drowned stars. You swing, your jaw shuddering beneath the strike, each blow carrying the weight of debts you cannot pay. But the serpent lashes back, its tail scything through muscle; flesh shrieking as salt consumes the wounds. Your fight falters, fists splintering against its carapace as strength bleeds into the tide. I thrash once, twice, until the blue erases every motion, every vow, until resistance melts into shadow. The serpent does not yield, and we are broken, carried into the dark where even our names dissolve. Black chokes on our names. I wonder — when the road forgets its veins, will the sea remember our names? I am silk, and I remember.

Dear you, I see the serpent bartering with the sea, scales traded for tides, as though our struggle were only commerce. Salt for blood, waves for breath, and iron for bone — each exchange as painful as the tearing of flesh, each bargain a wound. The serpent does not trade to sustain, but to consume, its coils tightening like contracts signed in salt. And because of this endless sea trading, the road no longer calls for us; its veins loosen, its pulse forgotten, as though our journey were obsolete. The serpent, not only a trader but a burglar, prowls through what remains, prying memory from our ribs, stealing the fragile threads of devotion we once carried. It plunders not only goods but feelings, leaving us hollow, as if we were never needed at all.

Dear you, glass blinds my eyes. The sea stiffens into a horizon of frost, as salt threads congeal into glass. Glass blinds my name. For it is a mirror of forgotten winters, erasing the voice that once named me, and a blade of winter carving the breath from my lungs. Its silence presses against my pupil until memory fractures into crystal, engraving “Forgets.” upon the hollow of my eyelids with chill veiled in ash. Light fractures first — a shard, pale as porcelain rimed with frost, spiralling as it descends to the ground. It does not rest; it circles, guiding the cold into its orbit, a bitter fissure etched under my feet. Graceful. But I am blinded.

You hear teeth clicking in the dark, a chime too precise, piercing through your eardrum. The heavens shatter into brittle mirrors, as porcelain raindrops pour in the storm too sudden to escape. I lunge sideways, the air thrumming with dissonant strings sharpened as knives, broken notes cleaving into staves of fracture. You stumble, your foot catching on the jagged stone that once lay across the path, biting into the earth like a hidden fang. Shards of rain graze your arm — sharp, a frozen blade printing fire into your skin. Another skims my cheek, brittle edges brushing close, like a discordant note conducting the storm nearer. The earth howls beneath us, and we run lurching through the storm, glass pursuing as though the sky itself has chosen us, alone. My heart hauls upward, each trickle tearing through my chest and carving into my throat, choking silence as if the storm itself has claimed the sky inside me. Our life dissolves into silence, carried only in the living who speak our names. Black blinds our names. I wonder — when the road forgets its veins, will the glass remember our names? I am silk, and I remember.

Dear you, the shards of porcelain and glass scatter like broken alliances, each fracture echoing the collapse of the Silk Road itself. What once bound deserts together now lies in ruin, splintered into silence. The serpent's merciless sea-trading has stolen not only our goods but our purpose, leaving us abandoned by the road. We feel the pain of its collapse in every breath — lungs clogged with salt and our steps faltering on a path that no longer remembers our names. I know that we will never reach the dream we once carried: the horizon where east meets west, where our pattern would be praised. Yet even as the road conspires to erase us, I still hold hope some fragment of our journey will endure, remembered in devotion, because even as the road collapses and the serpent steals, I believe the threads we carried — silk, salt, porcelain, and memory will bind themselves into a pattern greater than our wounds. Because devotion is not measured in the road's veins or the sea's bargains, but in the way we endured together, even when torn apart. I wonder — will the world see in our fragments a testament, and remember us for good?

Dear you, I am silk, writing to the future that will inherit these threads. Once, the Silk Road was alive — a vein across deserts, a pattern woven through lands. I had hoped it would be more: a path of trust, where alliances endured and the world praised the unity we carried. Now I see its collapse: shards scattered, alliances broken, the serpent's bargains devouring what was whole. I speak to you, the future — even now, new Silk Roads rise in digital veins across continents. It remains a vow of devotion. Carry that memory, for though the road forgets, I am silk, and I remember.

Dear you, I am carried by hands that have heard my name. My nails rest against fabric that yields, though I long for the Silk Road to be sewn into me — because without it, I am only a body without its thread. You walk as a traveller remembered by silk, while the earth bruises beneath your touch and a tremor frays the vanished road along my veins. I ache because the road is gone, because every step I take is a reminder of what has been forgotten, each step carving into the earth, engraving the words it left behind: "Road Forgets." My veins were never human. They were threads. I was silk. We walked the world. For even in its absence, I feel the echo of caravans, the weight of porcelain and spice, the shimmer of coins exchanged in shadows. The road may forget, but I cannot; its pulse still trembles in me, urging me to believe that our journey, though fractured, might yet be remembered, by you. So I dream of the road made safe again, its veins restored, its silence broken by caravans threading east to west. I dream of walking once more toward the horizon, where silk does not collapse into dust but rises into praise. And now, as I knot myself into your hands, I wonder — will you still carry the memory with me into the future?

"Because I remember," I say.

The Path We Lived

HKUGA College, Hon, Ho Kiu – 13

I was a lucky person. My parents were neither rich nor successful, but I, after burning countless candles in my cramped, dirty room, had earned myself a position in the government. It was a peaceful life, an easy life. Dawn to sunset each day, ten hours in a cramped room, and I had steady enough income to get me a house in the city.

It was also perpetually foggy. Mist swirled everywhere, around my legs when I walked to work, on the surface of lakes, around the roof of my house. I could just see far enough to keep me from tripping over obstacles on the street. It had always been like that, not even the greatest thinkers could figure out why.

I was called, one day, to the Emperor's Palace. I remember my surprise then, I had never felt anything like that. My life, up till then, was just a path of endless predictable events that I was slowly working my way through.

The Palace was a meticulously designed place. The way the smallest detail of each tile had been carved to the utmost perfection, the way my muddy boots clacked on the marble floor, and the way each door towered over me and mocked my humble existence, it was all overwhelming. My heart was pounding, slamming against my rib cage as I knelt before the Emperor. He was so far away I could not make out a single one of his features, yet his deep voice echoed all over the room.

'Zhang Qian. As you know, our country has been in constant war. I wish to end this violence. I command you to act as a diplomat, representing our country to travel to places we have never known of, and find allies to aid us. Promise them gold, silk, women, even the permanent friendship and gratitude of our country. Anything for military support. It is a task of utmost importance, and the peace of our people depends on it. Are you up for it?'

Honoured, I thanked him fervently. I was filled with excitement, worry, and so many emotions at once it felt like a tsunami was crashing over me. This was a once in a lifetime opportunity, and somehow, I happened to be the lucky one to stumble upon it.

Two days later, the Emperor had everything prepared. Food, jewellery, weapons, even creatures called 'camels' that replaced horses. Two assistants were to accompany me: a burly man called Zi who walked with a limp, and a young man, Chen, with a constant smile.

We departed quickly. I took one last look at the home I've lived in for almost thirty years now, but surprisingly, I felt no longing at all. Only fresh excitement for what the future might promise.

The first few days were absolute torture. Living in comfort my entire life, I wasn't used to the bumps and narrow seat for the camel, especially when I had to sit in the creature for an entire day. The nights weren't any better. The bed rolls were so thin I could feel the rocks jutting at my back. The rustle and hiss of creatures in the desert kept me awake all night.

Gradually, though, I began to appreciate the desert. During daytime, the endless stretch of sand extended to the horizon. I could do whatever I wanted, free from the boundaries of society. During nighttime, once one grew accustomed to the unnerving sounds, the night sky, freckled with infinite stars, was just as beautiful as described in the folktales.

One night, when the three of us were roasting lizards, I finally asked the question I'd been dying to ask.

'Why did you two volunteer for this mission?'

Zi looked up. He grunted, in that rumbling. 'I was a soldier before. A good one too. But I was injured during a conflict back in Chang'an. They had weapons. Two of my comrades died. Of course, they were taken care of, but I had to leave the troops. I couldn't fight, not with an injury like this. And now, this battle has taken so many lives. So many lives of the soldiers I had once fought with. I want to help.'

'What a sad story,' Chen groused. 'I was just bored with my life. I wanted change, to explore, to have my name written down in history.'

He laughed. It was a loud, chipper laugh, the ones children playing Cuju on the streets would make. 'I mean, I've always believed that life is nothing if you never make a difference that everyone would remember you by. After all, we're really just the nameless citizens who'd died without ever being anyone.' He laughed again. 'But that ain't me. I know I can do something great, and this is the chance to prove it.'

I smiled.

Three years passed. We'd found several different civilisations, although none of them had troops sufficient for war. They were, however, interested in our silk and goods. We knew, with an increasing sense of urgency, that our country was in more peril the longer we took to find allies, but out here, I just couldn't imagine anything bad ever happening.

On a fateful day, we finally came across a tribe. A tribe with a huge army. In fact, it was the exact tribe our country was warring against.

We tried to change course after realising it was Xiongnu's territory we were passing over, but the patrol there had the eyesight of an eagle. They had war horses and within moments, the Xiongnu had us surrounded.

Zi, with his selfless, brave heart, drew his sword and tried to take on a dozen warriors to buy time for our escape. However, I was paralysed. Completely rendered useless at the sight of those sharp blades. I could hear Chen screaming, screaming for me to break through and run, but I could only watch as Zi collapsed under the whirling of blades.

We were captured. The Xiongnu threatened death, hellish torture, yet I didn't care. I was enraged, had fury coursing through my veins, and recklessly so. I spat, swore, screamed at them, did everything I could to express all this burning hatred towards them. Yet the leader laughed. He said he was impressed with my feisty demeanor, and he released me from my cell. He gifted me a place to live, a wife, and comfortable living accommodations.

I lived. I made friends, got married, and had children, yet I never once forgot Zi.

Ten years later, I finally had my chance at escaping. There was some sort of conflict between the Xiongnu. At night, I secretly took one of their warhorses.

There were sounds of clashing far away. I spurred my horse on. I didn't know where Chen was, if he was still alive or not. Another dear friend lost. Tears, hot, fresh tears streaked down my face as I galloped across the desert, the stars twinkling happily up in the night sky.

It was another week before I finally returned. Clothes torn, blood everywhere, I was a horrifying sight. Knowing I had failed my country, I returned with a bowed head, yet the Emperor was not displeased. It turned out the Xiongnu had retreated because of internal conflicts. He wanted to know about my journey instead, detailed reports for each of the countries I've come across.

I was treated like a hero. I was awarded, and lived in a mansion with exquisite craftsmanship comparable to that of the Emperor's Palace. Merchants, following my footsteps, started trading with the other tribes. The path I had discovered was named the Silk Road. Everyone only knew my name, not Zi's or Chne's. No one heard the true story, only the modified version where I was the hero. And I was too cowardly, too tempted by greed to correct it.

There wasn't a day, up till now, that Zi and Chen's faces didn't haunt me. 'I want to have my name written down in history,' he said. But history had no place for the dead. I cried myself to sleep every night, hating myself for my greed. But I once never spoke up. I just couldn't help it

I visited the Silk Road sometimes. To relive my memories, those nights where I shared stories with Zi and Chen.

And I was sure, in the fog, I could see two men, one with a limp, and another with a bright smile, waiting for me on the Silk Road.

In Another Lifetime

HKUGA College, Hui, Hei Ting – 11

‘Don’t be ridiculous.’

Quinn glared at Anne with enough hatred to fuel an entire volcano. People passing by paid no attention to their raised voices, seeing that the two enemies argue every day after school.

‘Look who’s talking,’ Quinn hissed through her clenched teeth. On and on they went, each argument countered by the next, a large range of vocabulary flying around on their tongues. They would have continued bickering until their voices were hoarse, if not for the sudden change of surroundings.

Anne was the first to notice how the streets beside them had morphed into a sandy desert. She glanced around in disbelief. Mere seconds ago, it had been dark and cloudy, but now the sun was shining brightly overhead.

Quinn’s jaw dropped. ‘Where are we?’

Just then, an ear-splitting ripping noise caught their attention. The girls whipped around to see a portal shrinking fast, like a tear being sewed back together with lightning fast speed. Just before the portal closed completely, Anne caught a glimpse of their school in the distance. ‘No!’ she shrieked, darting forward, but it was too late.

Both girls felt sick to their stomachs. ‘We must have walked through the portal without realising,’ Quinn guessed. Anne was less keen to accept the facts and glared at her enemy. ‘Is this some sort of dumb prank?’

Before Quinn could retort, they heard a booming voice and jumped up, startled. ‘Hey! What are you doing here?’

The speaker was a tall man with hair as black as night and eyes like onyx. He wore something that looked like a gray cotton robe and a straw hat. He rode on a horse with a wooden box on his back.

Quinn struggled for words, but Anne was quick on the uptake and asked, ‘Are you merchants?’

‘Yes!’ the man replied, seeming surprised. ‘Who else would be on the Silk Road in *this* sort of outfit? Certainly not soldiers or missionaries!’ The men and women behind him chuckled.

Anne’s gaze darted to the female merchants at the back. The gears in her mind seemed to be turning rapidly as she observed the group. ‘We’re merchants too, but we were robbed of the items we had by bandits,’ she spewed out, her expression unreadable. Quinn tried to hide her confusion as she looked at her enemy.

‘You look awfully young to be merchants,’ the man remarked. Quinn swallowed under his scrutinising gaze.

Anne let out a sigh filled with sheer frustration, as though she was fed up with this. ‘We know we have baby faces, but we’re older than we look.’ *Older than we look?* Quinn thought. *Will the merchants even believe her?*

‘My mistake,’ the man said lightly. ‘I apologise for the misunderstanding. Well, you can come along, if my fellow merchants agree.’ He turned back and exchanged glances with all his companions. They all nodded, and Anne’s knees almost buckled with relief.

‘Thank you,’ Anne said with a subtle smile. Soon, the girls were tagging along at the back of the group, blending in.

As the merchants chatted quietly but happily ahead, the two girls began discussing their situation.

‘How did you know they were merchants?’ Quinn asked, keeping her voice low.

‘The way they dressed, and what they carried along with them,’ Anne whispered back. ‘Back in ancient China, only nobles could wear bright and detailed clothing, and others, like merchants, could only wear simple attire made of less expensive fabrics. Generally, only merchants, soldiers or missionaries would walk on the Silk Road, and the man already confirmed they weren’t soldiers or missionaries. So that’s how I knew.’

Quinn blinked. ‘I guess it’s lucky you pay attention to Chinese History.’

Anne shrugged dismissively. ‘Now, how do we get back home?’

‘I...don’t know,’ Quinn whispered. ‘What if we’re stuck here?’ Fear gripped her chest like claws.

Anne looked just as afraid. ‘We can’t think that. After all, we managed to get here. There *has* to be a way back,’ she said, convincing herself more than anything.

‘We’ll just focus on surviving for now,’ Quinn suggested, and Anne nodded.

Suddenly, the chatter in front of them turned into gasps, and the two girls’ heads snapped towards the sound.

There were people at the front, blocking the route in front of the merchants. Their only notable attire was the cloth covering their faces, and the moment Anne saw, her shoulders stiffened.

‘Look at the swords on their sides,’ Anne hissed. ‘They look like —’

‘Bandits!’ someone in the group shouted, and Quinn’s heart sank.

Anne’s face was pale. ‘We’re done for.’

One of the bandits unsheathed their sword and pointed it at the merchant man in the front. ‘Silk.’

The man blinked, looking as though he had gone through the same events countless times before. ‘How much?’

‘*All* of it,’ the bandit growled. The man tensed.

‘We can’t do that,’ one of the other merchants whispered in his ear. The bandit narrowed his eyes and shoved past the other merchants to the back of the group, where the two girls stood.

Quinn reacted quickly, grabbing Anne by the wrist. She ran, her heart thudding against her ribcage, pulse so loud that she thought everyone else could hear it.

But they were no match to the pounding footsteps behind them as the bandits wrenched them apart and held them both in a choke hold.

‘Give us the silk, and these girls won’t get hurt,’ one of the bandits bargained curtly. ‘Simple.’

Nothing about this was *simple*, Quinn thought as she struggled against the choke hold. The bandit holding her snarled, and she flinched.

Quinn turned to look at her nemesis helplessly. The look in Anne’s eyes mirrored hers — all that knowledge, academics and athletics did nothing for them — none of those could save them in this critical moment. It was up to the merchants.

The merchants debated among themselves about what to do, seeming afraid.

‘You have five seconds to make the decision!’ a bandit barked. ‘*Five...four...*’

Darkness roamed the corners of Anne's vision. Spots appeared in front of Quinn's eyes.

'Three!'

The girls exchanged one last glance of fear.

'Two!'

At least they would die with someone they knew well, whether it was a friend or a foe.

'One!' Your time is over, fools!' a bandit roared, and just as the girls braced themselves –

'Stop!' a thunderous voice commanded. The choke holds loosened, the swords falling away as the sound of hooves and clanking armour filled the tension in the air. Anne and Quinn's postures sank a foot in sheer relief.
Soldiers!

'Just great!' one of the bandits seethed, and they all broke off into a run.

'After them!' the soldier at the very front yelled, charging after them, and the soldiers behind him followed suit, their horses moving swiftly across the sandy landscape.

Just then, a sharp ripping sound caught Anne and Quinn's attention. They both turned around to see a portal leading to where they were before everything that had happened – back in their own time.

Without hesitation, both girls darted through the portal and it closed behind them as quickly as it had appeared.

'How long have we been gone?' Quinn asked in a hushed tone as the quietness of the streets resumed beside them, a large contrast to the chaos in the desert mere seconds before. Anne checked her watch and her eyes flared wide in surprise.

'I don't think any time has passed at all,' Anne replied, showing Quinn her watch. It was exactly two minutes after the school dismissal time.

'So...it was all a hallucination?' Quinn spluttered.

Anne thought about it for a moment. 'No,' she said, her voice clear and resonant as she looked at Quinn. 'It couldn't have been. We really were back in Ancient China, Quinn, and it taught us both something nothing could have ever, not in a decade or two. Haven't you noticed?'

'Noticed what?'

'We were arguing so fiercely before we entered the portal,' Anne said. 'We wasted our time fighting when we should have worked together. Look at how the merchants asked for each other's agreements before making a united decision. Look at how the bandits immediately knew how to cooperate with each other to disarm us. Look at how the soldiers ran as one, chasing the bandits.'

At last, Quinn understood. 'So it taught us how to work together?'

Anne nodded, allowing a small smile to grace her features. 'Maybe it was all too far-fetched, to place us back hundreds of years and let us be in brief danger just for the sake of our rocky relationship. But maybe we could take this chance and be friends?' She held out her hand.

Quinn grinned and took it. 'Deal.'

In another lifetime, they might have been foes, relentlessly bickering with one another.

Hundreds of years ago, they were a reluctant team, working together to survive on the Silk Road.

In this present, they were friends who had braved through what was now considered the impossible.

The Road That Remembered

HKUGA College, Wong, Kin Hang – 13

The old man proclaimed with vim and vigor the road was alive.

Li Mei laughed hysterically at the notion when he first heard it back in Chang'an, the glorious city where great bronze bells rang exactly at dawn and silk shimmered like captured sunlight in every market stall. Roads, Li Mei believed, were obedient things: beaten flat by feet, bruised by wheels, indifferent to the lives pressed upon them.

Stone did not remember. Dust did not dream. What was working inside the hollow skull of that wrinkled old man, riddled with regrets and reeking of pure raw miserableness, that engineered such a brilliant thought?

Yet now, as he trekked along what he dubbed the Silk Road, he no longer laughed.

He no longer spoke at all.

Li Mei was eighteen, bright and sharp-eyed, glowing with charm and wit. Chosen for this bold, treacherous journey for his bravery, discipline and courage.

Before he left Chang'an, his mother pressed his face firmly against her palms, as if to ingrain every feature, every shape, every tiny speckle of dust on his face into her brain. She whispered, bargained with fate, that her son would come back alive.

He thought it as nothing more than an overprotective mother then.

The desert stretched before him like an unwritten scroll, pale and vast, its silence so complete it seemed to listen in return. Camels knelt and rose with ancient patience. Somewhere beyond the horizon lay places with names that sounded like foreign mispronounced curses—Sogdia, Bactria, Persia—lands stitched together by rumor and risk.

It was the second day that the world unspooled into uncertainty. The air grew thinner and drier and harsher. Wind scoured skin raw and sand crept into clothes, into food, into eyelids and dreams. Blisters formed and burst. Lips cracked and bled.

Days blurred into a single ache.

The camels, croaking and twisting and crunching beneath the weight of luggage. And the men, again and again, succumbed to sin, arguing over water rations and money and blaming anybody but themselves. Then one merchant fell and did not rise again.

The caravan circled him silently, not in mourning but in fear that Death himself would notice and bring them all tumbling down. It was then that Li Mei reached acceptance. He no longer felt, he no longer yearned. He helped dig a shallow grave with numb hands, the sand already eager to reclaim its own.

Each step westward carved something away from him.

At night the caravan gathered around fires. Sparks leapt upward, gnawing ever so gently at the dark; oh those piteous souls, glittering for a split, frantic second only to fall back to oblivion, no different than their ignorant observers.

Li Mei stared. Tears trickled gently, tears of wistfulness.

Sleep offered no mercy. He dreamed of Chang'an—of his mother's voice, of tiled rooftops gleaming after rain, of streets alive with certainty. Each morning brought the same jarring cold slash of grief: the knowledge that he had chosen this absence. That longing hollowed him deeper than hunger ever could.

Yet the road continued. And somewhere beneath the pain, something else stirred.

The road did not resist him. It received him.

It accepted blood, sweat, regret, and fear without judgment, carrying them forward, smoothing their edges. Slowly, imperceptibly, Li Mei realized that the road was teaching him how small one life was—and how connected.

They passed ruined watchtowers half-swallowed by sand, their stones worn smooth by forgotten hands. He could almost see the men who once stood there, believing themselves permanent. He wondered if they, too, had laughed at the idea of a living road.

When bandits struck, it was swift and brutal. Arrows hissed from nowhere. A scream split the air. The caravan scattered. Li Mei ran until his lungs burned, hiding among rocks, heart pounding so loudly he feared it would give him away. When it ended, the road bore the cost without comment: blood soaking into dust, wheels rolling on as if nothing had happened.

Still it carried them.

Broken and reshaped, they reached Samarkand in spring. The city erupted from the horizon like a miracle.

Bright glorious colors were splattered everywhere, merging indescribably as this off-key harmony. Turquoise domes cupped the sky and mosaics, oh those shimmering mosaics! The air was so thick with spice and spoke and laughter and barter. For the first time since leaving home, Li Mei felt whole.

It was at a fig stall that he met Nodir.

Nodir stood hunched but steady, his hands practiced and sure as he weighed fruit. His hair was soft gray, tucked neatly beneath a vibrant skullcap. And though he was so old now, his eyes, those eyes, still had the same glint, that mesmerizing glint.

"From the east," Nodir said in careful Chinese, syllables stepping cautiously into place. "Chang'an?"

Li Mei blinked. "You know my city?"

"I know many things."

Nodir laughed—a sound light enough to loosen something long locked deep in Li Mei's heart.

Weeks passed. The road rested, and so did Li Mei.

Nodir taught him Samarkand: how bread clung to curved oven walls, how plaster could hold stories, how prayer bent time into circles rather than lines. Li Mei, in turn, folded paper like some mystical conjurer, brewed tea with ceremonial patience, and showed Nodir how ink could trap a thought before it fled.

For the first time, the road gave rather than took.

"Do you think this road will last forever?" Nodir asked as the caravan prepared to depart.

Li Mei considered the question. The desert. The danger. The sheer stubbornness of human curiosity.

“I don’t know,” he said slowly. “But it feels necessary. Like a bridge the world cannot lose. It carries more than goods—it ferries belief. Language. Hunger. Hope.”

Nodir smiled. “Nothing lasts,” he said. “Except what we pass on.”

He pressed a wooden bird into Li Mei’s hands—wings flung wide, carved with impossible care.

“To remember me by.”

And time went on.

The Silk Road thickened with traffic. Monks padded west with scriptures. Merchants carried glass and gold eastward. Paper, compass, gunpowder—quiet revolutions disguised as cargo. Alongside them traveled less welcome companions: war and disease, conquest and collapse.

Empires rose like scaffolding and crumbled into dust. Cities burned, rebuilt, renamed. Yet the road endured—

Until it fell silent.

Ships crossed oceans. Hooves gave way to hulls. By the fifteenth century, the road was memory more than method. Sand claimed stone. Stories thinned.

But the road did not die.

It simply slept.

Over twenty centuries later, Mei Chen stood on a train platform in Xi’an, the modern echo of Chang’an, staring blankly at nowhere, seeing nothing and thinking of nothing and knowing nothing.

She was twenty-nine, and everything up till now had been a blur. Her life had become a series of deadlines, presentations, metrics. She designed logistics for the project the Belt and Road Initiative. Routes, nodes, projections. Efficiency, efficiency, efficiency. Oh, the glamour and pomp of this lifestyle.

She told herself all of it mattered, yet something in her felt displaced.

The train surged westward, steel humming emotionlessly beneath her feet. Cities dissolved into plains. Mountains rose. Borders blurred. Her reflection in the window looked like someone traveling away from herself.

In a brief stop at Uzbekistan, she wandered a market. Buzzing by her ear, the rhythmic roar of vendors’ cries and the clatter of crates. The hum of the crowd and this living, breathing machine fueled by the sharp “clack” of coins and the urgent dance of the haggles.

Then she saw it.

A wooden bird. Wings flung wide.

“This pattern is very old,” the seller said in broken English. “Passed down.”

Mei Chen bought it without bargaining, without understanding why.

That night, the road spoke to her.

She dreamed of firelight and silk. Of a young man staring west with equal parts fear and faith. Of an older man whose laughter felt like home. Footsteps overlapped across centuries until time lost its edges.

When she woke, something had shifted.

The project continued but Mei Chen saw its flaws clearly: power imbalances, debt, exploitation. She could not help but wonder if she was just repeating history's mistakes with shinier tools.

She visited classrooms where languages tangled joyfully and kitchens where recipes fused. Workshops where engineers argued, compromised, and solved. Together, She saw curiosity resurrected, not erased, not dominated, but shared.

In Samarkand, restored and radiant, she stood beneath a blue dome and felt something align.

The road had not promised purity.

It promised connection.

Silk

HKUGA College, Yeung, Joyce – 13

Grabbing the fine threaded silk and slinging it into the last of the satchels, I did a sweep of all our materials from the shade beneath the pine trees, the sunlight filtering through the delicate leaves and casting bristle-like shadows on the clearing before me.

Today would mark the harshest day of the unforgiving Winter, and the last day for the Silk Travellers to embark on their journey before the blizzards render the lands virtually invisible.

Tents, animal-fur waterskin, pelt coats, crushed herbs in tiny pouches, the reserved dried fruit...all the materials had been strapped onto the humps of the camels, their footsteps scuffling toward the edge of the camp, where the cameleer and leader of our expedition – Wei awaited.

As the rest of the members boarded their respective camels –which included Feng, with his mischievous two-humped friend, and Xin, with her gentle camel with pearly eyes. Everyone from the camp gathered at the stone arches, carved with miniscule legends of the Emperor and bedecked with glistening jade shards just before the grand gates. Their eyes glinted with an almost fragile sense of hope and almost devout in its admiration. Even the oldest trader, the ancient weaver – Lao, who told tales of the first silk worms and how they were born of divine breath, perched on the benches behind the trees by the gate. His eyes were unusually steely, a far cry from his glassy-eyed look of mystery when his legends are dismissed as delusions or a sales pitch.

We trekked out of the familiar gentle dunes just beyond Xi An, the gentle breeze a soothing balm to the scorching sun that had seared its heat onto our skin, red and raw from the constant chafing of the plant-fiber backpack straps. The dunes seemed to stretch on forever, its claws extending to the furthest point of the horizon, barely just brushing at the sky from a distance. The sand, grainy and speckled, seemed to engage in a fiery waltz with the wind when the sky dimmed to a muted onyx, bodies twining with passion and heat as the air cackled with tension and unspoken, whipping and lashing at everything in its proximity.

As the garland of moonlight strung across the sky, we did the mandatory inventory check – pottery, check ; tea leaves, check; silk..... A shimmering, almost ethereal aura seemed to pour from the glossy fibers of the fabric itself, the satiny silk not so much as reflecting the moonlight but breathing in the silvery waves lapping at the white sand. Even in darkness, where even my feet were obscured, the silk was still visible, glimmering, enchanting and going so far as to emanate a faint warmth, the blooming heat a caress against our bundles and bales, a stark contrast to the bone-chilling frost in the night.

Given its undeniable warmth, we decided to leave it at the centre of the large tent, draped across flattened pillows and rugged carpets. That night, as sleep lulled me into sweet oblivion, vibrant colours blossomed beneath my eyelids, flashing, fleeting, all but a whim beneath the desert moon – lights flickered and seasons seemed to spring past, everything was in a constant, blurred motion but one thing stayed the same, still draped over those pillows in every scenario I imagined, always thrumming with the humming of life, and between the fine threads, flowed the golden ichor of divinity.

Soon, days blurred into nothing but flecks of paint on a canvas where passing moments were marked by piercing breaths and raw wounds. Quarrels inevitably arose, frustration bound tightly beneath layers of calm struck onto the group like a livewire, and most unfortunately and inevitably, diseases began to spread.

A chronic cough caused by the desert sand had infected most of the members, who would often have to take breaks against the shadier caves during the day, coughing with Earth-shattering force to eject blood from their throats – the trodding of camels began to slow, and our collective determination evaporated like dew in the summer sun. We muttered phrases like, "This life is over if we fail," and joked of taking the route back to the stable homes behind the closed city gates of Xi An, but we knew we were bound to this road, body, silk and soul.

At night, we gathered to check inventory when a member coughed crimson onto the silk, rendering it unsellable. We watched, as his fingers traced over the symbol of an eye, his spine straightened, his cheeks flushing with a rosy pink, the dark circles marring his pale skin from the disease– he was recovering right before our eyes! That night, between the currents of pristine white grains and the rustling of tent flaps, lay whispered prayers, gasps of awe and breaths of relief. That night, I dreamt of my beard unravelling into layered, strong threads; and when I asked about dreams the next morning, Feng mentioned his dream about being trapped in an endless cocoon, clawing and thrashing but being unable to escape, a daunted look flashing across his face. The drops of blood had also been 'absorbed' by the silk.

Sometimes, I would see the flicker of firelight and the panes of Xin's face in the dead of night, her shivering form crouched beside the silk, fingers mapping the creases in the silk– she had come to me, mumbling about how she heard the silk speak to her and how she believed the weaver Lao's tales.

After the recovery of our members, our pace quickened again. By now, we had reached the snowy, steep terrain of the Himalayan peaks, dusting the damp Earth with sheets of purity that would be tainted by the filthy soil of the Earth. We were perked and alert, eyes scanning our surroundings for any signs of the infamous Byzantines, ones said to prowl the mountainous ranges and lay claim to their territory by merciless bloodshed.

In a skirmish, a guard gashed his knee; blood flowed onto the snow, fiery as the emperor's robe. In a frenzy, we ripped a small section of the silk, the one with the eye symbol that we'd decided not to sell, and wrapped it securely around his knee. The next morning, after sleeping near the silk for the fourth month, miracles had curdled themselves into strangeness– Kie found bundles of raw silk winding around his calf, and more importantly, when the guard tried to remove the garment from his gash, he found the silk to be fused to his skin while the untouched excess fell away. The silk formed a new scar-tissue with the skin, the surface catching onto ribbons of sunlight and lustrous as ever. Nothing seemed to penetrate beneath the silk-skin's surface.

A clatter, a distinct, booming war cry, the sprinting steps of eager warriors, armed head to toe with curved blades and cascading chainmail vests, all marked the inexorable arrival of the very thing we've tried to avoid– the ruthless Byzantine Army. They broke into the terse, terror-filled silence of the early-morning tent, faces flushed with exhilaration and adrenaline from having an upper hand. Spears and swords glinted dangerously near our noses as we held up our hands in clenched fists and were lifted from the ground by multiple soldiers.

With deft fingers, they unravelled a thick rust-gnawed chain and bound us to the stack of flattened pillows– where the silk laid. At that very moment, unparalleled terror crushed into my chest cavity, plunging knives of despair and failure into my heart. Sweat beaded at my forehead, combining with the blood from slices I received in the harsh transportation, rolled down my skin and onto the silk. I winced and thrashed weakly at my binds, shifting not because of outward aggression but a creeping heat that snaked from the pads of my feet to the tips of my ears. The feeling was not unknown, only intensified – the same feeling I'd had the first night at the desert, the first time I slept near the silk, I saw the bright colours, the thin threads flinging itself across my vision, within each a fragment, a memory – the silk was not simply a tool for healing and a vision-gifter of truth and dreams, it weaved the fates of all our lives, mine, Feng's, Wei's...we had been living a silkworm's life after all.

From the beginning, we had consumed resources and trade, travelled a pre-ordained road in a race to fulfill our destiny, to deliver silk or goods before the Byzantine Army and harsh Winter seized us, much like the cocooning stage. The surge of heat flares, numbing my extremities and pulling the skin taut over my bones before loosening – peering down, I found my limbs unspooling into layers of eternal silk, others’ unwinding into threads of unending satiny streaks, into some twisted sense of belonging.

In our final moments, I viewed my fellow travellers as a breath-robbing pattern, a transition into something greater. We were not experiencing death, but the shedding of our vulnerable human forms into something more profound, more uplifting.

What emerged from the empty ruins of the Chinese tent rubble were not piles of corpses, but the fluttering of impossible, silk-winged insects – the final traders, carrying blood forged with the essence of the silk road itself, escaped through cracks in the stone, shedding its larvae-stage-like human struggle to become eternal torchbearers of the silk road.

New Tales of The Silk Road : Journey of Abul – Abbas

International Christian School, Arshid, Mysha – 11

Before my journey began, my world was a slow march until the golden warmth of the sun disappeared on the horizon. Every day was filled with the sweet taste of soft tan dates. Then, everything changed one morning. I turned my head as a man named Issac entered. He was a tall, heavily bearded man, wrapped in wool and leather that seemed out of place. His heavy, dark cloak immediately set him apart from the guards accompanying him. He carried no sword, but a calm, quiet presence that instantly silenced the noise from the men following him. As he came closer, he held out a piece of fruit. I knew he was trying to tempt me into following him. I wanted to walk away, but the kindness in his eyes made me choose to follow instead. As Issac talked with the guards, I quietly listened. This continued until we reached the palace of the Abbasid Caliph, Harun al-Rashid.

When I arrived, they led me through the outer gates to a huge royal stable. The stable had a tall arched entrance, and plenty of space. The room was lined with reed mats and heaps of hay. When I entered the room, I instantly felt relaxed. The hours spent under the burning sun had burned my hide. After a few minutes of relaxation a man dressed in a dark tunic and Persian trousers walked in holding the most colorful fruits I have ever seen. When he put the basket down I immediately dug in, they tasted especially sweet after the long trip to the palace.

When night fell a new pair of men walked in holding my dinner. As I ate, the two men started talking.

“I heard that the caliph is trying to get a foot-hold in the German lands,” said one man.

“How? The place is continents away,” the other man replied.

“I overheard the high officials and the caliph talking about sending this elephant as a sign of unity with the king of Francia.”

“Well, it makes sense why he would hunt down such a rare creature.”

After a few weeks in the palace listening to conversations became a habit of mine. Through this I learned I was going to be sent as a gift to a king named Charlemagne.

King Charlemagne ruled a large region called ‘Francia’ in the north.

Even though I knew it was really, really far away I didn't expect this journey would take such a long time. In those first few weeks, I was just a wonder for the men to stare at. But as Issac spent more time with me, he began to use the name ‘Abul-Abbas,’ and it felt like he was finally speaking to a friend. With my new name, I took my place in the caravan, ready for the long road ahead. The caravan was large, but the guards pressed so close I could barely move. As we left Baghdad, a big farewell was said as we slowly left their sight. As we entered the Arabian desert, I became thirsty, quickly gulping down the daily ration I had. In the desert, water is life, and we had very little of it. With that problem on Issac's shoulders we quickly drove southwest towards The City of David (Jerusalem) to retrieve water and other supplies. Then we set out south to Kemet (Egypt), and then west across Libya (North Africa). Most of the journey was spent resting, restocking, and waiting for the right seasons and safe passages to open.

It took us months before arriving at Carthage port in Tunisia (North Africa). There was this salty smell in the air as the sea breeze came at me. The port was bustling with people, wild shouts and stacks of boxes lined up neatly. The masts of the ships were a thin forest, and the shouts of the porters sounded like seagulls fighting over a silver fish. For a while we just waited for the ship to get ready so we could board. But boarding was its own problem, because of my size they had to use lots of ropes and ramps to get me on. After I got on the ship we headed towards Italia (The Italian Peninsula). The trip was horrible, the violent waves clashed against the walls of the ship making it rock back and forth. It made me want to vomit, but I couldn't get it out. And to make things worse a terrible storm struck and everyone was in a frenzy. Some were holding boxes in place and others were trying to steer the ship clear of the storm. I stayed close to the side of the ship, trying my best to stay on my feet. I wished with all my heart for the storm to end. Even after it ended the rest of the weeks were horrible. Everyday felt like forever, Every time the ship rocked I felt sick to the stomach.

When we neared the portus Vernis (port of venus) I could see the rough, gray castle sitting high on the cliff, a strong stone house. When we exited the ship we headed up the mountain and to Libici (Vercelli). When I took my first step into the lands of Europa, a shiver went down my spine. The warmth of Arabia didn't exist here, everything was cold. It was late winter of the year of 801 AD when we arrived. I looked up at the snow-capped mountains. 'What are those big hills?' I thought.

As I continued looking around I could hear strangers speaking in a different language. I was able to catch the name of the huge hills a few times. These were not hills, but mountains. They were called the 'Alpes' (Alps). Just looking at the mountains made me feel restless. After such a tiring sail here we have to climb up these tall mountains.

Issac and the strangers finished their talk. Since winter was coming, my handlers led me to a warm house. It was smaller than my home in the East, but it kept the cold out. Even inside, I could hear their strange voices through the walls:

"It's freezing. This is the most dangerous time of the year to climb the Alpes (Alps). Let's just stay here for the winter and leave when spring comes." Issac said.

"Issac's right. It'll be too hard to climb, especially with Abul-Abbas with us." said one of the Handlers. Probably everyone else agreed since I heard a lot of murmurs. And with that they came to a conclusion.

When Spring washed over in the year 802 AD, we packed up and started our climb up the mountains. The climb was no joke. Looking down at the steep drop made my whole body tremble. The cold, crisp air burned in my lungs as I pushed everything I had got into each step I took. The hardest part was getting around the rocky terrain. One wrong step and I'll slide down the mountain. But there wasn't much for me to worry about except fatigue since the handlers and Issac helped me with most things which made everything a little easier.

On July 20, year 802 AD we walked through the gates of Aachen, capital of Francia. As I was led towards the Palace I felt the eyes of hundreds of people lock onto me. That walk felt longer than the whole journey that took us nearly two years. When I entered the palace, I was greeted by King Charlemagne, who accepted me with honor and spent his money constructing a home for me. For the first few weeks staying there was uncomfortable. But I got used to it. During the time I lived there King Charlemagne brought me to many explorations. But the most unforgettable one was the campaign against the Danes.

King Gudfred of the Danes was a growing threat to the northern frontier. I couldn't understand why they were fighting but I felt the king's rage as he assembled his army in 810 AD and took me with him. To get to the border we had to cross the Rhine River. A few days after crossing I got sick with pneumonia and passed away in the same year. I never crossed back over the cold Rhine River. The cold breath of the wind that had chased me across continents finally settled in my chest.

They recorded my passing in Royal Frankish Annals, as if I were a man of rank. Maybe I was. For eight years I was seen as a reminder of the greatest bridge to be built. A five-year long mission of connecting two ends of the Silk Road to make one has succeeded, proving that even a creature of the desert could be loved in the land of snow.

New tales of China's Silk Road

International Christian School, Cheung, Lang Cheng Annecy – 12

Have you seen a house that is filled with all kinds of dangerous stuff that you're not allowed to touch or talk about? Well, that's pretty much what my house looks and feels like. It's my dad's job to invent stuff for his top-secret missions that his boss sends him to. So, I'm not supposed to tell you that. Who am I? My name is Charlie, and I always try to help my dad, but he never lets me do anything cool.

One afternoon, I followed dad as he walked into the basement, who carried a machine and laid it down there. Usually when he puts things in the basement, it means that the machine was unfixable. But the machine didn't look like it was broken.

"What are you doing in here? I'm just putting a time machine into the basement." He spoke.

Did he say time machine? "Can I try to fix it?" I asked, ignoring his question. He smirked. He pointed the machine and opened his mouth to say something, but his phone rang.

"No, and come out!" He said in a rush as he left.

He won't know if I stayed and fixed it, so I closed the door. Then, I took out some tools from the old drawers and laid them beside the machine. There was a paper inside. It said, 'The gray button makes you end up in the past. You must find the machine and press the gray button to come back.'

It wasn't like it would work, so I pressed the gray button. Then, the machine flew in the air, everything was flying. I lost the paper and the machine scooped me up as a yellow light zapped it. After that, everything went dark.

When I woke up, I wasn't inside the machine or in the basement anymore. I was at a place that had lots of Chinese people wearing Chinese clothes.

"Dad?" I shouted. People just stared and ignored me.

"Where am I?" I asked an old man who was frowning at me when he heard me. Then, he answered in Chinese, which I didn't understand, and walked away.

"Pssss," A voice whispered. I turned around and saw an old woman behind a door. "Come in." Maybe she could help me, so I walked slowly inside.

"Welcome to Xi'an! Where are you from? You don't look like you're from here and you speak English instead of Chinese. I speak both languages; in case you were wondering." The old woman asked.

I was about to say that I was from the present, but she might freak out, so I kept my mouth shut. I looked at the Calander, it was 130BCE.

"I'm trying to find something." I spoke. Then, she pulled me to a man without explaining why. She talked to the man and left.

"Who are you and why does my mother know you?" The man shouted when the woman went away as he pointed at me, "First, call me Boss. Second, this is a trading team. (Wait, that's means I'm in the Silk Road era!) You're carrying the bags. Third, that's my crew beside me. Forth, I'm only letting you join because my mother told me to, so you better listen to what I say." Wait, I'm joining?

"I'm Charlie, and can't the horse carry these items?" I asked, but he ignored my question. I lifted them up, and they were twice as heavy as me.

"Guys, this is girl is Charlie and can't the horse carry these items. TIME TO GO!" Boss shouted. I didn't like my new nickname, but there wasn't time to argue. A man made the horse hold still so Boss could climb on it. Another man guided the way. The rest followed behind.

"It's not fair," I told the person beside me who was holding a map. "You guys have nothing to do, and I have to carry these bags!"

"We all have jobs to do," the man said, "I'm Leo and the one at the front is Jeff. We're both map experts. He guides the way, and I make sure we're on the right track. That's Joe; he handles the money. That's Koss, who's the horse expert. Boss is the one who sells and trades stuff. Oh, I've been wanting to ask questions about you. Why are you dressed like that?"

I ignored him.

“REST!” Boss yelled. We all sat down as Koss handed out some food from the bags. When we finished, I stood up.

“Where are you going? It’s dark which means it’s time to sleep. I’ll guard the bags.” Koss said. Then, we all slept on the dusty, dirty, hard floor in the middle of nowhere. I looked around to see if the machine was nearby, but it wasn’t. I regretted pressing the button but there was nothing to do but to find the machine. Then, I slept.

After a week, we reached a place filled with people.

Boss bought a musk, raisins, and steel goods. Joe put the musk and some more food into the bags. I reached my hand to eat the bread, but Joe slapped my hand before I could even touch the bag. Mean. He frowned and pulled the bag away from me. People at that place had black spots everywhere and their fingers were falling off. Dead bodies were lying around everywhere, so we left quickly.

When we reached Kucha, I decided to walk around the place to see if I could find the machine. I didn’t succeed, but I spotted Boss and Joe at a stand, trying to trade stuff. I hid behind a bush and heard them talking with a woman.

“Would you like to trade the Sal ammonia for raisins?” Boss asked as he laid the raisins on the table.

“The Sal ammonia worths more than that.” The woman said, “I want that.” She pointed to the musk Joe held.

Boss shoved the raisins into a sack. Joe traded and got ready to leave. However, Boss spotted me spying on them and his face was like a lava bursting out of a volcano.

“WHAT ARE YOU DOING? YOU’RE SUPPOSED TO GUARD THOSE BAGS!” He yelled. I ran as fast as a thunderbolt until I reached the others. The others were looking at the boring maps and didn’t seem to care.

“I didn’t know I’m supposed guard them!” I explained when Boss arrived.

“If we get robbed, we’ll abandon you,” He yelled. Then, we moved on.

When we found a resting spot, Koss complained, “I guard the bags every time! Someone else do it.” Everyone looked at me. Uh oh.

“What if she gets distracted and thieves steal everything?” Boss said.

“She said it was an accident.” Koss said. They argued until Boss agreed.

So that night, I stayed up to guard those bags. Not long later, I saw a bunch of thieves hiding behind trees. I shook Leo. When he finally woke up, he also spotted them. Leo quickly woke everyone up and we all hid.

The thieves didn’t notice us being awake and didn’t leave. Then, a thief came out and touched one of those bags. Before anyone could do anything, I took a small rock and threw it at him. It was supposed to hit his head, but it hit his eye instead.

He screamed and a bunch of thieves left the trees and attacked. Soon everyone was throwing rocks at each other. I hid behind a huge rock to get protection. Then, a thief took a rock and threw it at Boss. He roared in anger and everyone stopped. He ran towards the thief and slapped the thief’s face. The thief fainted and the other thieves ran away.

When we arrived at our last stop (Antioch), we all cheered! No more carrying bags! Boss sold everything we had. That was a lot of money, and we split it up.

When it was time to go, I noticed that the time machine was beside me. Then, I saw a blue button that was also in the machine. The paper didn’t say what it could do.

I pressed it and the machine turned into a plane! Before anyone could say a word, I pushed them all onto the plane. Then, we got back to Xi’an safety.

They got off and stared with their mouths wide open. Everyone was staring at me. I pressed the gray button before anyone could say anything, got zapped back to the present, and found myself in the basement.

This time, the machine didn’t hide. I looked at my watch; I was just gone for a few minutes.

“Why are you still here?” Dad asked as he opened the door, “And are those coins?” I laughed as we left the basement.

I guess he’ll never know what happened. I also learned a lesson: teamwork is important. You can’t do everything by yourself, just like the Silk Road journey. Everyone had a part to do to make this happen. This was the most epic trip ever.

The Tapestry of Life

International Christian School, Chiu, Yik Fei Aaron – 13

At the heart of the capital city in the Tang Dynasty, I stood at the centre of my small art workshop in Chang'an, staring out into the open world around me. Here I was, a famous artist whose name was distinguished, yet something was missing. The city pulsed with energy, filled with merchants, scholars, and travellers, yet I felt an emptiness in my soul. Each brushstroke I made attempted to capture the beauty that eluded me. My scrolls murmured tales of distant lands, suggesting a longing to escape the confines of my familiar world. The marketplace outside—a vibrant tapestry of colours—suggested a journey to capture what was truly special about the world. As I walked along the streets of the marketplace, filled with thought, Kiran, the merchant from Persia, captivated me with tales of wonders along the Silk Road—exotic goods, breathtaking landscapes, and thriving cultures. My heart raced at the thought of experiencing these marvels firsthand. The yearning to venture beyond my familiar surroundings intensified, and soon I made the impulsive decision to join his caravan. This journey would open my eyes in ways I couldn't imagine.

The day we set off was a blur of excitement and nerves, as I packed my brushes, scrolls, and a few pieces of silk to trade along the way. The caravan, a colourful group of camels and carts, swayed gently as we moved out of the city, the sounds of Chang'an fading into a distant memory. My heart thudded with each step, filled with the thrill of adventure and the uncertainty of what lay ahead. As we travelled, the landscapes transformed around us—from the rolling hills embraced by the warmth of the sun to the arid stretches of desert that stretched infinitely toward the horizon. Each stop along the way was a feast for my senses; I was captivated by the vibrant bazaar towns where traders mingled, showcasing their wares—from shimmering fabrics to intricate pottery. I painted feverishly during our breaks, capturing not just the sights but the pulse of life around me. With every brushstroke, I felt my artistic vision expanding, the colors and textures pouring onto my canvases like the stories I was gathering. I was no longer just a painter—I was a part of this rich tapestry of cultures, and I was beginning to see the world not just through my eyes, but through the eyes of the people I met.

One day, we arrived at a small oasis town, a breathtaking jewel amidst the desert. The air was cooler, and palm trees swayed gently. I set up my easel in the market square, where merchants displayed their treasures, and soon noticed a curious girl watching me. Her dark eyes sparkled. "What are you making?" she asked. "I'm trying to capture the beauty of this place... and of you!" I replied with a smile. The girl, Amina, quickly became my friend and guide, sharing stories of her family and the art of dyeing fabrics. Under her watchful eye, I learned about colours' emotional significance in her culture, igniting a new enthusiasm in my work. Days turned into weeks, and Amina became my muse. I painted her in the market, under palm trees, and by tranquil waters, each piece reflecting not just her image but the essence of her dreams. Our connection deepened as I learned about her life, and through her eyes, I began to see the world more richly.

As we continued our journey toward the mountains, we arrived at a serene Buddhist monastery perched high atop a rocky cliff. The atmosphere inside was tranquil, filled with soft chanting. There, I met Master Li, a monk who invited me to participate in meditation. Initially hesitant, I quickly found the experience transformative. As I quieted my mind, I began to see the world through a different lens—true artistry, I learned, came not just from observation but from understanding the inner essence of life. Master Li encouraged me to express my feelings through my art, pushing me to dig deeper than surface beauty. As I painted the serene surroundings, the mountains turned into symbols of strength and resilience, and my creative voice blossomed.

Continuing our journey through the vast plains, we eventually reached a coastal city alive with music and art. Amidst the colorful festivities, I encountered Elara, a talented musician whose spirit matched the melodies she played. We bonded over our shared passion for creativity, collaborating on a project that combined my paintings with her music, merging sight and sound into a captivating experience. Yet, the journey wasn't without challenges. As we approached

the final leg of our travels, tensions arose within the caravan. A rival artist, envious of my success, spread rumours about my work, claiming it lacked authenticity and accusing me of cultural appropriation. The weight of his words threatened the confidence I had built.

Feeling lost, I turned to Kiran, Amina, Master Li, and Elara for guidance. They reminded me of the relationships I had forged and the stories that fueled my art. My work was not just mine—it reflected the connections I had built, woven from kindness and understanding. With their support, I prepared for the final exhibition in a thriving trade city, determined to showcase my journey through the art and stories surrounding me. The night of the exhibition, I stood before the gathered crowd, my heart racing. As I unveiled my collection, I shared the stories behind each piece: the vibrant market filled with Amina's laughter, the serene mountains inspired by Master Li, and the musical celebrations intertwined with Elara's melodies. My art became a bridge, connecting people across cultures.

The initial scepticism in the crowd faded as they engaged with my work, recognising the shared humanity within. The rival artist fell silent, unable to undermine a narrative that resonated deeply with others. Applause filled the air, a powerful acknowledgement of not just the art but the stories that shaped it. In that moment, I realised my journey had never been just about me—it was a celebration of everyone I had met, a partnership of cultures woven through art. As I looked around at the smiling faces illuminated by lantern light, I felt truly free. No longer confined by doubt, I was empowered by the rich tapestry of experiences that had shaped me. With newfound clarity, I understood that I would continue to explore and create, not just as an artist but as a storyteller, a bridge between worlds. My heart swelled with gratitude, realizing that true artistry lies in the connections we nurture. The Silk Road had gifted me more than inspiration; it had given me a family of friends, a sense of purpose, and a place in the world that felt just right.

As I prepared to leave, I recognised that this journey was only the beginning. The Silk Road would continue to flourish, weaving its threads across lands, and I would carry its spirit in every stroke of my brush. With my friends' warmth in my heart and the stories of the road etched deep within, I stepped forward, ready to embrace whatever lay ahead on my artistic path.

Hopes and Riches

International Christian School, Ezeamuzie, Cherry Oluebubechukwu – 11

BANG BANG BANG!

Lang Huan, still sleepy staggered to the door.

“Good mor—” Lang was interrupted by a visitor. At 7 am?

“Good morning, I am Ying Lui. I have a deal for you. Someone from Rome wants my silk. I won’t leave China, so I want you to do it.”

Lang Huan glared a bit. “What will I get?”

Ying Lui thought and spoke. “Everything Emperor Trajan gives you. I require 10000—yuan worth of items.”

“I’ll mark up by 10000 yuan,” Lang said, suddenly remembering economics and math lessons.

Ying continued. “Trajan wants the silk only. The rest can be sold anywhere.”

Lang considered, leaving his family or becoming rich?

Lang Huan’s sister, Mui cried when she found out Lang Huan was leaving.

His mother, Mama looked at her son with tears in her eyes. “My boy has grown. Now the man of the house.”

So, on hopes on supporting his family, Lang Huan set off with clothes, the package, and hopes and pride. He had an old but working boat from his old friend.

Lang Huan was a good geographer, and knew his best stop was at Tajikistan.

In the week, Lang Huan fished, hoping he could make some profit and his boat drifted off.

He saw a port with land that screamed THIS IS TAJIKISTAN by the land. Lang Huan hopped out, tied his boat and hovered into the city. He rented a nice overnight place to stay. The next day at the crack of dawn, he jumped out of bed and headed to the marketplace.

“Come on bros!” a man with a growly voice said when Lang was setting up.

A woman screamed. “It’s Boris!”

She grabbed her wool and fled the scene. Within seconds, the place was dirt empty. Lang Huan packed his jades, but Boris stopped him.

“Hand those over. Foreigners have the best items.” Boris growled. Murz and Ronjay held their own weapons, threatening Lang Huan.

Lang could feel Boris’s foul breath on his neck.

“One move and you’re dead.”

Trembling, Lang Huan whispered. “Let me find the jewels. I’ll hand them over.”

Boris laughed successfully. But he had other plans. He yeeted his jades at them, square in the eye.

Boris, Murz, and Ronjay were on the floor. Sheriffs came and took the gang away.

In the end, he didn’t sell a single thing, but people paid him for his bravery. And you get a lot of money when you defeat everyone’s fear.

He left for Kyrgyzstan the next afternoon.

It was close, so he could walk there. But he decided to use a boat to go to the border, closer to Rome anyways. He rowed and rowed, hoping not to drift and watching constantly for bandits. Kyrgyzstan wasn’t far, so Lang Huan hopped off.

He rented a horse to go to the marketplace and sold gold there. He even hired a skilled carver named Eli to make jewelry, even if it was for a few days.

Lang’s sales in Kyrgyzstan’s weren’t as successful, but it was plenty.

‘I better stay for a week and then pay Eli and leave.’

Eli was sick one faithful day.

“Eli, go home.”

The boy was stubborn. “No. I’m fine,” he said while struggling to breathe. At the point where he threw up, Lang Huan was done.

“Elijah! Go home and get rest. I’m leaving tomorrow!”

Eli realized the mess and went home. Sales were bad that day, but Lang Huan figured it was better than a sick boy working.

That night he packed up to leave Kyrgyzstan, but he felt sick himself.

He went to the late-night market and bought a few medicine drugs to help him stay awake.

He wanted home as soon as possible. Calculating, Lang Huan figured it was 70 days total, back and forth.

“Poor boy. He gave me that bug around here.”

Only, it wasn’t a bug. It was something worse.

The next day, Lang Huan was still queasy, but he forced himself to Eli’s house. Eli’s mother answered, pale herself.

“I want to give Elijah’s pay,” he said. Her face lit up.

“Elijah! Your boss is here!” she yelled.

Eli trutted down, paler than his mom and gave Lang a hug.

“Thanks. Lang Huan. It means a lot.”

Lang Huan was queasy, so he ran to a bush before vomiting.

“Vomit can’t stop me from getting money and home,” Lang Huan huffed. Took more pills and set off again.

“Egypt, yes. Next stop!”

10 days to Egypt. Every few hours, he would vomit, stinking the boat badly. No cities were near, so Lang Huan just drifted on the boat, in the lonely ocean.

On Day 9, Lang Huan felt hot. Really hot for cold waters and a breeze.

“Time for a nap,” Lang Huan groaned, lying down.

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“Where am I? Am I being robbed? HELP!”

A lady with light brown skin and long brown hair in a white gown with blood stains ran to his side.

“You’re in a clinic in Egypt. You are not being robbed. You are okay. You had the bubonic plague and were unconscious for days.”

“Sorry,” he mumbled. “How do I pay? I’m Lang Huan.”

“I’m Gianna. Are you Chinese? I’m Italian, Roman.”

Lang Huan’s eyes widened. “I’m headed for Rome! I need to go now.”

“No. You need to stay here for another 2 days. Can I please go home with you?” Gianna said.

Lang Huan sighed. “My boat’s a wreck.”

“Boat?” Gianna laughed. “I’m gonna get a ship for you.”

Lang Huan’s weakened body managed to stretch a smile. “I don’t need crewmen Gigi– I mean Gianna!”

“Gigi’s perfect,” Gianna blushed. Her expression changed. “But we’ll leave only when you are fully healed.”

Lang Huan bought the boat and 2 horses, which cost almost all his riches.

Now, sailing north in this time was hard. Going south was easier, you can’t say the same for north. As soon as Lang Huan and Gianna were in the open Mediterranean Sea, Gianna smiled and looked at Lang.

“Your name, Lang Huan. What does it mean?”

“Wolverine,” Lang Huan answered almost instantly.

“Wolverine. In Italian, that’s Ghiottone. I’d like to call you Ghioto as a nickname.”

Lang Huan nodded. “You’re Ji–Ji then.”

The sky darkened and thunder boomed. Gianna screamed as the boat was tossed in waves. The horses went crazy and weakened the boat more. Lang Huan tossed item after item out of the ship. Food, clothes, but not the profit.

It lightened the boat, making it easier to toss around in the storm. Gianna hugged the pole for dear life as they were swallowed whole.

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“Ghioto! Ghioto!”

Lang Huan woke up, on land. Gianna was above him. She sighed in relief.

“Ghioto, I found an inn so we can rest. We are in Persia. Our boat is in ashes!”

“Did the horse survive?” Lang Huan asked. Gianna nodded.

When Lang slapped Pharoah, he sprinted forward. So, Gianna slapped Cleo too. The ride more of slapping and whinnying.

After multiple painful hours, Gianna's eyes widened.

"Ghioto! It's Rome!"

The Colosseum was in view.

"I'll hand over the gold and porcelain. Do you know where Emperor Trajan lives?"

"The Imperial Palace." Gianna said. "I've been there many times as a child."

When they arrived, they were invited to a waiting room as Emperor was called over.

The waiting room was bigger than Lang Huan's house. It had leather couches, a bar with snacks. Lang Huan even felt ashamed to be touching the fresh fruit. But when Gianna sipped wine, Lang joined.

Emperor Trajan soon came in, wearing expensive silk robes.

"Greetings, Gianna and the trader. Ghioto?"

Lang Huan nodded, and Emperor Trajan sat down and gulped some wine. He saw Lang Huan staring hungrily at the cheese and laughed. "Take as much as you want!"

Trajan huffed a winey breath. "Thank you so much for the pilk."

"Silk." Lang corrected.

"It's new to Rome. Thanks a lot. I shall repay you anything you want."

Lang shook his head. "I want a guaranteed safe trip home and the cost... 10000 yuan."

Before Lang could sit, Trajan handed him a route home, and 15000 yuan.

Gianna said she would move to China with Lang, and her parents were supportive. They held a little traditional wedding for them.

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When the two reached China, Mui immediately welcomed Gianna as her sister. And Mama as her daughter. The wedding for China was bigger, with Ying Lui, Mui, Mama, and Gianna's parents in the heart.

When they were officially married in the scribes, Lang thought of the journey Ying Lui had offered him. A journey of hopes to escape poverty. But also, a journey of hopes to find himself.

The Weaver and the Willow

International Christian School, Kwong, Caitlyn Hay Lam – 12

130 BCE, Xi'an, Han Dynasty

The last thing that I thought would come after war was even more despair. I mean, don't people always say that once the war is over, everything goes back to normal? I could live the life I used to live before planes and bombs tore apart my country. Now, I was standing in my bedroom of 11 years, wishing I didn't have to leave. The cracked walls with their paint peeling off. The posters I stuck up when I got into K-pop. The windows providing raw, unfiltered light. This room – it brought me through everything. The one thing that kept me safe despite the bombs and soldiers and gunshots. And now, I'm forced to leave.

My dad – he fought in the war. The only reason our village is alive is because of my dad. And yet, we aren't welcome here. I guess some things never change.

"Li An," My aunt called, her voice sharp above my father's sobs.

This woman. "I'm coming," I said, my voice sickly sweet, failing to conceal my hatred.

She was the one. The one who destroyed everything. Even after all my father did. All it took was one person to shatter our dream. Our hope.

I brushed past her and fell into my dad's arms. Fat tears rolled down my cheeks; the grief I tried so hard to suppress hit me like a truck. We embraced, the scent of home filling my nose.

Why? Why did the one person we all trusted betray us like that? Don't they always say after wars, everyone comes together for peace? For love?

"I'm going to pack my final items," I murmured to Dad, brushing my tears away. He nodded, his voice snatched from the grief. I climbed up the stairs, my feet slow and weak. I brushed my hand against the walls we built together. The warmth of the *kang*. The soft *tu tang*. Choking back sobs, I pulled my final books into a satchel and slung it over my back. As I leaned against the cracked wall, breathing the air thick with grief, I could sense someone. *Mei Lan* was older than me, a silk maker bound by her family's duty. The tug on my heart told me it wasn't just a coincidence; our destinies were intertwined, and we were bound to meet each other.

114 BCE, Zhejiang, Han Dynasty

Silk. Work. The reasons *Mei Lan* existed. If she wasn't making silk, she was working. *Mei Lan* knew this wasn't right. But she couldn't do anything about it. If she wanted to quit, she couldn't. Her mom would look at her with those eyes – the ones that made a soldier hesitate. That's what she was up against. Every day.

Mei Lan noticed it first. It started off slowly, with days when her dad was more stressed and irritable. He would get more frustrated when I still couldn't harvest the cocoon from the silk worms. I would apologize, and he would shake his head in disbelief, but he would still forgive me. The next morning, he would just forget it. Then he made us work longer and later, and if they didn't do what he wanted exactly, he would snap. He would yell and scream over a single mistake. A dropped piece of silk. A calculation error. It was like everything we did was permanent; never to be forgotten or forgiven.

"Dad?" *Mei Lan* asked, "Is everything okay? I mean, you've been acting different and –"

"Nothing." He barked, then his tone softened, "*Mei Lan*, we're – we're gonna have to leave –"

"Wait," She looked up, incredulous, "So if we're not doing well, we just quit?"

"No..." Dad started.

"Actually?" She asked, her voice cracking, "We *actually* have to leave?"

“Yeah,” He sighed, “We’re gonna have to go.”

As *Mei Lan* processed the weight of her father’s words, she sensed someone. Someone like her, someone younger, someone struggling to accept that they had to leave. That they were never coming back. *Li An* had to go explore China’s Silk Road in hopes of making a living. Something that was virtuously unheard of. The similarities in circumstances told *Mei Lan* it wasn’t a coincidence; instead, their destinies were intertwined. They were going to meet sometime in the future.

130 BCE, Hefei, Han Dynasty

We had left home weeks ago, yet it seemed that we were going nowhere. Water was running low, and so was our food supplies. “Take these and go over to the next town and see if you can ravage for food,” Dad mumbled, his lips dry and cracked.

“Okay,” I replied, slightly lisping because of my tongue sticking to the roof of my dry mouth.

I might as well just go to the bathroom, also, since I don’t know when we’ll stop again.

I dashed to the bushes, creating cover for myself so I could just go to the toilet in peace. Despite all my efforts to tell myself this was my life now, memories of my past home kept haunting me, and tears began to fall down my face.

Just a month ago, we were promised peace and happiness after the war ended. Now, we’re on an old, rickety cart traveling to nowhere in particular. And to top it all off, I have to run to the bushes to go to the bathroom. What has my life become?

I stumbled into an old village, clutching the silks my dad gave me like it was a lifeline. As I gazed upon the old yet sturdy buildings with real *kangs*, soft *tu tangs*, and an actual functioning well that gave clean water, a wave of memories and grief swept through me. My mind and body just gave out pretending that everything was okay. Pretending it was normal to go around in a war cart on dirt roads in hopes of someone buying our silk. But this was the new normal. I had to accept it. I had to sell silk. I had to.

“H–hey,” I stammered, stumbling over my words, “Want to buy some silk? It’s just a few dollars!” I took a shaky breath as I tried to calm down. The grief became unbearable. I tried to blink back my tears, but soon it all became blurry, and my shoulders were shaking with every desperate breath. I grabbed all of my stuff and sprinted out, sobbing like the world was going to end. I collapsed into a heaving, breathless grief that shook me to the bone on the side of the road.

114 BCE, Jiangsu, Han Dynasty

Her calves cramped even more with each step. After walking for weeks, *Mei Lan* was ready to quit. “Dad?” She asked, her voice weary, “When are we going to arrive?”

“Soon,” He responded, though sounding quite unsure himself.

After a few hours, *Mei Lan* couldn’t take it anymore. She crumpled onto the ground. The sun was shining bright right into their eyes and any sort of breeze was nonexistent. They had been walking for days in these conditions without food or water.

“Well, if we’re going to stop, we might as well be productive and make some silk,” Dad muttered to himself, pacing around.

“*Mei Lan?*” He asked, “Can you get out the materials we need to make silk?”

“Sure,” She replied, happy they could take a break and not walk for a bit.

She grabbed all the materials and gave them to her dad. They each grabbed some silk and started working. A few hours later, everyone finished except for *Mei Lan*. She kept trying and trying, but it wouldn’t work. The silk wasn’t weaving and neither could *Mei Lan* figure out why.

“*Mei Lan*,” Dad sighed, disappointment thick in his voice.

“I’m – I’m trying, okay?” She replied defensively. *Mei Lan*’s finger soon became numb and slow from the number of times she just tried to weave the silk. No matter what she did, the silk wasn’t weaving. The weight of everyone’s pitiful looks became too much for *Mei Lan*, and soon tears began to drip down her face. Her face burned, and she suddenly bolted, kicking up dust into her family’s face. *Mei Lan* crumpled onto the side of the road; her head in her hands.

135 BCE, Nanjing, Han Dynasty

My body ached; it felt like I was getting trampled on by an elephant, but we couldn’t do anything. We were in the middle of this vast desert with no food, no water, and no way of contacting outside help.

So this is it? This is how I’m going to die?

“*Li An*,” My mom’s voice breaking through the fog, “You’re going to be fine.”

“Sure,” I whispered, my voice weak and raspy. However, instead of reassurance, these words sent me teetering on the brink of delirium. My condition worsened; my fever spiked dramatically and then dropped to a point where it seemed like Buddha couldn’t save me anymore. I grew delirious; my mind was somewhere apart from my body. I couldn’t keep anything down.

If I’m going to die, kill me now. I don’t want to suffer anymore.

I saw her first. She was wild and breathless, running to me like the world was ending and I was the one who was going to save her. Fear was radiating from her like something was really wrong. Like she couldn’t believe what she was seeing. Like our destinies were truly intertwined. Like she figured it out. I fell into her arms, and then the world melted into inky darkness—

New Tales of China's Silk Road

International Christian School, Mak, Myron Simeon – 13

Prologue

The sun glared on the horizon of the desert road, like a single eye intent on decimating the land in its scorching heat. Its deathstare moved slowly, like a torturous oven that left even the bravest of travelers parched and dehydrated. There were several other travelers on the famed trade route, all of different ethnicities and walks of life. Some were leading shaggy, smelly camels with baskets full of splinters; some with bundles of cloth and spices to bring back to their own countries, worlds away. These men had sacrificed their family, their friends, their whole lives, dedicating them to trade and bringing goods to their home country.

Amidst all the merchants and globetrotters were two special men. They didn't know it at the time, but they were two crucial parts of a grand plot that would change the world forever, in ways unimaginable. The two men couldn't have been more different: one was chubby and dark-skinned, with a turban wrapped around his head, and a dark, neat beard. The other was a Chinese man, and was pale and skinny, with a fancy yellow jacket and a small leather belt around his waist.

The man in yellow had been instructed not to open the box at any cost. Not for the first time, he began to doubt. Was the box *really* harmless and safe, like his employer had said. Was the thing inside this box *really* worth the trouble he was sure to stir up? An old aphorism from his father helped him to concentrate: 不勞無獲, or *no work no reward*. He pushed through, into the desert, further into the unknown.

His smooth, silky yellow jacket was key to the operation. That was the signal. Once the man in the turban saw a Chinese man in yellow, he would know that was the man he was supposed to do the deal with. This was because in China, yellow clothes were reserved only for royalty and highly honored men; an honor that was bestowed only by the emperor himself. No one allowed in yellow would be travelling on the Silk Road, which is why the man would be so easily distinguishable. People in yellow are not stopped, nor searched, nor questioned. The engineers of this plot knew that. Had the man been checked, the small box would have been found, and he would have been executed for treason.

Chapter 1: The Power of the Powder

The yellow jacket made the man stick out like a sore thumb, and the man in the turban saw him coming from a mile away. As they neared each other, the man in yellow took out the box. Palming it carefully, he deliberately crashed into the man in a turban. Their shoulders met, and in the short moment, the box changed hands: from the man in yellow to the dark skinned man.

"Sorry, didn't see you there," the man in yellow.

"It's fine," said the man in the turban. They looked at each other, their eyes locking. They may not have understood the whole plan, but they knew the gravity of the box. For a moment, the man in yellow wanted to snatch the box and run; back to safety, back home.

But it was too late. The deal was done; their jobs were finished. Slowly, the two men turned around and walked off. The box travelled on the Silk road for many long years; the arid, dry desert seemed to stretch out eternally, with no end in sight. But, finally, it arrived in the country of England, where it was greeted with overflowing rivers of joy. The box actually contained the recipe for gunpowder, which Europeans had sought after for centuries, in the hopes of creating weapons of mass destruction, weapons that would raze the land beyond recognition, and leave a trail of destruction and death. Inevitably, other countries would get their hands on this magnificent powder; the English had just gotten it first, so they would use it to its full extent. Electrically ecstatic, they whipped up a quick batch and stored it in a wooden warehouse, in a small, remote village.

That was their first mistake.

One dry night, a stray spark ignited the gunpowder. The blaze burned like a ravenous beast, with an insatiable hunger to wreak destruction and carnage, killing the hundreds of people that lived in the town. The English looked at their own decimated village not in horror, but in awe. If anything, it encouraged the English to use their

newfound weapon quicker. And so began the gunpowder war, a war that would kill millions; a war that would decide the fate of the world; a war that would spell doom for humanity.

The man in the yellow jacket would never see the destruction he caused, but his act of greed caused the deaths of millions of people. Never knowing when the next disaster would strike, people covered in fear of the next gunpowder episode. Over the years, many people perished and destruction ensued in the many gunpowder incidents.

London, England, 1605

A man named Guy Fawkes planned to use gunpowder in a plot to blow up the Parliament of England. Had he succeeded, it would have killed hundreds of people, including King James I and Prince Henry.

Leiden, Netherlands, 1807

A ship carrying hundreds of barrels of gunpowder exploded in the city of Leiden. It killed 151 people and resulted in over 200 buildings destroyed.

London, England, 1940

Under the reign of Adolf Hitler, Nazi Germany rained bombs onto the city of London for 56 days, forcing many to retreat to underground refugee areas, transforming subway stations into temporary bomb shelters and homes. Over 1600 people passed away because of the bombs, with many more becoming homeless.

Chapter 2: 2397 C.E.

The bombs rained down on the New Silk Road, and the air was filled with sprays of gunfire. Debris was scattered everywhere, and death and destruction had once again come on the Silk Road. The general sat on a little stool, watching the battle unfold like a movie. He sighed, a thick, heavy sigh like someone had sucked the last molecule of hope out of his body.

“We have fought this war for over a hundred years by now, Colonel,” said the general. He was an old, wheezing man that looked like a slight breeze could knock him over. Despite his age and size, he was a strong and capable man, managing an elite and able army of young men. He sighed again, facing the colonel, with his head in his hands. “I just think that, by now, this war is meaningless! Barely anyone remembers the cause, the meaning, the origin of this war! Look at all this destruction, what we have done to this once-beautiful place. All for what? We are grown men, playing pointless, childish war games; killing for no purpose at all. I think it’s time we proposed peace.”

So, as the sun dawned on the battlefield of the Silk Road, where it had all started, the last international trade happened. But this was not a trade of goods and cloths and spices, but a trade of peace. The general stood waving a white flag, walking towards enemy lines. As the general approached the enemy tanks, guns and missiles, the soldiers on both sides rejoiced. The hundred year war had ended for good. Man had finally learned from its mistakes, realising that war was never the answer. As the armies laid down their weapons and the barrage of projectiles ceased, the man thought back to an old aphorism his father had taught him, just as the man in yellow had thought of an aphorism, thousand years ago. It read: “War does not determine who is right—only who is left.”

The treaty was settled and the army men started heading home, with a newfound hope in their hearts that they would live to see the next day, their family, their homes. And the gunpowder war finally, after a thousand years, came to an end.

“War does not determine who is right—only who is left.”

—Bertrand Russell

The Plague

International Christian School, Ng, Nathan Tsz Shun – 12

I

“What’s this?” Jack asked quietly as he picked up a rusty book from the library. The ancient book was ripped and full of dust. Its brittle pages trembling as though they carried myths that had never been found. As Jack flipped through the brownish pages, he found a fading handwritten message: **“Help us! The mysterious plague is destroying our lives! –Marco Polo, Venice, Corte del Millon, 1271.”** Jack’s heart pounded, fear igniting with confusion. He dashed out of the library and hurried to the science laboratory in his college, where a brilliant theoretical physicist named Dr. Skor worked endlessly on peculiar experiments. Jack showed him the book, and the scientist studied the message with care. “If this is real, it means someone in the past is in trouble!” Dr. Skor exclaimed. “We must save Marco Polo and his people so they won’t suffer!” Jack declared with confidence blazing in his eyes. “Let me tell you a secret. I’ve been experimenting on my time machine. Perhaps this is the perfect opportunity to test it!” Dr. Skor whispered, leaning closer with enthusiasm. “That’s incredible! Let’s kick off this mission when the school year ends,” Jack suggested, already imagining numerous exciting adventures that awaited them in the past.

II

When summer break arrived, Jack rushed to the science laboratory with his backpack. Inside, he noticed a triangular object glowing under the fluorescent lights. “This is the time machine I have been working on,” Dr. Skor announced proudly, his eyes sparkling with exhilaration. As they climbed inside, Jack fidgeted in his seat, tapping his foot against the floor, while Dr. Skor pressed button after button. The machine began to shake, then sped swiftly, humming with unusual energy. Instantly, they were in a colorful portal filled with glowing streaks of light. Jack noticed a black hole swirling ahead, its force pulling everything closer. “Hang on to the safety bars, Jack! We’re entering that hole!” Dr. Skor shouted.

III

Jack felt dizzy, then everything went black. When he opened his eyes and stepped out of the machine, a vast grassland appeared before them. “Where are we?” Jack asked. “My machine indicates we are in Venice, and it’s 1271. We need to find a place to stay before dark.” Dr. Skor said sternly. “Let’s try that house with the dim light,” Jack proposed. They knocked, and an elderly man opened the door, his eyes filled with caution. “Sir, we are looking for a place to stay tonight,” Jack said politely. The elderly man nodded coldly, then invited them inside, offering beds and food.

IV

When the sun rose, Jack asked the man, “Do you know a person called Marco Polo?” The man’s face turned suspicious, then he forced a smile and replied, “Yes, I knew him, but he died weeks ago from a mysterious disease.” The man’s eyes looked toward the sky, as if he was hiding something from Jack and Dr. Skor. Awkward silence filled the room, and Jack whispered to Dr. Skor, “No way! In history class, I learned Marco Polo died in 1324, not in 1271! Something feels off, and this place seems strange. We should leave and find him somewhere else.”

V

As they left the house, they arrived at a village and spotted people sobbing beside cemeteries. At first, Jack and Dr. Skor were confused, but they joined the crowd and realized it was a funeral. Dr. Skor noticed a young man crying his eyes out, tears rolling down his face and forming a small puddle on the ground. “Are you okay?” Dr. Skor asked, reassuring him with a pat on the back. “Many people in my village are dying from an incurable disease. I left a prayer message in a precious Bible, hoping God would save us, but I am not sure whether He listened,” the boy replied. “Wait, are you Marco Polo? In our era, we found your message in a book. We’ve come from the future to give you a hand.” Dr. Skor said. The boy nodded uncertainly and replied, “If what you say is true, then maybe miracles exist. But how can you help us?” The boy asked.

VI

“Actually, we can cure this disease in our era. It’s called tuberculosis, and we need three key ingredients to make the medicine: Yellow River Water of China, Fragrant Garlic of Socotra, and Cubic Apple of Afghanistan. However, they all come from distant countries.” Dr. Skor said worriedly, his voice trembling with fear as he imagined the difficulties ahead, yet there were still hopes in his eyes. Jack thought for a moment and said, “Cheer up! Those places are all along the Silk Road. We might find the ingredients in the market here, as Venice is a crossroads of trade, where merchants from distant countries arrive every day.” “He’s right! Tomorrow, I’ll take you to the largest market in town. Tonight, you can rest at my house,” Marco suggested.

VII

The next morning, Marco led them to Venice’s largest market. The air smelled like spices and incense, while merchants from distant countries sold fabric, fruits, and silks. At last, they stopped at a Chinese stall. “Do you have Great Water from the Yellow River?” Jack asked. “The water is rare, one bottle for two gold coins,” the merchant replied. They looked at each other in despair, as they didn’t have gold. Suddenly, the merchant spotted something shiny on Dr. Skor’s wrist. “This is called an Apple Watch. It tells time and pulse rate.” Dr. Skor explained. “I’ll trade you my water for that magical device!” the merchant proclaimed excitedly. Jack and Marco Polo exchanged uneasy glances, realizing that saving the world required heavy sacrifices. But they chose to give up their own belongings to save other people’s lives.

VIII

After they got the water, they were starving. “There’s a restaurant nearby that serves mouth-watering pasta,” Marco said. Hungry and exhausted, they ran through a dark alley and entered the restaurant. Jack was impressed as he slurped the soft, tender noodles. “What is this pasta made of?” he asked the chef. “It’s cooked with a special garlic called Fragrant Garlic, imported from Socotra,” the chef replied proudly. “That’s the garlic we need! Can you sell some to us?” Jack asked eagerly. The chef shook his head and said, “No! It’s too precious to sell!”

IX

Jack kept eating, and without a care, he took out a McDonald’s ketchup packet and poured it onto the pasta. “What’s that red sauce?” the chef asked. “This is ketchup, made from a fruit called tomato!” Jack replied. The chef tasted it and was flabbergasted. He said, “I shall trade my treasured garlic for this magic sauce!” Jack nodded, and handed over a few ketchup packets in exchange for the garlic. As they left, Dr. Skor explained to Marco, “There were no tomatoes in ancient Italy, and they came from the Americas in the 1500s. That’s why ketchup seems like a treasure here!”

X

When they finished eating, they headed to different markets, hoping to find the final ingredient – the Cubic Apple of Afghanistan. After walking through a maze of alleys, they found it in a filthy fruit store, but only one remained. As they were about to purchase it, the elderly man who had sheltered them on their first night suddenly appeared, snatched the apple and fled into the alleys. Luckily, Marco knew the city well. He dashed through shortcuts and finally caught the man on a bridge. “Please forgive me! I only want to stop you from making the medicine. The King must get infected by the plague, as he cruelly killed my whole family ten years ago!” the elderly man mourned, and his voice shook as droplets of tears ran down his cheeks. Marco kindly patted the man on the back and said, “Revenge won’t heal your pain, mercy will!” Then, he took back the Cubic Apple and let him go.

XI

Finally, they gathered all the ingredients. That night, Dr. Skor prepared the medicine at Marco’s house. He carefully mixed the ingredients in a pot, the steam carrying a scent of garlic and herbs. The liquid turned greenish-yellow and glowed faintly, like a witch’s potion. Marco glanced at it and said, “This is our hope!” Dr. Skor handed the potion to Marco and said, “Take this to cure the sick! Our task is accomplished, and we must return home now! Marco, please

don't put our story in any book. The butterfly effect might change history!" Marco promised and bid farewell with gratitude.

XII

Jack and Dr. Skor went into the time machine. When the vibration stopped, they were back in the laboratory, having travelled through time. They grabbed a copy of Marco Polo's masterpiece, ***The Travels of Marco Polo***, from the bookshelf and flipped through it anxiously. They were relieved that Marco kept his promise. The book's pages felt alive, as if they were made from a wizard's spell. When they turned to the last page, they smiled as they discovered a tiny hidden note from Marco: "Thanks, friends from the future! – Marco Polo"

The King and the Merchant

International Christian School, Yu, Madelyn Li Shi – 11

Once upon a time, a young merchant named William heard of a foolish king who possessed one of the greatest treasures on Earth—Silkworms.

The worms themselves were not worth much, not more than one dollar, but the silk they produced was not rivaled. A single pound of the luscious silk was more than expensive; it was priceless, and most people reckoned it was worth its weight in gold, about 4 million Hong Kong dollars. All the other countries had tried desperately to get their hands on some of the eggs of the silkworms, but none had emerged triumphant.

This inspired the young merchant to challenge the king. He was certain he could persuade the naive ruler to hand over China's treasure. Despite the failures and killings before him, the merchant was undeterred. He needed the money to support his family, and he was determined to claim the treasure.

With this in mind, the man set off for the king's palace. The elegant white castle was set upon a grassy hill, where it was surrounded by iron gates and soldiers at every visible door. Even so, the merchant had no doubt that it was probably booby-trapped inside as well.

William took a deep breath and marched up the grassy slope. As he neared the top, he was greeted by the unfamiliar image of stone walls. They looked cold, dead, uninviting, but the man ignored all of his gut's warnings.

"Hello," William announced to a nearby soldier. He tried his best to sound calm and collected. "I would like to see the king please." The merchant puffed out his chest and tried to look big.

The soldier stared at him, narrowing his eyes, and William's heart almost stopped. The guard crossed his arms and used his metal spear to block the door.

"Name."

William almost fled in a panic, but he sucked in his breath. "Bill." He declared softly, hoping there was a chance someone named Bill was visiting the king today.

"Bill...Bill...Short for William? I have a 'William' down for today. That you?" He offered. William pondered his options, but there was really only one choice. "Yes sir!" He exclaimed, and the soldier removed his daunting spear. "The king is dining in the room on the right, second to last." William nodded his thanks and rushed in before he accidentally blew his cover.

The king was just about to tuck in to a five-course meal when William burst in. The scent of roast chicken wafted in the air, and the king snorted when he saw William.

"A peasant? Allowed in my castle? Interrupting my meal?" He raged. His face had turned a bright red, and his face was covered in pink blotches.

"Sir, if I may have a word in private....?" William asked. The king's nostrils flared. "How dare you request a word with me? Not to mention, I'm about to start my roast turkey, prepared by only the best cook in the whole of China!"

William was about to tell him he was going to eat chicken, but he locked the words away in a box at the bottom of his heart, threw away the key, and zipped his lips shut.

When the king was done fuming, he found yet another mistake in William's nine-word sentence. "The audacity! How dare you call me 'sir'! You must address me by bowing, and I am 'Your Majesty' to you!" William tried his best to hold in his own rage. Instead, he turned it into wits.

"Well, Your Majesty, if I may?" William bowed low in front of the king, and knelt on his knees.

"Ah, much better," the king replied. His temper vanished, and a pleasant smile appeared on his face. "Alright, peasant, what do you want from me?"

William furrowed his brow in frustration, but he stood up and dusted off his pants. "I would like to see your inventory. Everyone says you have the most prized possession in the world. But what is it?" The king paused for a moment and thought.

Finally, he grinned cheekily and said, "I'm not really liable to say." William bit his lip. Maybe this king wasn't really as foolish as everyone thought, he shuddered.

Just as he was about to slip out of the room before the king pulled his cover, the king chuckled a cold laugh and patted William on the back. "Oh of course I can tell you! I just have to show you!" The young merchant almost laughed aloud. "Oh, I would just love that, Your Majesty!" He played along, hoping that the king would stay true to his word.

For he knew that if he didn't get out alive with the silkworm eggs, that would mean the king had killed him. The king did not take intruders kindly.

The king led the way out of the room and the merchant followed behind him. The lights grew increasingly dimmer. When he stopped, William walked straight into him. "Sorry, Your Majesty!" He apologized profusely. The king did not respond.

"You never told me what your name was. Peasants are not allowed in my castle." The king's voice was deep and menacing, slow and angry. William shuddered at the thought of being executed on the spot. He would not doubt the king to keep a pocket knife at hand.

"Your Majesty, my name is William and I wanted to see if your inventory was as great as it was rumored."

"Or, are you here to slaughter me and take my treasure?" demanded the king. He advanced slowly, and William was forced to back up. His back hit the wall with a thud. His fingernails curled around the gnarly stone wall, and the lichen reached out to grab his wrists.

"Have mercy, Your Majesty! I mean no harm!" William knelt before the ruler of China and bartered for his life. "See here, I have a hundred dollars which I will give to you to continue the tour." He shoved a stack of bills at the king, which contained his last hopes, but the king smacked them away, and they fluttered down on the floor like William's fleeting hopes.

"Show me your hands! If they are clean, I will show you my treasure! And when they are filthy, I will take your life from you!"

"My dear king, I have a counter-proposal. We will have a competition. If I win, you must give me one of your silkworms. And if you win, you will have my head on a golden platter." The king smiled widely, not noticing William knew that he owned silkworms. "You're on," he smirked, "And I'll be so generous that you can choose the competition." William shivered at the thought of being beheaded, but he put on a brave face.

"Very well! We shall have a laughing contest. The first one to laugh will lose by any means necessary! But, we shall have a judge!"

"Fair enough," the king returned. "Guards, we need a referee!" A guard marched in wearing a black and white striped uniform.

And so it began in the gloomy passage of the majestic castle. The king leaped forward energetically despite missing his lunch and tried to tickle William. His fingers stretched towards the merchant, but he was quick, with his wits about him.

The king fell down and missed William, and William was sure he was in great pain. William almost wanted to laugh, which gave him an idea. The king moaned and rolled around, having never been hurt before. "Ow! You little brat!" The king shrieked. William's mouth turned into a tight line, and he made his eyes as wide as he could. He puffed out his cheeks and stretched his limbs out. But the king didn't laugh.

The king sat and looked very puzzled. He arched his eyebrows and looked up and down. But William didn't laugh.

Instead, he decided to use the plan and pretended he was trying to tackle the king, but failed pitifully. He flopped on the ground, tripping over his shoelaces, until he was lying on the floor, his cheek pressed up against the stone. He had scrapes all over, and a huge bump on his head from where he had hit the wall.

The king burst out laughing. "Ha ha! You look so stupid!" As soon as he realized his mistake, he quickly tried to cover it up. "I meant 'bwa bwa bwa', too bad for you that you look stupid." But it was too late.

Phew! The guard blew a whistle from the pocket of his uniform. "The merchant wins!" He declared.

"No! No! You work for me!" The king pouted. The judge hesitated, but then he replied, "No. The guard works for you, but the judge is a free man."

And so, William walked away, out into the sunshine with a silkworm in a large cage. And that is how the king of China lost his country's prized possession.

The Silk Road Secret

International College Hong Kong Secondary, Burton, Charlotte – 11

“Catherine wake up” called her mum “coming” I called back I quickly jumped out of bed and threw on my school uniform. It was my first day of secondary school. I ran down stairs to find confetti my golden retriever waiting for me. “Mum, where is truffle?” “here sitting on the table” she said As I came in. “Come on truffle off the table now” I said to my tabby cat.

As I sat down my mum said "Catherine, the school said to bring one of your pets to school" “ok” I replied . I picked up confetti and started to put my shoes on “see you on the weekend” “bye!” as i was walking out the door she stopped me and told me to grab my snacks and gave me a journal to record my school stuff in .

“Come on confetti” I called and as she came down the stairs I double checked that I had everything then we were off. walking down the road to find the bus stop. The bus came to a squeaky stop in front of me and I hopped in. The bus driver asked me where I was going and I told him I was going to “ a girls school in adelaide”

Ten minutes later I could see the school from my seat. It looked dark and not that welcoming but I knew that inside it was bright and colourful. I hopped off the bus with confetti at my heels and slowly walked through the school gates into my new home. I knew some of the teachers and the basic map of where to go as I walked past the forest. It started snowing with gentle little snowflakes.

That’s when I saw it majestically standing just past the forest. I knew this would be my favorite place in the school. It was right next to my dorm; it was the school’s enormous library. I immediately turned left and ducked behind a tree. I thought I heard something. I held confetti tight and hoped we wouldn't be found. I strained my ears trying to hear what was going on.

There were two people. “No one can know about this” she heard a female voice say "Chloe wouldn't allow her to be in grave danger” I wondered who Chloe was and noted that I would search her up later . “ That doesn't matter now we will talk to the girl anyway” said a male voice “I guess your right operation silk road must continue”

The sound of their voices quieted as they walked away. I quickly sat up and crept up the staircase confetti following closely behind. I heard footsteps behind me and quickly dashed up the steps . And through the door to my room I collapsed on to the bed relieved that I hadn't been found.

I checked the time “oh no we must be going. We're going to be late for assembly”

I quickly rushed down the stairs and into the hall where the principal was just about to start. Everyone was looking at me. I felt my cheeks reddening “now let us begin” miss. Luxembourg said “ as you should all know you are all doing an essay on a historic place/moment in the past. You will be working in pairs I have chosen for you will have a few minutes to discuss with your partner about what you will be doing.

I was paired with an asian girl with long brown hair and a kind face. Her name was Anastasia.

“ What topic do you want to do?” she asked, thinking about the conversation I overheard. I said “how about Marco polo and the silk road” “sure!” anaistaisia replied I went up to tell miss luxenburg our decision "interesting topic”she said “well get to work then you hand in your essays at the end of the week” .

We went outside to think about the things we already know about the silk road. Then I heard some voices, "Anastasia, duck!" I called. We quickly moved behind some trees and listened it was those people again "is anyone here" the lady called. I held my breath. "No" the man replied "but do it quickly anyway" with one last check the lady threw a stone on the floor and they both disappeared.

we waited a few minutes then I slowly crept out and went over to the stone carefully i picked it up there was a big flash of light then darkness the last thing I heard was anistaisia calling "ccccaaaattttthhhrrrrriiiiiinnneee!" as I got swept a way.

I landed with a "thump" the fog around me cleared "Get out of the way" someone yelled as they road their horse past me carrying goods "excuse me!" I called too the man who passed me where am I "your on the silk road of course" he answered giving me a weird look

"The silk road" I said aloud. I looked around. There were lots of horses and camels nearby. A group of men came past me riding camels speaking in a language I couldn't understand one of them pointed at me and asked "Are you lost girl?" "no" I said nervously. "My name is Marco Polo and I am traveling with my uncle and father. Are you by yourself?" he asked

Unsure what to say I answered "my parents went somewhere did you see a girl and boy in black" "yes they went that way towards the hills" he replied "thank you" I said and started heading in that direction.

As I walked I planned how I would get the other stone back in time. I had no idea how much time had passed because my watch fell off when I hit the ground. Should I just wait or should I sneak up and take it from them?. I pondered over this then

I saw them waiting on the other side of the hill it looked like they were waiting for someone but I noticed it was a different girl

I heard some foot steps behind me and got ready to run she lunged at me and I dashed for my life she got further away but I stopped looking where I was going I tripped and "crrrack" "oh no" I tried to stand up but i had twisted my ankle i crawled a few more meters and gave up.

Then a warm hand touched my neck and someone whispered "you got nowhere to run" then she put a gag over my mouth and nose the air smelt weird then I started trashing around to try and loosen her grip on me but it was no use. After a minute or so everything went black and silent.

How East Met West

International College Hong Kong Secondary, Chu, Ronny – 13

“Mr Zhang, please come in.”

Zhang Qian stood at the end of the doorway and bowed courteously to Emperor Wudi and walked in. The palace was meticulously made with exquisite phoebe zhennan wood and tiled with gold, carved sculptures chiselled with the finest materials. Jade rings wrapped around his wrist, and a detailed and a flamboyant outfit encircled him. An opulent and grandeur ballroom fitted with aromatic incense and lit with illuminating lanterns. Zhang Qian's gaze was floating around the room, admiring every inch of the well-designed palace. He imagined the history of every room, how every wall told a story. His train of thought was interrupted by the emperor, “Well, the reason I brought you here was to send you to the far places of the West, to attempt to ally with the Yuezhi people against the Xiongnu, our common enemy. I'll give you ten of my finest horses and a supply of food and water for your journey.

The next day, Zhang Qian packed his belongings and started his adventure to the west, accompanied by the ten majestic horses, each strong and well-bred, ready to endure the long journey ahead. The sun rose lazily over the horizon, casting golden hues across the landscape as he set out, the palace slowly fading away into the distance. Zhang Qian sighed for a long time and pointed his compass straight towards the West.

The journey was long, over mountains, under tree canopies and across deserts. When arriving at Xiongnu, they were swiftly captured by the Xiongnu, and Zhang Qian was being enslaved for a total of 13 years; during which he gained the trust of a Xiongnu woman and married her, even having a son together. One night, Zhang Qian escaped, hiding in the shadows of the building, creeping across the place until finally he was free. After 13 long years of enslavement, he was free. However, that did not stop Zhang Qian from finishing his mission; he managed to make the trip to Yuezhi, which was situated at the north of Bactria and explained to the Yuezhi king the proposal of forming a alliance. In spite of the tedious journey, the Yuezhi king said no as they were enjoying peace and quiet for that period of time, and so Zhang Qian trekked back to Zhong Yuan. Zhang Qian reported back to the king the decision of the Yuezhi king and all the surprising discoveries he encountered during his journey.

Zhang Qian said, “The first was that Bactria had a different culture from the surrounding regions. The reason it was so different was that a conqueror, Alexander the Great, showed up there from the West. As a result, that place has Greek coins, Greek sculpture and Greek scripts. Even more surprising, I found that Bactrian objects, made of bamboo and cloth, were produced and sourced from a place South of China. Those goods are brought there, by merchants from a land to the Southeast, situated on a great river, where the inhabitants ride elephants when they go into battle.” “Interesting, Zhang. Even though the original mission was a failure, those observations you made were fascinating.” Emperor Wudi said. “As so, you will be sent again to attempt to trade with the people of Bactria, and don't come back without goods of my standards.” “Yes my sire”, Zhang Qian said.

Zhang Qian started his journey again, this time towards Wusun hoping to make some trades. As he made his way through the beautiful and diverse landscapes, Zhang Qian encountered cultures that dotted the trade routes. Zhang Qian met various merchants from various lands, each with different stories and goods that fascinated him. Silk, spices, precious gems like rubies with a colour like the fiery gates of hell, sapphires that were like looking into the deep sea, diamonds that glistened in the light, emerald and jade with the signature vibrant green colour filled their carts. Zhang Qian was very curious about everything and took note of the different languages and customs he encountered along the way.

“Wow!” Zhang Qian said, looking at the lush valleys of Wusun, “Hello? I'd like to make a trade.” Zhang Qian was captivated by their hospitality and unique weaving techniques, which valued colours and patterns he had never seen before. In return for his tales of his journey and the riches of China, which Zhang Qian brought with him, they were willing to barter fine fabrics and horses. As he sat around the campfire sharing meals, he felt a bond strengthening

between the kingdoms every second. As Zhang Qian ventured further west, he reached the bustling markets of Samarkand, a thriving oasis that served as a meeting place for merchants and travellers. The sights and sounds overwhelmed him. The air was thick with the scent of spices, and the vibrant colours of the silk dazzled his eyes. Here, merchants from Persia sell gems, India sells elephants and other exotic animals, and the Greco–Roman world sells jewellery. But they exchanged not just goods, but ideas, philosophies, and most importantly– dreams. Zhang Qian approached a group of Persian traders, skilled in the art of negotiation. He practised his bargaining skills, trading jade and silks from his homeland for fine and precisely made Persian carpets and valuable emeralds.

In the months that followed, trade became a symbol of collaboration and cultural exchange.

From the deserts of Central Asia to the coastal cities of the Mediterranean, the message spread: The Silk Road was not solely a highway for trade; it was also a place for understanding and respect among civilisations.

In that moment, amidst the covers of a vibrant and thriving empire, Zhang Qian realised that he was not just a messenger, he was a bridge; a start to a movement that would resonate through the ages, embodying the endless pursuit of connection. The Silk Road would not simply be about goods exchanged, but the stories of humanity that were woven into the fabric of history. Thus, the Silk Road rose and forever became something historical and groundbreaking in the timeline of humanity.

Shadows of the Silk Road

International College Hong Kong Secondary, Deacon, Stella – 12

The year was 1338.

The Black death was at its peak.
Millions were dead.

I was walking by the local clinic after grounding down my spices when I saw her. My mother, sobbing as she consulted our doctor. Her fists were clenched and pounding on the table and her face was written with utter despair. Tears ran down her face, glistening in the relentless sun and her face was scrunched up in pain and fear. Then I was worried. I rushed over, my mind a whirlpool of thoughts. Why would she be consulting an expensive doctor when we barely had enough money for food? Why would she have gone to him before even putting the goods she traded for at home, safe? My heart raced .

I arrived just as he had pierced her skin with the sharp knife I had seen him sharpening just moments ago. Blood flowed out of her arm, a thick stream of red that stained the dusty ground, turning it a dark red, like sumac . I heard the doctor's deep voice explaining how she had contacted the Black Death on her journey home. How she raced all the way back to see him. I took a shaky breath, breathing in the spicy, salty air of the clinic. The muddy floor spun underneath me. I felt absolutely helpless.

I remembered when this all started. I laughed when I was told. “ People die all the time from mysterious diseases. Why would you think this is different?” If only I knew back then what this horrible Black Death could do. Not just with the painful sores that throbbed day and night, depriving anyone from sleep. Not just the delirium that completely changed your beliefs of right and wrong, but also what it could do to you and your loved ones, knowing that the disease would eat away at who you once were, destroying you from the inside out. Knowing that there was nothing anyone could do. I was lost, trapped inside my own head.

Suddenly, somebody tapped on my shoulder. “Pierre, there is one thing that you could do. I have heard of a wonderful plague doctor. He is in Avignon. However, you would need to accompany your mother on the Silk Road and as your mother has proved, that can be very dangerous. ” Fear overwhelmed me. I had heard stories from the local merchants of the bandits that lurked in the desolate parts of the roads, of the long and hard journeys through the hot deserts in which few could survive, of the undying thirst and exhaustion and hunger and— I fell to my knees, overcome by a sudden guilt. My mother was the one dying and if I was scared it should have been of losing her. I whispered in a shaky voice, “We’ll leave tomorrow.”

The sun bore down on us, cracking the dusty red ground. My mouth was as dry as the air and the lack of water made me dizzy. As the ground spun beneath me, I saw faint lights ahead. I gasped in excitement. They were so faint that they were probably a day away, if not two, but they were hope, because with a village comes food, water, and a little bit of security. I shifted into a gallop, glancing behind me to make sure Mother was still fine. I could see the dark circles under her eyes, how sunken her cheeks looked, the lack of color in her skin and her lips. I remembered the healthy woman she once was and used the sadness as energy to get to the village. It had been days with no water and weeks with no food. The thought of just a baked potato, maybe coated in spices and maybe with a juicy steak next to it was enough to make my mouth water, and that was enough to hydrate me.

Dawn. Beautiful and quiet, as if the world was safe and fine. The sky glowed red, then orange, then a light blue with the full moon still visible. The air was crisp and clean and cold, icy against my skin which had been exposed to months of sun. We arrived at a sleeping village, nothing like our home, which was bustling and busy until late at night, and at the earliest hours of morning. Carcassonne, I later learned, was its name. We wandered the empty streets

until we found a young girl with sparkling blue eyes and a warm smile setting up her trading stand. Her eyes widened when she saw us. "Greetings, travelers! What can I interest you in today?" She welcomed us to sit down. " Water. Food" My mother croaked hoarsely. Carefully, I explained our situation. " Of course! I am so sorry." she said. Soon, steaming plates of rice and meat were in front of us, and water and dried meat and fruits in our trailer. We set down our spices as we left and thanked her for her hospitality. " Thank *you!* These spices are great! I wish you the best of luck on your journey, and hope to see you *both* again." She looked at me warily, and gratefully, I nodded back , and set off, leaving a trail of dust behind and nothing more.

I could see the life draining from Mother, and I tried to stay calm, but as the days went by, the situation proved to be more and more hopeless. I missed the woman from Carcassonne, her comforting words, her hospitality. Or perhaps I just missed feeling safe. The buboes in Mothers neck and armpits had grown to painful lumps that were hard to ignore, and the wagon was dripping with blood from the rasping coughs that filled the void of endless silence. I had to face it. My mother was dying. Tears welled in my eyes, but I forced them down. " No more tears shall be shed over this horrific Plague, or it will finally have defeated us." I whispered to myself. Suddenly, the rasping became worse. I looked at my mother, and feared the worst. Then it all went dark.

I woke to a splitting pain in my head. My mother was crying. The food we had was gone. Our horse was gone. "W-What happened?" I asked, frantically getting up. " A bandit. I-I tried to warn you I'm so sorry, Pierre. I'm so sorry." I saw her sunken cheeks, her cracked lips, her dry skin and her swollen lymph nodes. "Mother, I am the one who is in the wrong. I mistreated you, I neglected you, I am letting you suffer!" I screamed, tears hot on my cheeks. " Child, I am sorry for leaving you." she whispered and finally succumbed to the darkness. Finally, she was free. Free from the pain, from the suffering. At first I was angry, angry at her for leaving me, angry at myself for letting her suffer for so long, angry at the world for causing her pain. Then, as I hiked in the hot sun and arrived at Avignon, I accepted that she was gone, and rejoiced that her suffering was over. I never returned to my home village, as the pain was too great, but I dreamt of it every night until the memories started to fade. I was clinging on to them like the last wisps of sunlight before a cold, ruthless night.

Around this time was when I found God. He saved me from the darkest hours of the night, and brought me to the cool moments before dawn. Thus, here I stand as Pope Clement VI to the people of Avignon. As God is my witness, I will make sure nobody ever has to suffer the same as my mother did, or suffer the same loss that I did. Please remember, good people, that God is always there for you.

Years later...

The pain is too strong. I am saddened that going through the same suffering is the only thing that brings her memories back to me. I hear her everywhere, her last words ring in my ears. *I am sorry for leaving you.* What choice did you have, Mother? *I am sorry for letting you suffer.* You suffered more than I, Mother. *I love you, child.* Mother, I fear love is a curse, for in loving me, you held on and suffered more than necessary, and by loving you, the pain of losing you was greater than any pain I ever experienced before, including the pain of death. *Child, one day you will understand that pain is the price of love.* If that is true, why do people love? *Because for some people, that price is worth paying.* Voices filled the room, whispers that grew louder and louder with every moment. I gripped on to life, refusing to succumb. Darkness grew in the corners of my eyes, but I fought to stay awake, until I slipped off into the emptiness of death. *I finally understand.* I whispered softly. *See you soon, Mother. I love you.*

The Cloak of the Curses

International College Hong Kong Secondary, Huang, Calum – 11

It was scorching hot out on the long, vast trail. The sun was shining more brightly than it had ever been, as me and hundreds of other traders were crossing the Karakum, the desert leading to the great city of Samarkand. My name is Jerome Chang, and me and lots of other traders were hanging out in animal drawn wagons, talking about what we would trade when we got to Samarkand. I have heard wondrous things about this city, like how the architecture gleamed with domes the size of elephants, and how many merchants would be there, willing to trade rare and valuable items. As the caravan slowly advanced through the treacherous desert, it soon fell evening, and then soon enough, it became night. All of the wagons stopped, and everybody got out. We all started setting camp up, and tying up the animals, before having dinner, and going to bed. As I climbed inside the cozy tent, I immediately fell asleep, unable to think about what would happen tomorrow at Samarkand.

When we awoke the next morning, I was first greeted by a blinding ray of sunshine, and after breakfast and untying the animals, we set off again through the tan, hot desert. After many more long hours of traveling, we finally made it to Samarkand. The things I have heard about the city were true, there were magnificent domes on buildings and thousands of merchants trying to make deals with people. I decided to get started trading, so I went around the chaotic street, trying to find anyone who would trade anything with me, but alas, nobody wanted to trade with me.

Until, a voice called from an alley way, and hissed: "Psst, hey, you, come here!" I followed the voice that had come from the dark alleyway, and when I reached it, I saw who the voice belonged to. It belonged to a short, old man, wearing a dark, silk cloak, which was covering his nearly bald head. He smiled a sinister grin. "Sorry, but who are you exactly?" I asked. "Oh, just some old merchant willing to trade you something of value..." croaked the old man. "What've you got then?" I asked again. The man started to pull up a wooden crate beside him, and started digging through it, to pull out a fine, silk cloak, with the colour of brown. "This is a very fine cloak, made by some of the most skilled tailors in China." Said the man. "I will take it." I replied.

So I gave him some spices in return, and headed back out onto the bustling street with the cloak wrapped around my body, where I strolled back to the caravan and we headed back out onto the trail. It soon started to become evening, so we decided to stop at a caravanserai, an inn for travellers who needed rest. When we arrived, we were taken into the fortified wall surrounding the place, and tied up the animals. When it soon fell at night, we all headed upstairs to bed, where I hit my bed and fell into a deep sleep.

I had a horrible nightmare last night, where all of my best friends and family were lying in a forest, dead. I was down on my knees, weeping in the darkness.

When I awoke the next morning, sweat was running down my body, as if I had just ran through the desert. When I went downstairs, what I saw nearly made me faint. One of my closest friends, Shu, was lying on a stretcher, being taken away outside of the courtyard to a waiting wagon, when suddenly, a man near the gate started to walk towards me. He had a short beard, and was wearing a turban on his head. He was the caravan doctor. "What's going on?" I asked worryingly. "I am afraid your friend was killed last night." said the doctor. Tears started to flood my eyes. "But how?" I asked soberly. "Nobody knows how he was killed." Sighed the doctor. "But he wasn't stabbed, poisoned or frightened." More tears were filling my eyes now. "I've got to go now, the man said sadly. He started heading towards the wagon. Climbed on, and the wagon left, and I watched them, until they were out of sight.

For the rest of the day, I couldn't focus on riding my camel, and kept toppling off. All that I could think of was Shu. I was devastated about his death. When we finally stopped to set up camp in the evening, I never touched the food I was given, and went straight to bed. It took a long time for me to fall asleep, and by the time I fell asleep, it was one o'clock in the morning. I awoke again at dawn, to find a nasty surprise. My brother, Bob, was lying motionless in the tent, as if he were dead. Minutes later, the doctor and some other travelers barged inside the tent, all with worried

faces. The doctor began examining Bob. After about ten minutes of examining him, he finally announced: "I am sad to tell you that your brother has unfortunately been killed like your friend." At that moment, almost my whole world was turned upside down.

"Wha... what?" I stammered. "Yes, your brother has been sadly killed, but like your friend, he hasn't been stabbed, poisoned, or frightened." The doctor said. Seconds later, Bob was put onto a stretcher, and carried out to a waiting wagon. As Bob was loaded onto the wagon, tears were streaming down my face, and as they left, I couldn't bear to look at them leave.

After many long hours of traveling across the scorching desert, we finally made it to the nearest caravanserai, where I skipped dinner once again, and went straight up to bed.

The next morning, when I thought things couldn't get any worse, one of my fellow travellers gave me an envelope. It was from home. As I carefully opened the envelope, what I read was the most horrid thing I have ever received.

"Dear Jerome, I am very sorry to inform you that your mother has unfortunately been killed last night. Her funeral will be in three days, so if you could come, that would be great of you. Best wishes, Dr.Un."

After reading that letter, I was on the verge of breaking down. When we began to leave the caravanserai, all I wanted to do was bring back my friends and family that I had lost. As I was climbing into a wagon, I sat on something. That something was a book, and not just any book, it was a book about curses. I got this a few months ago. I thought this book might help me. All my closest friends and family being killed felt like a curse. I opened the book, and went to the page where dying curses were. *"Dying curses are caused by a cloak, known as the cloak of the curses. It is the colour of brown, and is sold to any soul unlucky enough to decide and wear it. Every night, the wearer's friends and family die in their sleep every night. The only known way to break the curse is to challenge the evil spirits that lay inside the cloak, otherwise the wearer's friends and family will keep on dying, until the wearer's life ends."* At that moment I knew what I had to do.

When we finally arrived at the nearest caravanserai and all my fellow travelers fell asleep, I snuck down stairs into the courtyard, with the cloak hanging from my arm, and set the cloak down. Then, after I checked the coast was clear, it was time. Time to get my family and friends back. "Great spirits, I challenge you to a fight to the death. If I win, you must promise me to bring back my dear friends and family. If you win, you can keep killing off all the people I care about." I said. Suddenly, the cloak started to move slightly, and as if on cue, a ghostly figure appeared from the cloak. The figure had razor sharp teeth, a bald head, and a grim smile. He began to talk. "I accept." He said grimly. Soon, a brutal battle had begun.

The evil spirit blasted me with a blur of orange light. The ray was so powerful that it made me fall to the ground. "Looks like this is the end of your loved ones..." The spirit said. Would this be the end of the people I loved? Anger boiled inside of me. I glared at him in the eye. Suddenly, he exploded. Literally. Nothing was left of him. I had defeated him with my love for my loved ones. Suddenly, lots of people appeared out of thin air. They were my friends and family, all safe and alive.

Trade Good

International College Hong Kong Secondary, Leung, Sophie – 12

When the slave finally grew old enough to be discarded, dismissed by the mere flick of a woman's hand, she burst into a fit of giggles.

The other servants whispered to each other loudly, thinking her mad as she was dragged out of the room, still laughing, clutching her sides as if they were the only thing holding her together. The inferiority of their positions did nothing to soften the blow of their tongues; their remarks were ruthless and as gratuitous as gossip tends to be.

That particular slave was a nobody, perhaps a prized possession at one point, now reduced to another abandoned plaything. Her skin, an exotic brown hue marking her as Kunlun, had always set her apart from the lighter-skinned Chinese women. Her lack of a voice only fuelled the rumours. If she had friends, they did not speak up on her behalf.

There had always been murmurs, and at the news of her strange breakdown, they spread like wildfire. With each new retelling, the story grew a little more contorted, a little more dramatic, and the Kunlun's bout of overzealousness, described by one witness as 'cackling like a possessed woman's', was quickly spun into a tale of demons and curses.

Accounts differed, but it was generally agreed upon that, enraged at her dismissal, the slave had unleashed a number of vicious curses on the madam and the madam's family. Ludicrous, maybe, if one thought too hard about it, but this version was preferable, easier to comprehend. Nobody

Brazen as that display of disrespect may have been, the punishment allocated to the slave was lenient. A rare wave of pity might've crossed the madam's heart; some fondness may have lingered. Either way, the woman got off with but a flogging or two, and life moved on.

Even after many a day had passed since the incident, it was still only silence that greeted her whenever she stepped into a room, the weight of gazes pressing down on her and then shifting away almost guiltily when she turned her head to look. Feet shuffled away at her approach, prayers muttered in silence when there could be no backing away, yet the dull-eyed Kunlun did not so much as spare them a second glance.

The more callous maids made a habit of picking on her, going out of their way to make life difficult for the slave. Unfortunately for them, their attempts to rile up the woman were met with virtually no resistance. For every time she was tripped, she got up without complaint. For every broken plate, the lashings were met with a steady, unblinking gaze, frustrating her tormentors with her endless indifference.

But... what if one day they saw her for who she truly was? Not the wicked servant others had painted her as, but a farmer's daughter whose life was a persistent thrum of longing, for damp earth streaking her fingers, the carefree joys of days long past. Would they have understood then?

The child in her wanted to say yes, naive till the last second, but that was too foolish a thought for someone who'd endured this long. Even if those servants had borne witness to all the nights her loneliness had gotten the better of her, seen how the tear tracks on her cheeks had glinted in the moonlight, the Kunlun knew it was never a good idea to lay bare your vulnerabilities in front of these women.

She'd learnt that the hard way when she'd first stepped foot into the mansion, led by the grasp of a stranger in a foreign land, staring boring holes into her crudely crafted armour. Seven-year-olds know only of hunger and cold and pain. She, with the hollow cheeks and flickering hope in her eyes, never stood a chance against the barbed

comments her ears adapted to recognising. It was only after the child had let some of those arrows lodge in her heart, after she'd failed to fight the adults who'd stripped her of her innocence, that she finally learnt to raise walls and never let them down.

Homesickness was a constant plague, but the Javanese slave never allowed herself to cry too long, lest her eyes become red and puffy. Even now, two decades after she'd been taken, the pull she felt towards her homeland only intensified with age. The woman dreamed often of her family: her mother with her weary shoulders and tireless hands, her father's embrace, the relentless nagging of her three older brothers. She missed them so bad, her chest felt like it'd split open some days.

In the morning, faded from memory. The faces of her loved ones had warped over time, their features distorting like ripples in water. Had the tip of her mother's nose been pointier? The gap-toothed smiles of her village friends— had she imagined them correctly? All those little moments, all taken for granted.

Yet, when the flashbacks came, there were a specific few that were crystal-clear in the slave's mind. *I wish you weren't my mom.* The last words she had screamed at her mother as she raced away, grass brushing against bare toes, angry tears spilling from the corners of her eyes. The fight that'd seemed like the end of the world at the time, so trivial now that she knew how real pain felt.

The sun had been on the edge of the horizon, obscured by dark clouds. It should've rained that day. Her mother's voice, a resounding boom in her head, stern but not cruel, the echoes asking her *is this really what you want.* It hadn't been. The little girl, spoiled as she may have been, had taken no pleasure in hurting feelings.

At that instance, the right thing to do would've been to turn back, apologise, and perhaps she could've grown into the perfect daughter all little Javanese girls are expected to become. Instead, stubbornness carried her feet further, past men working the rice paddies, into the patch of forest bordering her little village.

How the hopelessness had welled up in her heart when the bearded men snatched her away, hands clamping over her mouth to muffle her screams. Her mother's warning to stay away from strangers briefly flashed across her mind, then her uncles' chatter about the new routes being established, foreigners arriving from distant countries.

The Kunlun cursed the route-makers with fierce loathing as the slavers threw her belowdeck, chained to the wall alongside her fellow prisoners. Even after those miserable months aboard the ship, her nose still stung at the faintest hint of briny war. The smell alone was enough to make her lose her appetite.

The sailors would forget about them for days at a time. The girl's ribcage jutted sharply out, her skin more translucent than she'd ever pictured it being. There were no tears for weeping: dehydration made sure of that.

Then came the marketplace. The customers, strange men speaking a strange tongue, stopped by the slavers, inspecting the quality of the merchandise. A 15-year-old, a 9-year-old gone, and here came a man with the poofiest sleeves to ever exist. To one of the bearded men, he handed a bag of jingling golden coins, and with his other hand, reached towards the child herself.

The child shrank back initially, glancing back at the other captives with their forlorn expressions, the men who'd kidnapped her. There wasn't anywhere else to go, was there?

The man brought her to a bored-looking woman lounging on a couch, whose eyes lit up like a toddler being presented with a new toy.

The lady treated the girl as a pet, pointing out her tawny skin as if she were flaunting some exotic specimen. She'd make the Kunlun dance for guests, blathering on in Chinese as the music played.

Gradually, the slave grew older, and the madam lost interest, demoting her to a simple dancer, simultaneously a wound and a relief. Despite the older woman's vices, the girl had a deep-rooted devotion to her, one that had never completely vanished, even after years of being under her foot.

As her movements got wilder, her footing clumsier, she risked relegation. She hadn't intended to be dragged out laughing quite so hard, but it seemed that reason had deserted her in the moment. It always did.

The unfolding of the slave's remaining days is unimportant. Whether or not she lived out the rest of her life wallowing in her own unhappiness, whether her bloodline continued in China some way or another, her tale is a tragedy. That woman was one of many, to her owners, akin to a speck of dust, inconsequential, disposable. In the end, the leash was still attached to the collar. In the end, she never took back the future that'd been stolen from her.

In the end, she was just another trade good.

Diary of a Time Traveler

International College Hong Kong Secondary, Richardson, Emmeline – 12

Dear Diary,

I'm not used to starting diaries but I thought that I probably should, considering that what I have experienced on the Silk Road, no other human will ever experience again. I should start at the beginning. I love tinkering with machinery in my garage and I love scifi novels. So a couple of years ago I began to merge my interests together after I read a scifi story about a man who invented a time machine. From then on I became obsessed with traveling through time. I read every book and article, watched every documentary and listened to every news broadcast on the subject. I also became obsessed with building a time machine. As soon as I came home from school I would work on it, tinkering and troubleshooting, but as hard as I tried I couldn't get it to work. For a while I gave up on the project until one day I noticed an article about a scientist from the World Science Organization (WSO) who was also working on a time machine. The article stated that she felt she was close to completion but had a problem and needed some solutions. So she had announced that she was holding a competition for kids all over to give her some possible solutions about how she could make her time machine work and the prize was a trip to her lab to see the time machine. Immediately I knew that I had to see the time machine and started researching everything I could to find a solution. I worked for weeks, anxiously checking the news every day to see if a winner had been chosen. Finally, one day, two months after I had seen the article, I felt like I had found the solution. Breathlessly I submitted it and waited hopefully. Suddenly a week later I received an email from the WSO, of all the solutions submitted for the time machine contest, the scientist had picked mine! I was so excited to see a real time machine. A month later, on the day arranged, I was breathless with nervous excitement; the day had finally come! After a one hour drive I walked into the WSO and was immediately awed by how big it was. It was a huge ten story building with a different kind of lab on every floor and as I went up I could see into them and saw gleaming state of the art equipment and scientists busily working on their latest experiments. It was the greatest thing I had ever seen in my life. But the time machine scientist's lab took my breath away. It was the largest lab in the whole building, spanning the whole tenth floor with five different rooms all full of even shinier, more expensive equipment and full of assistant scientists. And suddenly, I saw it: the time machine. It was a large shiny silver box with a huge red logo in the centre, big enough to fit about two people squeezed inside. Suddenly a high voice called out "Hello there" and I jumped in surprise because a woman had suddenly appeared right behind me. "Sorry to surprise you" she said, "I just can't seem to help sneaking up on people, I'm just naturally sneaky." "Oh that's okay" I replied, "are you the scientist?" "Yes," she replied, "I'm here to give you a tour of the time machine and the lab." "Can we go for a ride in the time machine?" I asked, "Maybe later, but if we do then we can only go back about twenty years, it's too dangerous to take a child back further." We then went to the experimentation room of the lab to take a tour and I learnt all about what other things they did in the lab but I was only half listening, what I really wanted to do was go back in time. Finally, after lots of explanations about science and engineering that I wasn't really listening to, it was time to go in the time machine. "Okay," said the scientist, "we are only going to go back about 20 years because we haven't tested further than that." "Okay," I said reluctantly because I had really wanted to go back a hundred years but from the voice of the scientist I knew there would be no chance. When we had gotten into the time machine and buckled ourselves in, the scientist said, "because you were the one who gave me the solution to help me build the time machine, you can push the button." I looked at the wall and saw that it was full of buttons, all marked neatly with numbers. "Push the one that says 20," said the scientist. "And remember, we don't know where we'll end up." I reached out to push the button marked 20 but something came over me all of a sudden and instead of pushing it I pushed the button marked DANGER 1,400 years. The time machine whooshed and I heard the sound of the scientist screaming as we shot through time at the speed of light.

As we flew up into the air I realized I had never been told how long it takes to time travel 1,400 years into the past but luckily, in approximately 20 seconds, I got an answer. As soon as we landed the scientist threw open the door of the time machine and we unclipped our seatbelts and tumbled onto muddy ground. I got up, checked myself for injuries and then looked for the scientist. I saw her about 10 metres from me and went over to her. When she saw me she started yelling like crazy about what a fool I was to press the 1,400 years button and get us transported to the Silk Road. I tried to calm her down by saying how sorry I was and how I didn't know what had come over me but anything I said only made her more angry. Seeing that I could do nothing, I tried to get my bearings but all I could see was miles of dust coloured grassland, towering mountains and some specks in the distance. But suddenly those specks started to get bigger and I could see that they were actually horse drawn carts and there were people driving them! I ran to them and asked them where I was but suddenly one of them pulled out a dagger and said, "you're on the Silk Road and we want your silks and tea." Then I realized that the carts were laden with expensive looking silks and vases. Suddenly I remembered that the Silk Road was an old trade route famous for transporting silk, porcelain and tea across China to Europe, I had read about in one of my history books. I also remembered that there were ruthless bandits along the road who stole from traders. I knew that these people must be bandits so I started running for the time machine, only to discover that the scientist had recovered and was also running to the time machine about 10 metres in front of me calling, "I'm sorry for this but I have to take the time machine and save myself." "I'm sure you'll be fine living on the Silk Road." I had no intention of living there, so I used every last bit of energy I had and ran to the time machine, tackling the scientist before she could press the button. But the bandits had caught up and had grabbed the scientist! Suddenly my body reacted by itself and I closed the door and buckled myself in, quickly pressing the present day button. The last sound I heard was the scientist screaming before I was back in the present day. Before I got out of the time machine I sabotaged all the controls so no one could ever use the time machine again and ran out of the lab. When I got home I just wanted to forget the whole experience but I thought that maybe the scientist would want people to remember her time machine and how she got stuck on the silk road forever. And that's why I've written this diary entry.

Cruelty

International College Hong Kong Secondary, Sze, Zannie – 13

Screaming children, burning buildings, blazing fire everywhere...

And a man.

He is not any ordinary man, dressed in a gold-embroidered Chinese silk robe, his sword gleaming in his hand. Behind him stood a horse with a silver mane and coat. Each second they edged closer to my hiding spot—then pain.

Pain surged around my body, and my head spun. The whole world disappeared—no solid ground beneath me. Voices faded into distant murmurs, then silence.

I plunged into a world of unending night.

To a world where the daylight slowly dissolved into darkness.

~

Click.

Clack.

Click.

The first thing I saw since they chained me for sale was darkness and coldness. It was not inviting at all. “Wha—?” At first, I didn’t even recognize my voice. It was raspy, my throat hurt, and everything was wrong.

“Shut up, Mouse,” answered a thorny voice.

Mouse? Who is that? Is he talking to me? All these thoughts raced through my mind. My throat tightened as I tried to speak; instead, a faint whimper escaped my lips.

“I bought you to serve. Not to bother me with your whimpering noises; even if I were, I would buy a beaten dog instead,” he laughed as my face grew hot with embarrassment. “It is your soul I seek—I will drag it into darkness and despair, and cast it into hell. There’s no need for any type of light here. Stay where you belong and know your place.”

My eyes welled with unshed tears, and I felt like I had been slapped in the face, hard. The only sound I could hear was the clatter of hooves on the stone. Just when I was about to wonder where I was, the man yanked me out of the carriage by the collar as if I was a doll and shook me.

“You will be serving in my gardens, pulling weeds, tilling soil. Easy enough for a mouse like you, you will be fed twice a day, three if the head steward thinks you did well. The dorms are there, you shall not rest until the head steward, or I deem fit.” He paused and pointed to the greenery. “You shall only call me, ‘Da-ye’, or ‘Master’ at all times, no exceptions. If I find you speak of my name, the consequences will be severe. The walls have eyes, the wind hears. You hear me, Worm?”

“Yes.” I replied. The man glared at me, and I quickly added, “Da-ye.” The word tasted like ash in my mouth, and he took one last glance at me before leaving me on the floor. I walked towards the gardens muttering under my breath, “Past all thoughts of if or when, no use resisting or backward glances, I’m trapped here and escaping might cost my life.”

I am utterly alone in the darkness.

~

“Mouse”, “Worm” were all the names he gave me; they were meaningless. Those words could only be used against me. Sounds.

“You there! Did I not say anything about cleaning this corridor until I was satisfied? Why are you here in The Great Halls?” Master yelled. “Should I sell your weak form to the markets? Perhaps a trip on the Silk Road would shut your mouth?”

I shook my head desperately, dropped onto my knees and scrubbed the tiles below me.

“You are useless, have I not asked you to scrub the corridors?! I have had enough of your snivelling, you are a waste of resources!” Master yanked me to my feet and chained my hands behind my head before pushing me onto a cart stacked with goods.

Master covered the cart with a thick tapestry; since then, I did not know how many hours I had been inside the cart. It seemed like days, or even weeks, before my stomach growled in protest.

I missed my family, I missed my friends, I missed the light the world once granted me.

At some time of the day, the cart began to roll. I screamed in fear, hoping someone would hear me, a servant, a guard or perhaps the driver of the cart? “Da-ye, please, I beg you,” I begged for forgiveness, I begged for mercy, but no reply came.

I was devastated.

~

“And what’s in here?” Gruff voices awoke me, and I saw inspectors at the southern borders peering in at me.

I whimpered in fear and pressed myself against a bag of wheat, hoping to melt against it. The inspectors held me up as if I weighed nothing. I thrashed against his hold, chains rattled and clanged against each other. I was hoping to escape, but instead of slipping free, the inspector backhanded me, stinging my face. Tears welled in my eyes, and my cheeks bloomed bright red.

“Take this scrum and throw it into the slave pits. The Council would love to have some new faces,” announced the inspector proudly.

“Hope this thing survives the Silk Road,” snickered the skinny one.

The Silk Road? The thought of the Silk Road loomed over me, filled with entertained merchants, travelling roads that never end and death. So many deaths. I panicked, thrashed around, biting and kicking.

The inspectors grabbed hold of me and pressed their blades against my throat, and threatened with a deadly whisper, “If you move again, I shall cut your throat.”

I paused and went limp, letting the inspectors gag me and toss me inside a cage full of men. It was dark, the candles barely offered any light, and the stench of sweat, filth, and fear mixed together invaded my nostrils like a suffocating fog.

“Captured or punished?” asked a slave.

I did not know how to reply, I just shook my head and sat on the snow-dusted ground. Everyone huddled together, preserving as much heat as possible, except for me, who was too busy cowering, and I regretted it.

The nights were freezing, the temperature dropped below freezing, I shivered and wrapped myself tighter with my arms, my lips turned blue, and my eyes watered from the biting wind. A man with a long beard and rags as

clothing, he broke out of the huddle and came to me. Offered a hand and carried me towards the group. I was squeezed tightly by others, but it was worth it. I closed my eyes, let the warmth seep into my skin, and got a restful night of sleep.

“Up you get!” shouted a guard outside.

Everyone in my cage scrambled up. I did the same, but just a fraction of a second too slow. The guard glanced at me and pulled me out. I tried to scream, but the gag forbade it. I tried to run, but the chains held me.

I was chained to other slaves with a wooden plank and forced onto the Silk Road. We were forced to march together while the guards were on horseback. If one fumbles, the whole group falls, and then we get punished. Whipped in the head or a painful kick from a rearing horse, not many people ever made it across the Silk Road alive.

Every midnight and noon, they deemed that there were fewer bandits during this time, so we would stop. Let the horses rest, build camp, eat and have a bit of rest. This is also the time when there are the fewest guards guarding us and the time we have a bit of hard-earned freedom in loose chains.

We would walk around the camp with our loose chains rattling. They would give us a bit of water and some scraps as food. We were given just enough to survive, never enough to be full. The food was horrible, mouldy, or rotten, but none mattered when we were starving.

This would repeat every day: walk, camp, food, freedom. This was a never-ending cycle of torment. This has repeated every day for two months, until I decided that I had had enough.

During the night, when most guards were sleeping, my chains were loose. I used a stick from a nearby bush and started to pick the lock on my chain. It clicked and unlocked.

I was free.

Or I thought so, dust kicking up as I ran. My feet started to bleed, but none mattered when you could smell the freedom. Everyone panicked, guards reached for their swords as the horn blew, the slave patrollers whipped their whips wildly as they chased me.

I ran and tripped over a rock. The guards surrounded me, their shadows loomed over me, and I shrank into a ball, hoping to disappear. The slave patrollers came and brought their whips down onto my body. My thin tunic ripped, and blood seeped through as they whipped me over and over again. Lash after lash, over and on top of different scars.

I reached out for a distracted guard's dagger and decided to end my life with it.

I held the handle tightly ready to stab myself in the heart and end my life of relentless torture and despair.

~

[End]

Really, Royalty?

International College Hong Kong Secondary, Wong, Beatrice – 12

Her back ached like being stabbed by a thousand needles. Her hands trembled with both tremendous pain and exhaustion. A single drop of salty tear ran down her cheek. Luxyue carefully picked up the last red pokka-dotted mushroom and placed it gently in her basket. As she made her way to the General, the pain of the others around her, the suffering, consumed her with guilt. This was just the way of commoners around here: the way they survived and clung to life. Shaking a little with fear, Luxyue walked into the tent with the basket of soft mushrooms, sweet tomatoes, and golden potatoes. The General was a ruthless, unforgiving, and selfish woman; she was the kind who would chop your head off for not listening or asking for a break.

She said, "Resting was only for royalty." Her name? Gretchen Liu. She was in charge of the foraging area. Slowly looking up, Luxyue offered her the cocoa-colored, hand-woven basket. Without looking twice, Gretchen snatched the basket out of her hands, almost dropping some mushrooms.

"Took you long enough, you little brat!" anger was boiling up inside Luxyue, but she bit her tongue and clenched her fist; she could not afford to lose this opportunity. Gretchen tossed her a handful of coins "You got your payment ain't ya? Now get you're being a real tosser", and with that she left with her head held low.

Luxyue walked through the town in her beige, dusty, torn clothes. Her shining, black hair, despite having spent all day in the field, was long and silky smooth; her eyes were emerald green and glimmered like stars in the sunlight. She wandered through the quiet, gentle town. There were brick-red roofs, and the houses were like giant temples. When she got home, she immediately went out to the back garden, leaving the coins in an old, wooden cabinet, to see her grandma. Luxyue's parents left when she was little, so she had lived with her grandma ever since. Looking around, she found her grandma by the Koi pond feeding the fish. She sat down right next to her.

"Isn't today wonderful? And the fish are swimming happily today," exclaimed her grandma, "I heard Koi grant wishes, go ahead, it never hurts to try, darling!" Luxyue hesitated for a minute before silently making a wish in her mind, "I wish we could have a better life.", and for a moment she thought to herself "I knew this wasn't worthwhile" and she was about to leave, when she felt a hard push behind her. Luxyue screamed at the top of her lungs. She fell face-first into the mossy, rocky Koi pond...

When her eyes finally opened, all around her Luxyue could see beams of glistening amethyst purple and diamond blue light dancing and twirling as if they were in a ballroom. Stars played happily around her like kids in a playground. Luxyue was dumbfounded, yet it only made her more curious about the place around her. Just when she was about to go further, she saw a bright shining light gleaming in rays of the cleanest pearl white. It drew her in like a magnet; the closer she got, the more curious she got. At the corner of her eye, she noticed a ray of light unlike any other; it was blood-red, and the mist surrounding it wasn't white but black. It was almost as if it was telling her, 'don't go in,' but as the rebel she was, it only made her want to go in even more. Before she could react, a strong magnetic wave pulled her into the beam of white light, she wondered, "What was that?"

Luxyue felt a hard thud, something, bang against her arm. She opened her eyes only to find she landed in a soft patch of bright red roses. Now she was next to a pond in an unfamiliar garden in a completely mysterious place. Out of the blue, she heard a voice, a deep yet a little frightened voice,

"Oh dear, Lady Rosevalt? Oh My Days! Lady Rosevalt, there you are! Your counselor, Sophie, is waiting for you." Luxyue looked around, clearly star-struck, and then the mysterious man led her to a glamorous hallway that took them to a room. On the way, she entered a grand mansion, probably twenty times the size of her home.

There were intricate patterns carved and painted in gold, and plants in pots that looked like it was worth more than her yearly salary.

“What is this place?” Luxyue thought to herself, “And Lady Rosevalt? Where did that come from?” Headswimming, she walked into the room, in the room was a woman mid-thirties wearing a luxurious, beautiful black dress and had silky smooth blonde hair,

“Oh, Lux darling, there you are! We have much to discuss, like your coronation. I know things have been hard ever since your parents’ passing. Now, before we continue any further, you must take a bath. Your hair is all muddy, and your clothes are torn!” Luxyue’s face turned as red as a tomato. She was in a palace, a mansion, a place she'd never seen before, yet the people there seemed to act like they'd known her since birth. A servant led her to the washroom to clean up, and they entered a beautiful, fancy, pink room inside. Luxyue opened a door that revealed an enormous wardrobe with so many gowns that she thought she probably couldn't even wear them all.

Elegantly, Luxyue walked out of the room, still trying to get the hang of wearing heels. She wobbled, she tripped, and finally, she made her way back to the room. Luxyue wore a stunning rose gold dress with very detailed embroidery of roses as red as candy apples, forest green vines, and blazing yellow western tanagers. It was not like anything she had worn before.

“Darling, you look absolutely wonderful!” exclaimed Sophie as she smiled.

“For your coronation, would you like the color theme to be blue or yellow?” Luxyue thought for a second, “Vermilion,” she answered, “Oh... that's an unusual color, but it'll do.” So, for the rest of the day Luxyue was planning a coronation, she didn't know about, with people she didn't know, to rule a land she'd never been to.

“Lady Rosevalt, I have a letter for you in the mail.” Luxyue looked baffled. “A letter?” she thought. A beige envelope with a ruby red seal was handed to her. Ever so cautiously, she opened it inside a letter addressed to her, written by her grandma. She was completely dumbfounded. Her grandma, How did she find her? Inside it read :

“ To : my dearest Luxy,

Hi darling, enjoying your new life? I always thought there was something off about that pond. Anywho I do hope you got your wish you longed for. Have you ever wondered why your mother named you Luxyue? It means ‘light moon,’ showing the cross between day and night. Although I must warn you, the Queen is not who she seems. Never trust her, and most importantly— remember that.

Love, Nana.”

Luxyue was very irritated. The most important part was smudged; it looked like a tea stain to her. What was the most important part? And the queen? There was no queen. Then the silence was shattered BANG, the palacedoors came crashing down.

“Princess Lux Rosevalt, you are under arrest for the murder of Queen Maria Valois IV.”

Illusions

International School of Beijing, Liu, Shu Meng Maisie – 13

I'm dying. That is my only thought as I scramble behind Master in the vast desert. It feels like a piece of gauze is covering my throat, and I barely manage to utter the words:

"Where are we, Master?"

It has been five days since we ran out of water, seven days since we got separated from the traveling group, and four weeks since we set foot outside of Jiayu Gate. I know I should be grateful to be able to experience such a learning opportunity. Poor teenage boys usually are on the streets begging for food. My family is poor, and it is my privilege for my musical talents to be recognized by the Xue family. I am assigned by the Xues to introduce foreign instruments and pieces to them. The echo of music from the desert can be heard from every corner of the Tang empire, hence, Master and I travel on the Silk Road, an attempt to complete our mission.

The dryness on my tongue is unbearable, even drops of blood from my cracked lips would satisfy me. As I walk, I feel like I'm floating, and my feet are walking backwards. Every nerve inside my body screams for me to rest. The next thing I know is the unpleasant feel of sand in my nostrils and darkness.

"Wake up, Ying Lu!" shouts Master urgently.

I feel like I'm in a dream, everything seems to be in a brighter shade, and the desert is cooler than before. *Perhaps, it is just the feeling of waking up after fainting, nothing special.* Master's eyes, which are normally dull, twinkles with excitement and joy. He points to the distance, and I struggle to find what he is pointing at. A tiny orange light dances in the horizon. It is not the light of the setting sun, but firelight!

At a closer distance, I can make out the outline of figures gathered around the fireside. Soon, one of them noticed me and Master. He beckons us forward. The man is wearing a helmet, and his muscular body is covered in armors. *He's a caravan guard; we had one, when Master and I did not get left behind by our caravan.* Around the caravan guard are a dozen merchants. They all have different types of clothing, some wear masks, some wear turbans, and some wear kaftans. The merchants are kind and invited Master and me to join their caravan. Suddenly, tears of happiness flood my eyes, and I silently wipe them off my cheeks.

The howling wind blows my dark hair in awkward directions. The day was hot, and the night sky lies like a warm blanket over the desert. I lie on my back in the sand, stomach full of foreign delicacies. The most memorable one is from the Persian merchant. The Persian merchant's offering is a bag of dried grapes. I have never heard of the fruit "grape" before, but it is the most scrumptious thing I ever tasted. The outer shell is flavorless, and the inside is sweet. It has a chewy texture, which makes me crave for more. *I hope someday they'll sell dried grapes in Cheng'an!* I clutch a spice gifted to me by the Indian merchants when they were preparing for their religious ritual. It is a small piece of sandalwood. The scent is so calming that when the scent faded, I asked for more of these woods.

"The scent cannot last forever, no matter how much you get." the Indian merchants said in unison.

The Indian merchants are all kneeling towards the west with their hands clasped. They lighted incenses in the sand and starts reciting verses. I am surprised. At home, we believe in Taoism. I remember the time when the Xue family invited Taoists to perform a funeral ceremony. The Taoists wore yellow robes and black hats with detailed sewing of landscapes and animals on them. They used ritual objects like chimes and paper offerings to guide the spirits to afterlife. Some of the servants were weeping. *Is it because their master dead or is it because they will lose their job?* That was my innocent thought four years ago.

"That is Buddhism." one merchant explained.

I wander around aimlessly, and that's when I see them, a pile of instruments. Next to the camels are harps, lutes, drums, and double-reed pipes. I suddenly remember my mission as the conductor of the Xue family's private musical group, their Yuefu. I pick up a lute; it has a pear-shaped wooden body and four strings.

"That is Persian!" exclaims a Sogdian merchant.

I am so surprised by the outburst that I drop the instrument. The merchant screams and rushes to retrieve the instrument.

"Stop snooping around! What do you know about music?" shrieks the Sogdian merchant.

Instantly, my face explodes with heat. It feels as if my brain is flooding with boiling blood. *What do I know about music? I happen to be the youngest conductor working for the richest family in Cheng'an! I will show him what I know about music!* Around my belt is my only possession, a wooden flute. It was handed down to me by my mother after she passed away. And it is the only thing I brought from home after being sold to the Xues. I place my lip on the familiar lip plate, the smoothness calms me down and I play my favorite song. It is a lyrical song of spring, made for a flute soloist. It is the song that I used to play on the streets for food, which helped my family survive through the winter.

After I finish the song, the Sogdian merchant nods his approval and picks up his instrument. It looks like my flute but is made from bamboo and has less fingerholes.

"Hengchui, from my homeland." He announces.

The Sogdian merchant starts to play a rhythmic song. The sound of hengchui is incredible. It has a bright and powerful ring. When playing, the sound is purer and sharper than my flute's. Soon, all the musicians joined in with their instruments. The once lyrical harp is off tempo. The once resonant drums seem unnecessary. The once mellow lutes sound messy. *A little organization and this band would be legendary!*

I lie on my side in the sand, listening to merchants sharing tales from their homeland. Most stories are about death, daily life, and how the world came to be. My eyelids seem to have heavy weights forcing them down. With a yawn, I shut them completely.

In my dream, I am back home. The ground is blue, and the sky is green. My heart aches because Mother is standing in front of me. Without any warning I am crying again, tears of happiness pour down my cheeks like loose pearls from a pearl necklace. Mother pulls me into a hug. *Solid. She is not a ghost.* I take her to the Xue family's house and proudly shows her my Yuefu. They are playing a song I don't recognize with unfamiliar instruments. Then, a moment of epiphany hits me. There are drums, harps, lutes, and hengchuis. When all these instruments are combined correctly, they create a beautiful harmony. In the distance, there stands a purple mountain full of grapes. *Grapes! Soon, there will be dried grapes in the market!* There are two temples floating in the sky above the mountain. One wooden, one golden. One for Taoism, one for Buddhism. *The flute! I need to show Mother my flute skills.* I fall into a chair under the window and start to play. The sunlight reflects off golden linings on the flute. The calming wind ruffles my hair. *I hope I will never wake up from this dream. It is too good to end.* Suddenly, I'm sinking into the chair, my heart abandons my chest and pounds in my throat. My pulse races and I fling my arms in random directions, an attempt to save myself. Darkness.

Air! I need air! As I climb on my elbows, tons of sand pour from my nose and mouth. My stomach growls even with all the foreign delicacies from last night. The desert spreads out before me— a sea of sand, shimmering with heat. A few miles in front of me lies Master, his face in the sand. There are no merchants or camel footprints. *How did the merchants disappear? How could they leave me in the desert without an explanation?* A rim of pale blue light forms on the eastern horizon. Then the sun rises, an explosion of pink and gold with millions of bursting light. I squint into the golden ray, and it reminds me of my flute in the dream. When I hold it out in the sunlight, golden streaks like cascading stars can be seen. The dawn breeze caresses my cheeks as I play my favorite song. *I hope the peacefulness will last forever. Maybe there will be dawns as wondrous as this in hell.*

The Tale of a Tea Cake

Invictus School Hong Kong, Cheuk, Wing Yan Amelia – 11

The smell of dust and old leather and far away rain was what Zhang Wei was used to. He was a merchant who lived during the Tang Dynasty. The Silk Road was his world, but his heart belonged to the mist-covered mountains of Fujian. His journey, however, had an unique weight. He carried something in a simple silk bag that he wore close to his chest. Not something like a precious stone, no, it was a small, fragrant tea cake. This tea came from his family's garden. His father, while on his deathbed, had pressed it into his hands. "Carry our mountain's spirit to the desert's edge," he had whispered. "Trade it not for silver, but for a story from beyond the Jade Gate."

Zhang's caravan was a fragment of the Empire in motion: thirty horses, a dozen mules, and men from across the Middle Kingdom. There was Captain Luo, a former soldier who knew the Western frontiers like his own face; silent Li, the Tibetan guide whose eyes could read the moods of the high passes; and young and eager An, a Persian trader's son who served as their bridge to the languages of the west.

They had departed from Chang'an's splendour, their packs loaded with shimmering silk, bundles of sturdy paper, and fancy brass locks. They had already navigated the Hexi Corridor and traded for fine jade in Dunhuang under the watchful eyes of giant Buddhas carved into the cliff faces. Zhang's mind was sharp, but the tea cake was a personal pilgrimage.

The real challenge started at the Yangguan Pass. This is where China ended and the body of the world started: the Taklamakan, it was the "Sea of Death." The sound of the wind changed from a whisper to a loud and harsh scream that was full of sand. The sand dunes were huge, like waves of gold that changed shape all the time and covered up the paths in just one night. The days were extremely hot as if being inside an oven. Nights felt like being locked in a cold room. One afternoon, a big sandstorm came with an immense force. The people hid behind the trembling horses, cloths pressed against their faces. When the storm passed, two mules and a cache of paper were buried, lost to the desert's hunger.

That night, morale was as low as the temperature. "We risk our bones for tea?" grumbled Captain Luo, warming his hands over a feeble fire. "The Westerners drink milk and wine. They will think this is a dried leaf."

Zhang did not say anything. Instead, he brought out his brass pot. He poured some water from a skin pouch into the pot and carefully cut a few hairs from the tea cake. He warmed up the water, not too much, like his father had taught him. He put the tea leaves into the water, and soon, the air was filled with an earthy scent of mountain mist and green plants. He poured a cup for each man.

They drank in silence. The hot liquid was a revolution in that desolate place. An sighed, his eyes closing. "It tastes of... home." Captain Luo simply nodded.

The shared cup became a ritual. Each evening, as the stars emerged, Zhang would brew the tea. It was no longer just his story. It became the caravan's story, a moment to hide away from the consuming desert.

Weeks later, at the oasis of Khotan, they traded silk for fine jade. Zhang, following his father's wish, was not just a merchant, but also a storyteller. He found Ibrahim, a Sogdian with a weathered face, who had settled here years prior. In the shade of a luscious tree, Zhang presented not silk, but tea. He brewed it as Ibrahim watched with his curious, shimmering eyes.

As the steam rose, Zhang spoke of his home: the endless tiers of the tea gardens, the morning fog hanging by the peaks, the skilled hands of the pickers. Ibrahim listened, then sipped. A slow smile spread. In return, he began to speak. His voice, rough, spoke tales of cities further west, of Samarkand's turquoise domes, of the strange, cold northern lands where traders told stories of a midnight sun.

He spoke of a Greek physician in Antioch who used a similar leaf in a poultice, and of a calligrapher who prized the mind above all else. Zhang listened, his father's tea cake between them, a silent fuel for a truck load of words. The essence of a Fujian mountain for the unfamiliar memories of a world away.

When the stories were spent and the pot was empty, Ibrahim placed a hand on the remaining piece of tea cake. "This is not something that can be bought," he said. "It is an invitation. Leave a piece with me. Let it tell the tales of your mountains to those who pass through."

Zhang agreed. He broke the cake, leaving half behind. As he did, he remembered something his father had said, “The tea cake is more than a tea cake, it is a symbol of heritage, used as a bridge to share culture and stories. The greatest value in trading is not the materials, but the connection.”

Silk Road

Kellett School, Hong Kong, Blanchflower, Henry – Y8

Lucius was a middle-aged Roman man among the vast agglomeration of merchants, traders and others alike traveling the arduous Great Silk Road. All he could see for miles and miles was just the dull hued feather grass, swaying to a mournful tune, with the occasional azure flower taking a peek out of the green sea of never ending. The wind was whistling in tune to the deafening silence, sending subtle shivers down Lucius' spine. The sky was a frustrating grey, the cirrus a wispy puff of smoke from the bakery somewhere in Rome. Lucius thought about Rome all the time, the cobbled roads and the signature juniper fields rolling into the distant mountains of the gods and the Colosseum, a portrait of Rome's power. The silk sheets he once had, the mansion and slaves he once owned. All of that now traded for a horse drawn carriage with nothing more than his diary, a knife and a few blocks of pure gold. Yet every day, when he reconsidered his choices, when he thinks of glorious Rome, and his wife and children left behind, he knows it's for a greater sacrifice – the well-famed treasure of Silk. He heard it is worth all the treasure the Emperor has, the very gift from God to man. Made and curated by the people of Cathay, their hands working all day, spinning and weaving strands worth more than even gold. Lucius knew if he could just get his hands on the fabled treasure, his life would forever be changed, the sacrifice worth it, the journey through the unknown realms of danger and mystery all but just a memory to laugh at.

Rahul was an old Buddhist monk, with wrinkles etched across his face like streaks of rain on a grey day. He was all alone, his only companion being Ashva, his old mule and a few tomes and scriptures – for Rahul was travelling the infamous, arduous Silk Road, his ultimate goal to preach the religion Buddhism to all that would accept. An endless sea of maroon and green sagebrush could be seen stretching into the very reaches of the horizon, barren and bare as the Earth could possibly be. Click-clack, click-clack, Ashva's hooves collided with the dusty, bare ground with the force of an ancient beast yet the sound of age rang out through the plains. Despite the bareness and hollowness of the sinister Silk Road, Rahul captured with his eyes a flicker of life. A flower, one with no challenger to its grandeur and one with no challenger to its beauty was perched in the flowing wave of juniper, a picturesque Monet in an idyllic environment. For the peony was as bright as the brightest star in the sky, as glowing as the happiest child to walk this land, yet waltzed with such adroitness and confidence, one only the lightest feather could recreate. Click-clack, click-clack, Ashva went on, until upon Rahul's eyes another peculiarity appeared. A tree as black as night, stripped of its leaves, was wedged into the soil, its branches just claws ripping the skin of the pale blue sky. Despite being as dead and as lifeless as wood, with it the tree carried the wisdom of a hundred men and the stories of a hundred books, being more alive than any other animal in the plains. The tree's roots were spread far and wide across the land, never giving up the hope of preaching its own unique religion. Click-clack, click-clack, and Rahul kept going into the Autumn evening, his enlightenment awaiting him.

Abtin was just a young Sogdian boy, with gentle eyes and inky black hair. His family was very poor, living outside the imposing walls of Sogdian society, living off limited food and drink. Being next to an epicentre of the Silk Road, Abtin commonly witnessed foreign merchants and traders, yet they seldom ever came to him and his family – trade was not something for his class. Sogdian society was heavily ruled by prejudice and hierarchy, and Abtin was the lowest of them all, a humble farming family that got no gold or spices from the West. Yet on a Summer's morning one unusual day, a peculiar man that wore colours Abtin had never even knew dwelled the Earth came to his family's humble abode and spoke in a tongue that confused the young boy even more. Abtin's parents then engaged in the hieroglyphics game, using both hand and mouth to communicate with the man. It was then decided that if the weird man would help farm, he could stay at Abtin's home for some time. Abtin was more curious than he had ever been in his life, for a new visitor was something completely different to anything that had ever happened. At first, Abtin approached the man with caution, alienating the man with very white skin and very bright brown hair. The man was very weak and hopeless, not knowing how to kill snakes with a stone or use the hoe, confuzzling poor Abtin. Yet as

the days matured to weeks Abtin proceeded to teach the hopeless man, as the activity was more entertaining than watching the leaves grow on his tree with as little effort as possible. Abtin displayed the perfect snake killing throw, as his stone sliced the air like a bullet, the crunching connection with the snake's skull making a deafening sound, as the man's fell short, breaking the serenity of the sand. And so it continued, as the man grew competent and Abtin became impressed, his smile lighting up the atmosphere. Yet the days slowly disappeared, and the man had to leave. But Abtin never stopped throwing his stones over the sandy plains, never forgetting the hopeless man.

The Spice Roads of Chang'an

Kellett School, Hong Kong, Choudhary, Ayansh – Y7

Chapter One: The Brothers of the Bazaar

A cheery hum of voices buzzed through the warm April air, wrapping around Hai's ears like a swarm of bees in a honey dream. He and his brother Shan stood proudly outside their family's wooden caravan on the bustling main road of Chang'an. The perfume of cinnamon and ginger drifted through the air so thickly that Hai almost tasted it with every breath.

Chang'an, once a quiet capital, had become the heartbeat of the Silk Road—a wild orchestra of jingling coins and clattering wares. Traders from every corner of the map, from the deserts of Persia to the cobbled streets of Rome, poured in like waves, carrying curiosities of wool, glass, gold, and rumor. Even at dawn, the stone streets glowed with excitement.

Shan's eyes blinked as though he feared opening them too wide and realizing it was all a dream. Then, without warning, he dashed into their caravan and emerged balancing two rolls of paper, three porcelain dishes, a vase of fragrant spices, five bronze mirrors, three kilograms of jade, and two freshly folded silks. This was going to be the brother's biggest day yet.

For years, Hai and Shan had helped their mother Jian tend the caravan while their father ventured out to strike trades and bargains. But today was different. Today, the boys had been granted a golden opportunity—to roam Chang'an freely and make trades on their own. If they succeeded, they would earn the right to negotiate with foreign traders whenever they pleased.

"Shan! Hai! Before you go," called their mother, Jian, striding toward them with a beige roll of paper clutched in her graceful hands.

Shan groaned theatrically. "Please don't tell me that's a list of chores!"

Jian's smile twinkled like a candle flame. "Not this time, my clever boy. Why don't you see for yourself?"

The brothers leaned over her shoulder. The paper shimmered with a list—precious stones like jade and lapis lazuli, furs, silver, and even a few flakes of gold. Beneath the list, Jian had scribbled motherly instructions: who to avoid, where to eat, and a hand-drawn map of the city's winding lanes.

"Thanks, Mom!" said Hai, leaping forward to hug her, his hair bouncing like ink droplets in the sunlight.

"Go make me proud, Hai," Jian whispered, waving as her sons plunged into the roaring marketplace.

Chapter Two: The Deal of Deep Blue

"First stop Timur's stall," declared Shan, squinting at the map. He weaved through the maze of monks, merchants, and camels, leading Hai toward a dingy three-story bazaar. The smell of spices—nutmeg, saffron, cloves, cinnamon—swirled together like fragrant artwork. Hai inhaled deeply, tempted to eat the air.

Inside, the boys stopped at a stall where a man in a honey-colored tunic leaned behind stacks of glittering stones. His half-torn olive pants and sly grin gave him the air of a man who'd seen too much. A pin on his chest read TIMUR.

"What brings you here so early, little merchants?" Timur rasped, his voice gravelly yet cunning.

"We're here to trade for lapis lazuli," Hai said confidently.

Timur's narrow eyes gleamed. "My best offer one and a half kilograms of lapis for three kilograms of jade."

Hai stepped back, whispering, "No deal, Shan. We'll find better elsewhere."

But Shan shook his head, eyes sharp. "Hai, look at it! That lapis is deep blue with gold flecks of pyrite. Our jade is common in China. This is a good trade."

Timur tapped his fingers, waiting like a cat near a mouse hole. "So, boys—do we have a bargain?"

Shan grinned. "Deal."

They scooped the lapis into a small pearl pouch and hurried out, the blue stones glittering like tiny stars.

Chapter Three: Secrets in Silk

As they stepped back into the daylight, a noisy crowd had gathered at a nearby stall, chanting in frustration. "We want silk! We want silk!" they roared at an old man whose long beard trembled like a broom in the wind.

Hai tugged Shan's sleeve. "What's going on?" he asked a pale man standing beside them. The stranger's white shirt was smudged with blue ink, and several pens peeked from his pocket. His skin shone like polished ivory, and his sapphire eyes watched the chaos calmly.

"Do you need something, young man?" asked the stranger warmly, his lips curling into a perfect smile.

"Yes, sir," said Hai. "What's happening over there?"

"The city's main silk supplier was robbed last night," the man explained smoothly. "Now everyone's short on silk. Tempers are short too."

"Got it. Thanks," Shan said. "What's your name?"

"Thomas," replied the man, eyes flicking back to the crowd.

But when the boys turned away, Thomas's pleasant smile twisted into something far darker—a grin sharp enough to cut silk.

Chapter Four: The Storm in the Alley

Hours passed. The sun melted into amber, and the brothers marched home laden with riches and stories—leather from Elif for a bronze mirror, gold from Louis for silk, sugar from Raj for fine paper, and glass from Giorgio for another mirror.

But Hai wasn't smiling. His shoulders slumped, and his eyes kept darting toward the shadows.

"Hai?" said Shan, nudging him. "Something wrong? You've been quiet since the bazaar." Hai didn't answer. Instead, he grabbed Shan's wrist and pulled him into a narrow alley behind the busy market.

Raindrops began to fall—lightly at first, then thick and heavy. In seconds, the city faded into a blur of rushing feet and dripping roofs.

"Why are we here, Hai?" Shan asked, adjusting his satchel—then froze. A massive man towered before them; scarred face shaped like a thundercloud. His fists looked heavy enough to crush a stall's counter in one blow. He held Hai by the collar.

"Let him go!" yelled Shan, lunging forward. But the stranger's growl froze him in place.

"Bring your valuables to the outskirts of Chang'an before dawn," the man snarled. "Or your precious brother becomes a slave to someone named Ryan."

Lightning flashed—and he vanished into the storm, leaving only echoing thunder and the beating of two terrified hearts.

Shan looked at Hai, trembling in the rain. "Who's Ryan?" he whispered.

Hai's answer was drowned by thunder.

To be continued...

Next in the Series: The Jade Shadow Conspiracy

Keep Running

Kellett School, Hong Kong, Gradel, Clare – Y7

The sweet breeze hit my face as I run through the hustling, bustling streets of Chang An, my face drenched in sweat, my legs exhausted, my stomach clenched in a stitch, all that I could tell myself was to keep running. I had been out on a walk and completely forgot about the arrangements my parents had made, out of my will they had me placed to meet with a matchmaker. Although there was no way I could meet the matchmaker, with my sweaty robe, worn out shoes and dirty face. My mother has told me to meet her at home at a strict 2 hours past mid day, giving her two hours to get me dressed, and get my makeup on. It was already an hour past then, and I had just made it to my doorway, nervous on her reaction. My hands shaking, I knocked on the door three times. And in an instance, my own mother opens the door, her face stiff, staring straight at me.

“Hi ma, sorry I lost track of time.” I murmured, knowing that this excuse would not at all help my case.

“Ling Wu! You think you are funny, faffing around all the time, you are already seventeen! You need to get married to a wealthy man, so you can have a good future! Me and your Pa are helping you here, be grateful! Come in now! Such disgrace.” My ma genuinely seemed disappointed, I lowered my head and stepped into my home.

I went into my room, looking out at the afternoon sky, the sun shined on the empty streets, where shadows of trees laid. My mother was prepping the makeup for me, where the pungent smell of soot powder spread into my room through the door. I had never wanted to marry some snotty rich man, though that was the exact plan both my parents had for me. My dream since young was to travel the world but was constantly dismissed by my mother especially. After the completion of the Silk Road, travelling had never been easier, people (men) would always leave town to trade and explore, others from across the world like Rome, would come often selling to vendors, making the bustling markets filled with diverse trinkets. Once I had saved up enough coins to buy my very own special “painting” of Baghdad? I had no idea what it was for, though I hanged it on to my own wall, and every night as I am half asleep in my bed, I stare at the “painting” dreaming of life elsewhere in Baghdad, nothing but just a dream. A dream?? Why is it just a dream, something that I’ve wanted to do all my life is just a dream!? It shouldn’t just be a thought that lives in my brain, I should do it, it should become reality, and so I have decided, it is now.

15 apples, 5 boxes of grains, 8 bags of red dates and 7 bottles of hot tea. Hopefully enough rations, for now. Though the trip in all takes 5 months, finding rations along the way might be challenging, even impossible. But there’s no time to squaller, or I will end up in a ridiculous matchmaking outfit. I twisted the knob, slowly pushing it open and carefully attempting to step out of the tiny window specifically designed to keep me in and others out. As I am contortioning my body to fit through the window, my mother who I had merely forgot about said something, “Ling Wu come out it's time to do your makeup” I stayed silent, thinking about what to say. “Come on, we're running out of time.” A creak at the door, my mother stepping into my room. My vision turning into a blur, time slowed down.

Keep running. Don’t stop, don't look back. Keep going, keep going... The words that sat in my head as the somber city flashed past me. Apples in my bag clashing at my back, soon enough my back got overly sore. I needed a break, but my mind took over. Keep running, do not stop... And so, I pressed on, I am cold, I am sore yet I made it to the Silk Road conjunction. Lining the city was a desert road where to the horizon was sand, although it was hard to even see the road, as it was filled with travellers all coming to Chang An, soon I would be one of them, and I was thrilled. But my body can only go so far, the sky was a piece of darkness, a sign that it was time to rest.

The blazing sun hit my skin, as I heard the sound of camels and donkeys walking on the paved grounds. I knew it was morning; I squinted my eyes open to see the busy conjunction filled with travellers of all kinds, I stood up and grabbed my bag looking like an absolute mess from being asleep. I looked down to see my clothes that are covered in dust and mud. “Uhhh” I irritably said as I wiped down the only pair of clothes I stupidly brought. I looked around the sunny scenery, as the wind blew dusty sand at me. It was time to leave, but my stomach growled in hunger, so I

opened my bag and took out an apple and a cup of tea. Immediately the food was all gone, so I started to move, I didn't know where to go but for now there was a straight long road, easy enough to follow.

I walked and walked, while people around stared at me. I guess it was because I was a young girl on her feet with a small little bag but as I continued the whispers got worse and worse. Me being myself i generally assumed the worse, I was dying to know what was happening, so after a long time thinking I gained the courage to go to someone and ask them what was happening. I specifically chose someone younger, shorter, and less intimidating to make sure I wouldn't end up on the ground. I walked up to him with my back straightened and my eyes staring at him. "I'm just wondering why all these people, including you are looking and whispering at me ?!" I said, trying to use my most daunting voice. He looked me up and down as if I had just said the most ridiculous thing.

He broke into a chuckle "Because you are obviously a non experienced traveller who knows nothing about the Silk Road." At that point, I really wanted to punch him in the face. Just because I'm a girl, I suddenly know nothing! It was sexism at its finest.

"Oh, so just because I am a slightly shorter, younger, and female you lot of men think I'm clueless about where I'm going! I'm actually on way to Baghdad right now." I furiously exclaimed.

"It's not that your female, but you do know nothing. You can fight me all you want, but if you were a real traveller, you would know that the worst sandstorm in months is happening in a couple hours. Plus, you're travelling all the way to Baghdad with just that tiny bag of I'm guessing apples?" His personality infuriated me, I bet he just wanted to play with me.

"You think I believe your stupid tricks? I know your lying, and even if you weren't, i can deal with a little sand?" I just wanted to prove him wrong, that I'm not just some small-time girl.

"Well, I'm not letting you go alone, I have experienced a bad sandstorm, I'll bring you through the desert and then you can thank me, let's go." My shocked face let out a gasp, but I went to think that I want to live and this might be the only way I do.

"Fine" I let out a sigh. He smirked at me, and we started to move.

We walked and walked and walked, I was starting to believe we wasn't legitimate, but at this point who should I trust. I kept doubting him until suddenly the winds started growing, sand blowing the sky turning it muddy and foggy to the point where we couldn't see anymore. To the point where the wind were like glass shard hitting my skin. To the point where to even walk i had to push my body to extremes. My legs started to shake my face sore, my vision blurring.

Black out.

Courage is something easier said than done. You can have as many dreams as you want, but to actually go ahead and do them takes resilience, perseverance.

My life was lived short, with my adventure living even shorter. But at least I tried, I tried to step out of my comfort zone, I tried to be something other than a dull housewife.

I tried to keep running.

Silk, Spices and Secrets

Kellett School, Hong Kong, McMahon, Siannen – Y9

The sun gleamed on the wooden path, freshly polished. The freshly grown vegetables and salty smells of fish enthralled my senses with hunger as I stepped off the ship with crates in my hands. The scent of freshly grown vegetables mingled with the briny aroma of fish, awakening my senses and stirring my hunger. The crates blurred amidst the bustling market, but the cacophony of morning sounds and enticing fragrances enveloped me. My legs wobbled in hesitation as if they had forgotten their purpose and blisters left sharp pains escalating up my body. Many months of travelling on sea was quite extraordinary, yet I still recall the sharp smells of salt and fish in the air. I still remember the rock of the boat as we navigated towering sapphire waters, the chattering of working men as well as a barking orders of the captain as we journeyed to a new port. Now we had finally arrived in Rome.

I was met with a breathtaking sky flourish with cotton white clouds as I made my way towards the market. Today, I must trade all my pottery from China with intricate glassware and precious stones. I had 1000 denarii which was enough for a couple pieces of glassware and precious stones as the noise of chatter rose. I set my crates down what I saw was unimaginable.

The market was teeming with life, filled with vibrant sounds and new smells coming from all directions. Flourishing wisps of dust flew up into the air as horses pounded into the rest areas stalls filled with wide eyed traders welcomed you into their country. People walked with many different coloured garments, silk and cloth and cotton. Merchants were clad with richly dyed tunics, and they showcased wonder as well as beauty. Many spices were laid out inviting travellers to take a sample of their exotic taste fragrance smells of oils such as lavender and peppermint luxuriated in the air. My eyes wandered across the brightly coloured shelters that covered peculiar objects that were in all shapes and sizes. Eccentric forms of patterns on cloths out surprised me. I was admiring this place of bliss. Unloaded my crates full of many ripe fruits and cutlery – I was ready to embark on a promising day ahead. The sky faded with a golden tinge blanketing the bustling market. The amber glow hid the secrets of darkening shadows of dusk. However, shadows were obscuring the faces that wanted fortunes as I look deeper into the hooded cloaks of people. A musician played his tune, but a foreboding sense stains the melody. Suddenly a chilling whisper of the wind brush past my skin once humming and bustling crowd simmered to murmurs of uncertainty. My hands clenched onto the wooden handles of my crates I yearned to turn around, but the bodies of traders prevented me. Heads shifted to the left side of the market. Everything and everyone turned silent.

Finding Hope

Kellett School, Hong Kong, Shankardass, Kyla – Y8

“Goodbye Florence. Always remember I love you.”

I stared at the note, hatred and devastation in my eyes. It had been five years since my mum had left me that note and well, left me behind with it. If she loved me so much, why did she leave me? Every time I looked at her handwriting and read those words again, a little bit more of my heart broke away until all that was left was emptiness.

“Good morning, Ms Sadie!” I shout rushing out my house.

“Morning Florence!” She replies.

Ms Sadie is like a second mother to me as she cared for me like her own and I am forever grateful. I head to the markets as per usual and set up my stall where I sell handmade silk and Chinese jade; both of which are quite popular. The pay is also decent and keeps me going. Although this life is good, I can’t help but feel bored with this life. After many years of being left in the dark, I simply feel frustrated. Alone. I just need some hope...

I pack away boxes in my attic – I don’t want to but I know it’s time. I kept all my mother’s things locked in the attic for years, unable to face even one look at her things. Just the thought of all her clothes and pictures makes me tear up. I knew it was time to put them behind me, so I start to tidy and go through her things as my heart squeezes in sadness. My mum was a trader just as I am and always got me the most unique gifts from the routes. I reach for the necklace I’m wearing, something she got me for my 8th birthday. The last one I had with her. I can’t hold back the tears anymore and they echo in the room as they hit the floor with a pitter patter.

As I get up to leave, something catches the corner of my eye. I scramble to get it and as I get closer, I realise it’s a beautiful jewellery box with my mum’s initials H.W. Hope Woodville. I open it and my eyes grow wide when I pick up a picture with my mum’s handwriting scrawled on it. A picture of a huge desert with bustling streets and markets. A key part of the Silk Roads which I immediately recognise it as the Taklamakan Desert. I read my mum’s handwriting aloud, ‘travel here on the 15 June and start a new journey here’. The 15th of June is the day my mum left, the day my life changed. Millions of questions run through my mind but one the most important: should I go find my mum? I know that caravans go to the desert each morning at dawn, but I wouldn’t be allowed on for sure because of one slight problem. The desert is known as the Sea of Death. It’s dangerous, but my mum is there: the one person who I truly need right now. I look at my favourite picture of us taken when I was 3 at the beach. I don’t remember her very well, but I do remember her kind face and the way it lit up when she laughed. Her sweet voice and her contagious smile. It hits me now that I need to find her and I’m not stopping until I do.

I stare at the ceiling in my room at Ms Sadie’s house. It was empty with just the bed and the cupboard. Ms Sadie said I could decorate it however I wanted but it just never felt right. My alarm is set to go off in 10 minutes for 4:30. I packed my bag last night with only the essentials: the money I had been saving from trading, the jewellery box, some clothes, snacks, and my necklace. I creep downstairs and leave a note for Ms Sadie briefly explaining and telling her not to worry about me. Then, I slip on my shoes and walk to the caravans. I must sneak on because there is no way they would let a child on such a perilous journey, let alone a girl. I can feel my heart beating faster and my legs wobbling beneath me. I have to stay strong though. The desert is a treacherous place, known for its sandstorms and extreme weather. But if it’s where my mum is, then I would travel the world.

I arrive at the caravans, and the traders are busy packing their materials giving me the perfect opportunity to sneak on. I jump on and squeeze to the back of the vehicle. It’s a tight space but

it's better than nothing.

The traders get on the caravan, and I hope they do not come to the back. Fortunately, they take their seats, and we set off. As the caravan takes off, the rhythmic clatter of hooves and the chitchat of the traders fill the air. I nestle deeper into my small hiding spot, trying to quiet the whirlwind of thoughts racing through my mind. This is it – I am finally on my way.

The caravan made its way through the bustling streets of Xi An, the chatter of merchants and the scent of spices wafting through the air. Looking through the crack, I see a sea of women with vibrant dresses and stalls filled with people trying to bargain prices. There are children laughing with joy and smiling wide. For a moment, I feel a pang of longing for the life I'm leaving behind. But the picture of the Taklamakan Desert and my mother's handwriting brings me back, this is what must be done.

The shrieks of excitements and sounds of the lively streets eventually settle down and I feel the temperature rising as we enter the desert. As day turns into night, I gaze at the sunset before me as anxiety and doubt cloud my mind. What if my mum doesn't want to see me?

Before I have time to worry any further, the caravan abruptly stops, and the constant patter of hooves comes to an end. The traders get off and begin unloading their bags and set up tents under the stars. I realise we have landed in a small town on the border of Taklamakan desert and then it dawns on me. This is the exact town which my mum had written down. Kashgar it is called I say reading to the note myself. Before I can look for my mum, I must get rest first, so I take out my tent from my bag and set it up in a corner. After I got a fire going and ate dinner, I lay under the stars thinking that tomorrow just may be the day I see my mum again, just maybe.

The next morning, I awake to the smell of naan and spices drifting in the breeze.

The streets transform from quiet and desolate to a symphony of lively music and a constant stream of laughter. After buying a fresh kebab for breakfast, I begin trying to find the address my mum had left. I look from corner to corner in the town making friendships and seeing unexplored places along the way. Days turn into weeks and after 2 weeks of staying in Kashgar, still nothing. On day 15, I lay in my tent awake at night. I came all this way for what? My mum isn't here. I should have known she wasn't coming back. Darkness overcomes my body, and I know it's time to head home. Then I realise, it doesn't matter that I didn't find my mum. All this time I've been obsessed with finding her when really, I just needed to find myself. I notice how happy I have felt the last couple of weeks seeing new places, sharing laughter with new people. And even if my mum wasn't with me, she's always in my heart.

Dawn arrives the next day, I have my things packed and ready to go. I did enjoy my time and had such an extraordinary experience, but nothing beats going home. I go through the markets one more time and say bye to all the friends I made. Suddenly I freeze in my tracks. I feel a shock of recognition and standing before me in the markets, is the unmistakable face of my mum. She looks exactly as I remember. I finally found her.

"Mum, I'm here," I shout as I push through the crowd.

"Florence?" My mum says a look of disbelief on her face. Before I know it, she embraces me tightly, like she never wants to let go.

I breathe in the familiar, flowery scent of her perfume. I don't know why she came here in the first place or why she left at all but all I know right now is that everything is going to be okay.

A Trail as Old as Time: The Silky Pursuit

Kellett School, Hong Kong, Stanley, Amabel – Y8

552CE – Dunhuang, Northern Zhou Dynasty, China

Three months after travelling out from Byzantium we made a brief stop for supplies at Xi Ming's hostel in Dunhuang. The place was an old wooden three-storey shack: the first floor was a dining room and bar, the second floor was the guest rooms, and the third floor was the owner's quarters.

"What was our mission again?" I asked getting ready to sleep.

"Cosmas!" Sergius groaned, "we need to find out how silk is made and, if we can, bring it back!"

At midnight on our second night there, I peeked my eye open to see that Sergius was gone. His tiny mattress-on-the-floor bed was empty, and the door was ajar.

I heard some clattering downstairs and cautiously tiptoed downstairs to see Sergius sitting on a stool.

"Sergius!" I whispered, slightly tapping the stairs to get his attention, "what are you doing?"

He turned to me and in his hand was a beer. I sat down next to him and nudged him with my elbow.

"Just one," he muttered, "I haven't tasted this in ages."

Just watching him made me thirsty but I shook the thought out of my head.

"Sergius, real monks can't have alcohol!" I looked to see if anyone was watching just to see a fuzzy shadow fly up the stairs, "did you see that?"

Sergius downed the glass and slammed it onto the wobbly table, "We leave in an hour." He began to stand up when we heard the stairs creak as a figure stomped down.

I quickly sat on the table to block the view of the glass and pretended to be praying.

"What are you doing up so late?" An unknown voice asked, "You must be quiet!"

We both stopped our 'prayer' and squinted at the tiny figure by the stairs. As the figure came into the moonlight, we realised that it was a lady.

"We are so sorry for the noise," I grabbed the glass behind my back, "We'll head up now."

"I hate to be nosy, but I heard that you were leaving soon," she whispered just as we were heading up the stairs, "may I know where?"

"Chang'An," Sergius explained, "we have to go, goodnight Ms..."

"Ling," she smiled, "one more thing," she fiddled with her fingers, "can I go with you? I have an aunt to visit, and it is not safe for me to travel on my own."

Sergius and I exchanged glances before politely declining, explaining we were doing missionary work.

"Well, that would be a shame because I don't think Chang'An will let strangers in," she looked up at us, "especially now, because the Emperor is visiting soon."

"Then we best get going," Sergius grumbled as we began to tread up the stairs, "thank you Ms Ling."

As the moon was slowly setting, we packed our things and stepped outside. After a few steps only to hear the door swing open behind us.

"You can't do this alone," Ling had her own bag heaved on her shoulders, "Chang'An will never let you in."

Sergius looked frustrated, "we already said you're not coming with us."

"Well," she said, "it'd be a shame if the guards knew there were fake monks roaming around."

We just glanced at each other, the colour draining from our faces.

"I've always wanted to travel, not work in a hostel, and you can help me."

Sergius thought deeply, "you're right, we can help."

"But you need help too?" Ling raised a brow.

"Help us into Chang'An," I whispered, "and if it works, you could travel back to Byzantium with us."

I held out my hand, waiting for her to shake it. She thought for a bit then gripped my hand.

"I have a plan," she smiled.

“Are you sure this is going to work?” I asked glancing at Ling as she pushed the 2-wheeled cart full of food towards the wall.

Along the journey, we had confessed to Ling that we weren’t doing missionary work but figuring out how silk is made.

Slowly, the looming wall was getting closer as we walked up to it. I grabbed the cart like planned and joined the queue to enter.

After a while of watching people being rejected and leaving, we were next.

“Turn and leave please,” one of the many guards on duty pointed his finger into the distance, “no guests during the ceremony.”

I was about to speak when Ling stepped in, “my aunt lives here, Kim Cong, we’re here to visit.”

“Ling!” a small voice from inside the city yelled.

“That’s her!” Ling pointed towards the opening where a person was waving.

The guard glanced at her then inside the walls then removed his weapon, “go in”.

Sergius and I walked towards the entrance but the guard stopped us, “not you two.”

“We are with her,” I tried to explain but the guard stood firm.

“They’re bringing food for the festival,” Ling was still waiting near the entrance, “they will leave after that.”

The guards whispered something to each other then let us enter. I thanked them and followed Ling to Kim’s house.

We settled into Kim’s house for a bit before preparing for the festival. The celebration was due in 2 hours and we had nearly finished helping Kim prepare the meal for the celebration. While Kim was adding the finishing touches, Sergius, Ling and I excused ourselves to the bathroom.

“Ok, so, Kim said that there’s a house full of silk worms,” Ling glanced around the corner to check if Kim was listening, “you guys need to go there tonight, when everyone is celebrating.”

“Silk worms?” I asked staring at her, “what are those?”

“They produce silk,” she frowned, “wait sorry, I forgot you don’t know.”

“China is very secretive about it,” Sergius explained.

“I won’t go into detail but they are the creatures that make silk,” she hurriedly gave us a flier painting of a two-storey house with little worms dancing outside, “this is the house and these are the worms you need to look for.”

We went outside, to see a large dining table lined sideways, with enough seats for every person to sit. We headed to the alley Ling showed us.

The alley was dark but the moonlight helped us watch out for puddles. Eventually, we reached a house that looked similar to the one in the flier.

Sergius fiddled with the door until it finally creaked open.

A few steps in, I noticed that the place had an unfamiliar scent. I wandered around while Sergius kept a lookout, peeking in through doors until I found an odd room.

Inside, there were strange boxes, the same murky smell lingered in them. I opened them to see many of these little white worms wriggling around.

Without a second thought, I snatched a few and stored them in my robe. That’s when I heard Sergius talking with someone outside, they sounded angry.

“I was just seeing where the house in this flier is,” Sergius’s calm voice echoed throughout the house. The other person spoke rapid Chinese with a scary tone.

I looked around, hoping to see an escape route but was met with nothing, until I noticed the window slightly open at the end of a hallway.

I heard the door shut and footsteps approach my location so I lunged for the window, forcing it wider and leaping out. I landed with a thud and my body ached everywhere but I was safe, or so I thought.

Sergius must've heard the noise because he came running over, "did you get them?"

"Yes," I groaned as he helped me to my feet, "we need to go, now."

Though I couldn't help but notice a crack in the city walls close to where I landed, *strange*.

We rushed back to the dining area.

"Ling!" I called out as she excused herself.

"You found them?" she looked at me and I nodded, "ok, we'll leave in the morning."

I felt something shake me violently as I opened my eyes to the morning light.

"What?" I grumbled, half asleep.

"News has spread," I recognised Ling's voice but this time, it was concerned, "the owner of the worms has reported a robbery, you need to leave quickly."

I shot up and watched as she bent down and told Sergius too. I grabbed the sack of worms and we all raced out the door, thanking Kim as we ran past.

"No!" Ling hissed, "they're checking everyone leaving!"

"I think I know what to do," I muttered, clutching the sack, "follow my lead."

I discussed my plan and handed the sack to Ling before Sergius and I walked towards the exit.

"We're going to need to check your belongings and anything on you," one guard explained as he searched through our bags.

Another guard pat us down before handing out belongings back, "clear, next!"

We calmly walked out before turning and following the wall's curve.

"If I remember," I was thinking back to the night I fell, seeing a little crack in the wall, "it should be this side."

After a bit of walking, I saw the same crack and peeked through, "Ling!"

"Here," she shoved the sack into the crack before turning towards the exit.

I reached my fingers inside and pulled the sack out, opening to see if the worms were ok. Thankfully, they survived the tight squeeze so I closed the bag and walked near the exit, waiting for Ling.

She finally came out of the city and we treaded after her.

"Thanks Ling," Sergius smiled, "we couldn't have done it without you."

"Thank goodness you drank that beer," she laughed.

And that's how we stole China's most important trading secret.

Based on a true story

Tales of the Silk Road

Kellett School, Hong Kong, Tye, Alexandra – Y8

10:53 am. I was sat on a small chair that stood at the side of the pier, clutching my treasured bag of prized gems and gold, the ones I had toiled through unrelenting sleepless days and nights, the ones I had worked until my fingers bled of exhaustion, the ones I had dedicated my mind and soul to procure. My journey had finally been completed. Trekking over a myriad of mountains, crossing over treacherous rivers and seas, walking through the vast wilderness of west, and finally reaching the end goal. *Where I could finally go back. Where I could finally rest. Where I could finally be in peace.*

I shoved my jacket into my makeshift backpack that I crafted using the rest of my torn shirts. My head spun around slowly, letting out a sigh of relief I had been holding in for a while. The sun glittered over the pier, the warmth in the air engulfing my arms as I inhaled a deep breath, my reflection shimmering in the sea waters, shared whispers of the sacred story of the trader in the west, gently lapping between the rougher tides. The horns of the ship blew, the sound snapping me out of my daze, signaling the ship was about to leave. My eyes widened in panic, before I darted towards the end of the pier, running to an open door and almost taking a small leap onto the ship, the metal railing the only object anchoring me from plunging into the icy waters. My arms and legs practically latched onto the railings, the cold metal against my skin sending shivers down my neck as I caught the last of my breath. I quickly scurried away into the baggage area, ducking under leather briefcases that looked like they had been through hell and back. The ship rocked back and forth against the roaring waves beneath me, the booming echos of chatter in the area above me causing me to let out a weary sigh before I ran a hand through my hair instinctively in exhaustion.

The sounds of wealthy people's laughs flooded my ears as I slumped back against the briefcases, the salty and bitter smell of seawater drifting to my nose and mouth, the taste of the briny seawater almost evident in my tastebuds. The ship swayed back and forth, the motions almost making my head dizzy. The clattering of expensive cutlery and metal silverware was amidst all the chaos, the lingering sounds of echoing chatter spiraling through my mind. The freezing yet crispy air blew past my face as I reluctantly set my small makeshift bag on the white stained concrete floors. My legs sprawled out on the ground in front of me, the whispers and clamorous murmurs the only sound threatening to haunt my ears for the next few days. The next few hours felt egregious and insufferable, my eyes fighting for dear life to stay open, only fluttering every few seconds as my mind fell into a hazy trance, as if possessed. *Just a bit longer... a bit longer... longer...*

I hadn't realised that sleep had already surged through my veins until the neon white ceiling lights had blinded my vision. I haltingly opened my eyes, the ceiling lights so dangerously bright, almost like lasers beaming into my pupils. I groggily rubbed my eyes, my hands now naturally sweaty and clammy since the sun had already set, darkness now stalking over the ship. Shadows of moonlight peered through the begrimed and filthy windows, the bright stars and moon enlightening the crepuscle sky. I unhurriedly sat up, a rampage of body aches crashing over my back and my legs, my eyes squinting shut in slight pain as I let out a small groan stuck from the back of my throat. I blinked up repeatedly before attempting to comb through the knots at the ends of my dark brown hair, begrudgingly ruffling it up slightly after a few failed attempts. I stood up, my leg muscles cramping involuntarily as I did so, before stretching out my back, bending backwards and hearing a small crack that clouded my thoughts with uneasiness. I stood back up, my shoulders dropping inwards unconsciously as I looked over my shoulder for my makeshift bag, finding it mindlessly tossed in a corner. My legs trudged towards a small opened window, the glimpse of the caliginous yet entrancing night sky luring me in as I sucked in a deep breath, expecting a frigid yet refreshing trail of air flowing up my body, however, only getting a prompt and bare cloud of stifling air. A huff of brief disappointment climbed its way to my throat, my thumb and index finger pinching the bridge of my nose before croaking out a restrained sigh. I looked back up at the enthralling twilight sky, before turning back to where I was splayed out only ten minutes ago.

My mind was a mess, headaches pounding through my head as I instinctively rubbed my neck in an attempt to soothe the aching. My eyes wandered over to the towering stacks of briefcases piled up against the white stained walls, large clusters of much smaller makeshift bags scattered impetuously around the glossy white floors. My mind almost went still for a moment, leaving me profoundly disoriented in the deep abyss of my thoughts before a sharp stab of pain clawed through my head. My hands instinctively clutched my head tightly, the sounds of my ragged breathing combined with my thundering heartbeat blaring through my ears as my throat swelled up and squeezed around my neck like a vice. Trembling irrepressibly, my knees gave out in utter panic, sending my body collapsing onto the cold and piercing ground beneath me. My fingers pressed down hard onto the frigid floors, my fingertips turning white before I frantically scrambled backwards. My back thudded against a nearby stack of briefcases, the sudden punch of the thick leather and metal sending a soaring ache through the veins on my neck.

A creak came through from the black tinted balcony doors, my heartbeat booming louder in my ears, louder, louder and louder. My head swivelled around, only to find piles and piles of bags blocking my way. The balcony doors screeched open, the sound causing me to snap my head forward. The faintest glimpse of a scroll held by a single red ribbon peeking through a fully black cloak caught my eye as footsteps prowled towards me. My eyes widened in horror, the feeling of trepidation crawling up my spine. My breath hitched almost silently, shallowing down in my throat as realisation crept over me like a shadow emerging from the vast depths of darkness. *No way out. No way to escape. No where to run.* I was ***trapped.***

Hong Kong: The Beginning

Kellett School, Hong Kong, Wang, Eddy – Y7

The sun shone over the desert. The heat—brewing sand was raging with anger. Four young travelers, dressed in black, walked forward. Stomp. Without warning, the shadow of a mysterious man came forward. The man raised a revolver toward them. The travelers froze, hands rising.

“Who are you?” Said the man. Cluck. He reloaded his gun.

The travellers took off their hoods. “We’re hunters,” he replied, voice with fear. “Searching for the rarest creatures along the Silk Road.” Then, with a nod, he holstered his weapon. “Follow me,” he said. “And you’ll find what you seek.. if you dare.”

They traveled across lands, seas, and creeks, always aware of the stranger’s secrets. The wind howled like a freight train, stopping their progress. Then came a cry.

“Something’s coming!”

The man ignored them. In front of the people, a sandstorm rose like a mountain, covering the horizon. Panic spread. “Take cover! Come on guys!” The storm engulfed them like a tsunami, sweeping them away. Darkness stayed for days. When the sandstorm stopped, the travelers lay unconscious beneath the sun.

Coughing, gasping, they blurted. “Where... are we?” one whispered. “And that man... he’s gone! It was a trap!” “Calm down,” another muttered. “Look, it’s an island. We need to move.”

The island stretched vast and green, a lush island of forests and streams. Food and water were plentiful. The men: Benedict, Hayden, Elon, and Keon stood in shock.

“We can’t stay here,” Benedict stated. “We were headed to Europe, to find those cool animals!”

“There’s no way back,” Elon said in disbelief, pointing to the sea.

Hayden looked at the terrain. “We have materials. Let’s build a camp.”

Keon grinned. “Not a bad idea. Let’s get to work.”

They dug and scavenged, gathering wood and scraps. Hours turned to days as they hammered together a shelter only for Benedict to collapse it on entry.

“Benedict! We haven’t nailed it yet!” Hayden roared.

Keon chuckled. “Forget the tent. Let’s build something bigger. The Silk Sea.”

“A port,” Benedict wondered. “A large one.”

Plans were made with precision. Construction was gruelling. Days of sweat, hunger, and thirst. But after two never-ending weeks, the port stood proud against the horizon. Then came the sound: HONKKKKK. A colossal ship approached, its hull gleaming. The men rang the bell. BING! BONG! And watched as traders in jewels stepped ashore.

“Welcome to Hong Kong!” Elon said.

“Hong Kong?” Keon snapped. “We never agreed on a name!”

Arguments flared until the name stuck. The traders looked skeptically until Benedict mentioned metal.

“Metal?” the lead trader said. “Rare metal?”

The men looked confused. “Yes... want some? We’ll trade for food.”

Bread and greens were given. They ate the food like a lion. In return, the traders went off with their goods. Everyone has heard what happened. A port in Hong Kong trading rare stuff. Soon, ships came to the docks. Emperors and merchants crossed oceans, offering cool things and slaves for jewels. Contractors arrived, building villages and markets. The Silk Road fell as the Silk Sea rose.

Keon watched the harbour. “Looks like our plan worked.”

The others nodded. Who would take over when they were gone? They never answered. The port they built became a city of global trade. A city known today as Hong Kong.

Misfortunes

Kellett School, Hong Kong, Yanarak, Sam – Y9

The humid air of the capital of China, Xi'an, the chatter of buyers negotiating for lower pricing was so passionate it could be the declaration of war. Hooves of horses and camels blended together into one percussion symphony, and the whispers of silk from a merchant told tales that only a scholar would know. The humble merchant, named Wang, was fairly tall in height, he wore light blue silk robes that complimented his fair skin. His eyes, dark orbs that glisten like obsidian, match his long, black hair that, like waterfall, gracefully drapes down his back. His hands, coarse but beautifully sculpted, wonks wonders. It's here his creation; they are woven by him alone. Distinct designs and patterns here are quite popular among the market, he is proven to be quite talented. His mind, sharper than daggers, his heart, though, is as warm as osmanthus tea for the coldest winter.

Wang never let down requests, which often ended up in him being underpaid or taken advantage of. Therefore, resulting in him being in huge debt and often being short in rent money. "Rent's due' oh, heavens! This is my pay day..." The merchant cried in dismay. The notice paper that he received was crumbled, artistically. Since he stated to the whole tavern that "If I ever fail in life, I will not be barbaric about it. I will die aesthetically, like a withering flower. Or the infrastructural concept of a temple that's denied." This rant has caused a stir in the community as it was—not only iconic—but amusing. And the merchant was already dying tragically.

Until one day, unfortunately, Zhao, the landlord of the place where the merchant was staying lost his patience. His hair, although black like others, is still unique and distinctive. White pieces of hair cascade down his hair like milky swirls in black tea. His frame, although toned, held elegance and control, was wrapped in dark green robes. His young features were sharp and stern, evidently expressing his distressed due to an expected absence of money from rent. He trekked downstairs, knocked on the merchant's door (impolitely) and waited. His foot tapped on the wooden floor, anticipating the door to creak open. But to no avail, it indeed did not. The stripe-haired man contemplated bashing through the door and grabbed Wang by the collar to scold him. But as soon as he took his first step to do just that, his impulse was halted to the creak of the door.

"Good morning, sir..." The merchant hiccuped, "How may I help you?" He rubbed his eyes, leaned against the door frame and gazed up at his landlord as a practiced smile crept up on his face. The landlord was not amused, he did not want to hang around to see the tenant. More specifically, he did not want his pathetic excuses for why his payment is late. So Zhao cleared his throat and extended his right hand out, "You've been warned, either give me the money, or leave." His words snapped Wang out of his daze and straightened up immediately, "Oh dear, how could I have forgotten? Alright, alright just, ah, a moment!" Wang dashed back into his kitchen and profusely started rummaging through the drawers for the ring of coins he had collected. The landlord clicked his tongue, closed his eyes and stepped into Wang's abode. Once his eyes were open, he was met with a beautiful mess. "But still a mess," muttered Zhao, as he reminded himself. The room was filled with paintings and fabrics, colors haphazardly placed along the floor and tables. A single desk that was flooded with different colors of dye, with, of course, pigments scattered all over the wooden surface. The landlord lets his eye wander, he spotted a teapot. Idly placed on a, surprisingly, clean table. Zhao assumed that it was forgotten since there were no teacups or steam coming out of the teapot itself. The striped-haired man took off his shoes, stepped further into the flat and looked for his tenant.

Zhao started, "Mr. Wang, I—"

“Yes! Yes, I’ll be with you in a moment! I just needed to find the money, which will be...here!” Interrupted the merchant from another room. Zhao opened his mouth and shut it, not wanting to yell across the room. So he found a place that isn’t a mess, and sat down. He takes that as an opportunity to survey the arts and craftsmanship that Wang has dedicatedly created. The colors have resonated with the merchant completely; bold and bright, but still holds the delicacy of each stroke. Wang wasn’t only a merchant, he was an artist. A very talented artist at that. When the merchant—artist—appeared again, the landlord was met with a sack of money being thrown onto the table carelessly. “Here you go—oh you’ve said down here, I’m sorry about the mess but it’s the commissioning season so please don’t mind it. It’s—it’s a work in progress right now.” Zhao spotted that Wang must be very fatigued, so he gets up and encouraged Wang to have a seat at the table with him. “Mr. Wang, what I meant to say is that you should have a break.” Wang whipped his head around to his landlord, he cracked a smile, “Oh, I simply cannot. You see, I—” The artist’s words were cut short due to Zhao placing his hands on his shoulders, walking him to the table and sitting him down. Methodically, Zhao took the teapot, drained the old tea away and started a new brew. Once the kettle was on the fire, he sat back down in front of Wang at the table. “I have said what I said. Have a break.” Said Zhao calmly. Wang scoffed and looked away, “I’m already quite shameful of my mess, especially when it comes to you seeing this. And I can’t take a break if I want to pay rent, you see.”

Zhao measured the weight of his words in his head before uttering, he took a deep breath and spoke in a quiet voice, “You don’t have to pay me rent with money, and all I ask from you is to paint me something each month, your work is more valuable than money. And you struggle to make money, but not art. I care about your health, so...” By each word, the artist’s eyes brightened just a little more by each word. His smile crept up into a grin. “Are you lying? Because I can’t possibly give you just my work, it’s not worth much anyway.” Zhao sighed and looked into the artist’s eyes, “If it doesn’t worth much, then why bother selling it. It is evidently impressive, and I would like to admire your work.”

The kettle whistled, the smell of tea enveloped the room, the smile of the artist brightened. The room seems to brighten as the sun rays fall into the room.

“Of course, with pleasure.” The artist whispered with hope. The landlord, who was once stoic, cracked a small smile. Just a little.

Silk Road Tales: The Imperial Seal

King's College, Chen, Mattheus Jun – 11

Looking back at this trip, I didn't feel like it was a waste of time after all, considering we all survived.

It was a normal sunny afternoon when I heard the doorbell ring. I stopped drinking my tea and went to open the door. However, all there was a letter, no one else. I turned left and right but there was no one to be found. I went back to my room expecting nothing much in the envelope. I unsealed it and there was a note that had three words: Important, meet now. When I turned the note around, a familiar name was shown. It wrote Ben Li, my adventurous and maybe freaky friend I used to play with in middle school. Since he said it was important, I brought my good friends Sean and Willie, both of whom have also met Ben. We all shared the same middle school. I called them in, and they accepted my request.

We made our way to where we thought Ben lived. We saw him on his porch. "Sean Chan and Willie Tang, didn't think both of you would be here. Do you all mind if I brought another friend, you should know him." Ben said. And next to him stood a tall, dark figure. I recognized him immediately, and he was known as the so-called prankster of our class, Phil Ming. "So why do you want me, or us here?", I asked. "Well, I didn't expect Sean and Willie to be here but the more people the better. Now, back to the point. I'm guessing all of you know about the Imperial Seal of China? The Imperial Seal of China, also known as the Heirloom Seal of the Realm, is one of the most famous Chinese treasures that is lost or destroyed. Carved for the first emperor, Qin Shi Huang, in 221 BC, the jade seal was a powerful symbol of imperial authority for centuries but vanished around the 10th century AD. But I'm guessing you don't want to know about all this boring talk. All I'm saying, is that the seal may still be around, but maybe broken into pieces scattered throughout the Silk Road. The only reason I'm doing this is because first, finding the pieces would probably make us rich, and I always love an adventure. And the reason I'm doing this is because I found a map in my Gong Gong's memory box." Me and the others were shocked, we all heard different stories, but we all knew that the Imperial Seal was either lost or destroyed, obviously until Ben mentioned this. And the fact that he had the map to finding it was astonishing. "And how would you expect just the five of us to find this seal?" Willie asked. "Well, I obviously didn't come unprepared. An Uber is waiting for us outside because we're going to the airport. I packed at least ten luggage just in case there were more than five of you. We're going on a flight to Urumqi, Xinjiang!" Ben enthusiastically replied. Well, I didn't expect my summer to be this fun. "You all coming? He's probably going to steal us for a week or so." I asked, and all of them said Yes in unison.

When we all landed, Ben led us to the Urumqi Museum, we saw mainly statues of Mao Zemin, the Communist Party's leader Mao Zedong's brother. I thought that Mao Zemin was alive for around the early 1900s so why did he have anything to do with the Imperial Seal made and lost millennium ago. That's when we saw a shiny object under one of Mao Zemin's memorial statues. But the second we grabbed hold of it, the statue reformed itself into a large stone moving crane, and we knew we were in trouble. We sprinted off to the exit, hoping the crane stopped chasing us, but it still came at us like we were food. Luckily, for no apparent reason, the crane stopped moving the second we exited the museum, leaving other tourists flabbergasted at the sight of what happened. Staring at the object clearly, it was clear that it was a piece of a seal. The crane chasing us left an imprint in our mind. We all thought that the next piece was dangerous, but Ben assured us retrieving all pieces would be worth it.

Our next stop, Lanzhou, was much easier than expected. All we did was go to the Gansu Provincial Museum, which was luckily uncrowded, and the seal was obvious, hidden and shown as a Buddhist Cult Artifact, but it took us no time to find out that the pattern matched the other piece of the seal we had. Although there were no guards, the glass we broke that confined the artifact reshaped itself to a panda, but it was slow and fat, so we even felt bad for it chasing us.

Finally, our last stop. The "Magic City", the "Pearl of the Orient", the "Paris of the East", and the "New York of China", Shanghai. Most people wouldn't expect a high technology city to hold such a priceless artifact. But

according to the map, it was hidden in Yu Garden. Our group made our way to the area and were amazed by the art pieces about Chinese history and mythology. Then, we saw a huge dragon statue. Under it was the last piece of the seal we needed. Looking at dragon statue, it would probably act the same way as the other animals that protected parts of the seal. However, this statue gave a more strict and dangerous feeling, like if I even laid a finger on the seal, the dragon would tear me apart. Then, I devised a strategy with my friends. “Guys, I think if the seal gets touched by something, the dragon statue would react. My plan is to grab a rock, throw it at the seal, then the dragon would get activated and distracted from the seal. My role is to take the seal, throw it to you guys, and I think the dragon would deactivate when we leave the garden. Is that a plan?” “Yeah, I think that’s the smartest thing you’ve ever done throughout your whole existence.” Sean replied. “Shut up”, I jokingly ordered. Then, what I said was what we did, I threw a nearby rock at the seal, and the dragon of course had to breath out fire, why do all dragons have to breath out fire? I rolled to the seal and threw it at Phil. Phil had butter fingers, so Ben took it carefully from his hands. We all ran to the exit of the garden, but the dragon didn’t stop. It followed us outside the exit, but that’s when we heard a loud BANG! And then another one. The dragon fell to the ground and we were saved, but by who? Well, that question was quickly answered when we scanned our surroundings. “Well done people, you unleashed a crane that scared citizens, broke and stole an artifact from a museum, and unleashed a fire-breathing dragon that could’ve killed many. But other than that, you guys helped us find the Imperial Seal.” Although this was all said in Chinese, it was clear for all of us, but I wondered who this person was. But then, his face was recognizable, being the president of China and all that. I was appalled that the president of China came all this way because of us, but we did just illegally steal pieces of a famous artifact, so it was asked for. Luckily, he was nice enough to let us off the hook, but we couldn’t keep the seal. I gave my thanks to him and we made our back to home.

“Nice trip, wasn’t it?” Ben said. “How was it nice? We spent so much time and effort, risked our lives, just so the seal would get taken away?” I replied. “Matt, it doesn’t even matter. This seal was never meant to be ours. It belongs to all the people of China. It’s a historical artifact after all.” Phil stated. That’s when I realized that this trip wasn’t about the outcome, it was about the experience, the process, and the friends we made along the way.

The Silk Aurora

King's College, Cheng, Carlisle Spencer – 12

If you look at the sky during nighttime, you might see the beautiful aurora shining brightly in the starry skies with its vibrant colors. However, the aurora you see today holds a story waiting to be told behind those colors, a story that has been hidden for over two millennia, just waiting to be discovered...

It all began from a dream. After a long day of meetings and discussions, emperor Shinmi was exhausted. 'It's so tiring being an emperor,' she thought to herself. 'Hopefully I'll get a good night's sleep before the meetings tomorrow.' After writing some letters to the government officials, she laid on her cozy bed and fell asleep. That was the start of the story and the long journey ahead.

During the dream, she saw the sky covered with silk-like lines, stretching so far that even she couldn't see the end of the lines. She was amazed, dumbfounded by how strange yet beautiful they looked. As she walked further, she saw mountains standing beside the Mediterranean Sea, a sea that she had only heard about in myths and legends. Looking at the horizon touching the water, she felt calmness in her body. Seeing the silk lines still stretching further into the unknown, she felt curious, wondering where it would lead her if she kept following the lines. Suddenly, a voice echoed from the sky above her, 'To the ones who complete the journey, shall receive a reward that will benefit many generations to come.'

Before emperor Shinmi had time to process what the voice meant, she woke up.

Feeling confused, she put on her clothes and got ready for another boring and exhausting day. But then, two guards burst into the palace, their faces drenched in sweat, as if they had been running to the palace since sunrise. 'Emperor Shinmi!' Shouted one of the guards. 'There's some sort of silk in the sky! What's going on?' Emperor Shinmi was bewildered. 'I thought that was just a dream!' She muttered to herself. 'I've got to know what's going on. That voice told me something. Benefit many generations to come? Complete the journey? Hold on... What if the journey was following the silk? That's it! I have to tell the other officials about it.'

By tomorrow, all resources were prepared for the journey. Fifty guards were waiting for Emperor Shinmi at the Great Wall, ready to protect her at all costs.

As they went out of the Great Wall, the mountains stood tall, covered with trees with dark green leaves. They were so tall, that the clouds above were covering their tips. The wind crashed into them, its violent howls echoing so loud that you could hear it from a mile away. Each step felt like there was a boulder pulling them down. Yet Emperor Shinmi and the guards didn't give up. They walked from one mountain to another, step by step, following the silk, as it guided them.

After a few days of struggle, they finally finished crossing through the mountains. As Emperor Shinmi and the guards crossed to the other side, they saw the Mediterranean Sea. The guards' jaws dropped. The Mediterranean Sea was believed to be a myth, a legend where 'the sun sinks at night, and rises when a new day starts'. And there it was. In front of their eyes. As sunrise approached, the sun began to appear little by little, until most of it was shown, some covered under the waters, as if the sun was floating on the water. The guards were astonished by the stunning view, some even crying tears of joy. 'Alright guards, let's keep walking,' said Emperor Shinmi. The guards were reluctant, but they still followed her orders.

For the next few days, it felt amazing compared to the mountains. They walked on the hills beside the Mediterranean Sea, its waves splashing on the rocks gently. The soothing sound spread calmness around each of the guards' bodies, with them continuing the journey more relaxed than ever. Little did they know that this was just the calm before the storm.

All of a sudden, the once sunny sky turned gloomy, with ash-like clouds covering the sun. Yet the silk was still seeable, it kept guiding Emperor Shinmi and the guards forwards. As they kept walking, the rain came. At first, it was just a few drops gently dropping onto the guards' heads. Then it became rapid rain falling down from the sky, each drop on the guards feeling like a hard tap on their helmets. As the rain fell down, the sound of thunder roared in the sky, like a lion proving its territory. After the thunder, multiple streaks of lightning plummeted down in an instant, each creating a crater almost two meters in diameter. The shock waves of the lightning coming down were so powerful that all of the guards got knocked back.

But then, the silk started shaking violently, and then it flew up into the sky. Emperor Shinmi and the guards were confused. What happened?

After a moment, the clouds split apart, with the sun shining brightly from the cracks, and the silk finally returning to its original place. 'Thank you,' Emperor Shinmi muttered to the silk above her. As the sky finally cleared, they kept walking forward.

The next day, they kept walking again. However, it was a different situation today.

Suddenly, one of the guards shouted, 'Oh my gosh! Look up!' Everybody immediately looked at the sky in an instant. 'What is that?' Asked another guard. Up in the sky, the silk was tied up, under the tied-up silk someone had painted a x-shaped cross. The voice in the sky echoed, 'You have finished the journey. We're so proud of you. Once you step on the x-shaped cross, there will come a gift that will benefit many generations to come.' Emperor Shinmi started to walk slowly to the x-shaped cross, hand trembling with a mix of fear, accomplishment and happiness.

Once her foot stepped on the cross, they heard the sound of horses galloping from the front. As they looked, they saw over five hundred horses galloping towards them, with people from Central Asia riding them. Emperor Shinmi felt regret sink into her heart. 'What if it was a trap? What do I do now?' She thought nervously.

But then, the people in the middle ordered them to stop. He got off his horse and started slowly walking to Emperor Shinmi. 'May I ask, are you Emperor Shinmi?' Said the man in a low voice. 'Yes, I am Emperor Shinmi. What have you come here for?'

'A voice told us all to follow the silk in the sky, and to bring our most treasured items with us.' Said the man. 'They told us there would be a woman on a x-shaped cross, and she was Emperor Shinmi.' However, Emperor Shinmi and the guards did not bring any items to trade with them. 'That necklace looks sick! Can I trade my pendent for it?' Said one of the horse-riders. 'Of course!' Said a guard.

For the next few hours, the guards and the horse-riders traded items with each other. Paper for leather, pork for beef, anything that they had. During the night, they danced and sang to their homeland songs until sunrise. They shared inside jokes with each other, as if they had been best friends forever. Even though they were separated by distance, they were all brothers and sisters on that day.

When the sun rose, they had to say farewell. 'That was an amazing day yesterday, Emperor Shinmi. Unfortunately, we have other duties in our country. See you again, if we meet again.' Said the man. 'I agree,' said Emperor Shinmi. 'What if we meet every year at this spot?' she asked. 'Sure, why not?' Said the man. Hopefully by the time we meet again, you will bring our guards with you as well. My lads enjoyed their time with them very much!

When they returned home, the silk in the sky was gone, replaced by streams of color flowing in the sky. 'Well Emperor Shinmi, I must say that was quite an adventure,' said one of the guards. 'What should we name this journey?'

'The Silk Road.' Said Emperor Shinmi.

'Are you sure?' asked the guard.

'Yes, I'm sure.' Emperor Shinmi answered.

And that is the story of the Silk Road. The story waiting to be discovered behind the colors, and I must say, it is one of the most beautiful and amazing stories I've ever heard. And now I wonder, does natural beauty hide behind its own colors? Like rainbows, what if there was also another story to be discovered behind its colors? That is a question I will be asking myself for a very long time. But for now, we know about the story of the silk aurora, its beauty hidden behind streaks of colors, hiding a story alongside it, a story that connected two cultures together...

The Promise

King's College, Cheong, Hoi Cheung Kaison – 13

It was a chilly night like any other in Uzbekistan. Twelve year old Karimov had never stepped outside Bukhara's city walls, not even to the outer markets. His grandfather was the town's spice keeper, the person everyone relied on for cumin that didn't taste like dusty dirt and sand. Now he lays in bed, sick. His shakey hand passes a leather pouch into Karimov's hands.

"Take this to the tea merchants in Chang an." He says with a weak and thin voice. "It's not regular cumin, I added a twist. It's mixed with star anise from the east. Promise me that you won't lose it?" Karimov nodded confidently, masking his worries. What if his grandfather got worse while he was gone? Omar, the trader who brought his grandfather spices for years, said he'd take him along with his camels. "We'll stop at oases every few days, so you won't get thirsty."

The first morning on the road, Karimov's legs ached from sitting on the camel. He thought riding would be fun, like the times he climbed on his uncle's horse, but the camel's back swayed in a weird way that made him uncomfortable. Omar handed him a loaf of bread to quiet down his growling stomach. "Eat up, we won't stop again until the sunset." He said whilst chewing bread. Karimov took a bite, and he felt crunchy bits between his teeth. He spat it out, hoping Omar doesn't see it.

That night, they camped near a small oasis. The other traders sat around a fire, talking about the towns they'd passed through, but Karimov wandered over to the water. He pulled the leather pouch out of his pocket and opened it. Inside, the cumin seeds had a warm brown color, mixed with tiny bits of star anise. His grandfather had spent days grinding and mixing it. As he stared into his own reflection, he remembered when his grandfather let him stir once, and he stirred too aggressively and spilled a handful on the floor. His grandfather didn't yell at him, he just laughed and said to do it more gently next time.

A week later, a sandstorm hit. The wind howled so loud Karimov could barely hear his uncle. Omar yelled to tell everyone to huddle close to the camels, but in the chaos of the sandstorm, his pouch slipped out of his pocket. "No!" He shouted whilst attempting to catch it mid-air. Luckily, the pouch got caught in one of those dead bushes you would see in the deserts. When the storm died down, he sprinted towards the bush, dusted it off, and put the pouch back into his pocket. He almost felt like crying, he had promised his grandfather.

They finally reached Chang an, Karimov's jaw dropped. The city gates were taller than Bukhara's biggest mosque, and the streets were packed with people. Some in long robes, some carrying baskets of fruit, some leading horses with shiny saddles. Omar took him to a tall building with a sign that had Chinese words on it. "This is the tea guild," he said.

A man in a blue robe came out. Omar talked to him in Chinese, then nodded at Karimov. He held out the pouch. The man opened it, took a sniff, and raised his head to make brief eye contact with Omar. It seemed like he liked the smell. He poured a little of the cumin into a cup of hot tea, stirred it, and took a sip. Then he nodded, and said something to Omar.

"He says it's the best blend he's ever tasted," Omar translated to Karimov. "He wants to trade your grandfather's cumin for their tea. We'll take a crate of tea back with us."

Karimov couldn't help but smile, a genuine one. He thought of his sick grandfather, lying in bed, and he knew that he'd be happy.

They got back to Bukhara. Karimov ran to his grandfather's house. He was sitting up in bed, grinding more spices, when he rushed in. "I did it!" he said, holding up the pouch that is now empty and a small crate of Chang an tea. "They loved the cumin, and they want to trade with us forever!"

Her grandfather laughed, a weak but real laugh. Karimov gave him the tea. "Let's try it," he said. He poured a cup, and they drank it together. It was smooth, and had a rich flavour with a hint of sweetness.

"Do you know why I sent you?" he said. "Not just to trade the cumin. I wanted you to see that the Silk Road isn't just long road with sand, but it's a long road with sand that leads to different people and cultures. You shared things with the chinese, and you've got to see what they wear, what they build, and what they have. You've got to see what the outside world looks like."

Karimov nodded, and for the first time he felt proud for himself. He felt like he had learnt something new, that there are so many different things out there. And soon after he became the most well-known trader in Uzbekistan.

A Journey Through The Silk Road

King's College, Hong, Wen Bo Bobo – 12

John was in a bad mood. And that was before he fell into a black hole. It all started with a normal school day in Primrose high. Leo Macber, the biggest bully in the school, was picking on him. 'Scrawny Johnny!' He jeered. John was used to this. He just avoided eye contact and walked on. It was true, he was the smallest boy at school, and was last picked for everything, even for the skipping contest. His mum said that he should be proud, that being short made him unique. Sometimes, John wondered if his mum had lost her mind.

He just got to the toilets when he realized he had made a mistake. He had forgot to scout out the area. But it was too late. Leo and his gang popped out from nowhere. 'Surprise!' He said, with a malicious grin. His goons, Larry and Abby, carried him into the toilets. John squirmed and fought, but it was no use. They dumped him in a cubicle, and put a bar through the handle. 'Let me out!' Leo shouted, pounding on the door. But Leo just laughed.

Just great, Leo thought. He looked around at what was probably going to be his prison for the next few hours. Suddenly, he spotted something unusual. Where toilets supposed to shine liked that? He leaned forward, and suddenly, he fell forwards, into the toilet, into the endless hole.

He landed in a city. It looked old. Very old. Everywhere, there were old wooden huts and people dressed strangely. With a bad feeling, he walked up to one of the people and asked: 'Excuse me, but what year is it?' The person replied: 'It is 2000BC' The person looked at him strangely. 'What are you wearing?' John ducked away quickly. Great, at least it is better than being picked on.

A large group of people were crowded around a notice board. John went to see what they were staring at. A large piece of paper was nailed on the wall. On it, were the words: 'Emperor Wu has issued a task to Zhang Qian to make a military alliance with the Xiongnu.' He heard one of the villagers say: 'This will never work.' There was another whirl pool, and John disappeared...

He found himself near an army camp, this time watching from a far. He saw a man entering the camp. Some men with swords came out and surrounded the man. He tried to show them a piece of paper, but the men just laughed and tied him up. Watching them pushing the man inside a tent, John thought: That man must be Zhang Qian, and those man must be the Xiongnu, and they've captured him! I've got to help! But before he could do anything, there was another whirlpool, and the scene vanished.

The next moment, He found himself back in the village, but clearly, some time had already past. The villagers were carrying a man who was clearly Zhang Qian, but a lot older. The people were all cheering 'hurray for the great Zhang, the hero from the western lands!' As he watched, Zhang Qian opened his bag, and showed the people a bunch of grapes, some jewelry, and several gold bars. The crowd yelled excitedly. John thought: this must be when Zhang Qian came back from his quest! He has so many exotic products!

The king himself came from the palace, and everyone bowed. The king inspected the products that Zhang Qian had brought back, and smiled approvingly. Although he had failed in his quest, he had made a huge discovery. John barely had time to feel happy before he fell into another whirlpool.

This time, he fell into a flourishing market. There were stalls selling everything, from silk, gunpowder and paper, to gold, horses and exotic fruits. He went around taking in the huge market. It seemed that all of Asia, Europe, and Africa had taken part in this market. Wow, John thought, the silk road has finally started. This is so amazing!

The next time he emerged through a whirlpool, the scene was totally different. People lay dead on the streets, while rodents roamed free. Far away, a child was crying. Oh no, What happened? John thought. He looked around and remembered something from his textbook. Oh, this is the black death! More than half a million people died! And the disease traveled through the silk road! This is so horrible! John couldn't bare to stay anymore, so he jumped into the whirlpool...

He found himself in another market, but this time, the people there looked stronger, as though they were soldiers. The market mainly traded for weapons and horses, and there were some man on horses. So this is the Mongol empire, thought John, and the rise of the silk road. However, the silk road declines over time as sea travel became more powerful, this is pretty much the end of the silk road! As if on que, the portal appeared and John climbed in.

He found himself back in the boy's toilets, and Leo Macber was just leaving. He froze as he saw John. 'Where have you been?' He growled. 'The silk road' John replied. 'Huh?' 'Really, you should spent more time studying about the silk road instead of bothering kids. It's more interesting.' And he walked away, leaving the three bullies stunned.

The Talking Stone

King's College, Wang, Tsz Wa – 14

A caravan was slowly making its way westward across the Gobi Desert. Suddenly, the lead guide, Amur, raised his hand to signal a stop. He squinted his eyes, which had been weathered by the wind and sand, and pointed to a huge rock on a distant dune. "Here it is," his voice hoarse, "the 'Talking Stone'."

Li Cong, a Han merchant dealing in silk in the caravan, looked up. The huge rock was riddled with holes and made a wailing sound when the wind blew, indeed seeming to murmur. The fellow servants accompanying him all showed fear and detoured around it, but only Li Cong dismounted and approached.

He reached out and touched the lines on the stone, only to find that they were not naturally formed but rather densely packed with strange characters. Some resembled Sanskrit, some Persian, and interspersed among them were a few barely recognizable Chinese characters.

"It's... a message left by a traveler," Li Cong suddenly realized. He examined carefully and found a line of small characters in the shade of the stone: "In the third year of the Zhenguan era, Wang Qi, a jade carver from Khotan, took shelter here from the sandstorm. If any fellow craftsman sees this, please inform my family that I am well." Higher up, there are even older inscriptions: "The Great Yuezhi merchants went eastward from here, carrying ten loads of spices."

Li Cong carefully examined the huge rock and found that the messages on it spanned several hundred years and came from all directions. There were wishes for safety, records of goods transactions, warnings from lost travelers, and sighs of homesickness. People from different languages and different dynasties had used the rock as paper in this desolate place, engaging in a dialogue that transcends time and space.

"Boss, it's time to hit the road!" the assistant shouted. However, Li Cong took out a small knife and carefully engraved on the stone: "Li Cong of Chang'an, traveling westward with a hundred boxes of silks. If anyone needs help, they can seek help at the Yongchang Store in Dunhuang."

When they set up camp that night, Amur, unusually, had a conversation with Li Cong: "That stone is a 'messenger' on the Silk Road. When my grandfather was young, he carved words there. Fifty years later, my father really found the message left there."

Li Cong added a piece of firewood to the fire and said, "Why didn't you tell me earlier?"

"The Han merchant caravans came and went, most of them regarding it as a strange rock," Amur smiled and continued to speak, "Only smart people know what the stone is used for."

The next morning, just as the camel caravan was about to set off, a trading team from the west arrived at the huge rock. The leader, a Sogdian, jumped off from his camel, examined the newly carved characters on the rock carefully, and then walked towards Li Cong.

"Are you Li Cong from the Yongchang Store?" the Sogdian asked, speaking poor Chinese. "I heard about your business establishment in Samarkand. I have Persian silverware here. Could we exchange it in Dunhuang?"

Li Cong was astonished. He then realized that this was also part of the miracle of the Silk Road – news spread through word of mouth among the traveling caravans, traveling even faster than the camel caravans.

On the journey ahead, Li Cong began to pay attention to all kinds of "messengers" along the way. Not only the talking stone, but also the piles of stones at the forks in the road, the markings beside the water sources, and even the stones placed beside the human bones in the desert – those were the marks left by later travelers for their dead companions.

Two months later, Li Cong's caravan arrived in Kashgar. At the market, an old man from Khotan tottered over. "Are you Li Cong from Chang'an? Have you ever seen Wang Qi's message at the talking stone?"

Li Cong recalled the words on the stone, "Wang Qi, a jade carver from Khotan, took shelter here from the sandstorm," and nodded hurriedly, "I've seen it. He asked me to tell his family that he's fine."

The old man's eyes moistened: "That was my father. He went west fifty years ago and never returned. Thank you for the news you brought."

At that moment, Li Cong suddenly understood the true meaning of the Silk Road. It was not merely a trade route, but a bond that connected hearts. Silk fades and silver coins rust, but these conversations that spanned time and space, these feelings of concern for one another between people who had never met, were the most precious goods on the Silk Road.

On his way back, Li Cong passed by that huge rock again. He added another line of words: "The Silk Road stretches for a thousand miles, connecting not only the East and the West but also the past and the present. All those who travel along it are my friends."

China's Silk Road

Korean International School, Padwalkar, Aditi – 11

The cool winds danced amongst our feeble bodies.

I stared at the silk I was meant to sell, remembering the rejections of many different countries.

Ming, my only companion laid her hand on the silk, putting her weight on our carriage.

“Do you really think we’ll be able to sell any silk?” She asked. “We went to so many countries, yet they all didn’t want our silk.”

I looked forward, thinking about our only destination left.

“We’ve got one more chance.” I muttered. “Europe.”

★ ★ ★

A few hours passed. I glanced back at our silk, wondering if this trip would really be a success.

Ming sighed. “Mei, do you really think they would accept our silk?”

I didn’t reply. I locked my eyes into the land of Europe, now unsure if they would accept our trade.

I stepped out of our carriage. Ming let out a huge sigh, reluctantly carrying the heaps of silk.

A merchant came towards us, a lumpy pouch dangling from his waist.

“Are you guys willing to trade silk with us?” He asked.

I nodded.

The merchant pursed his lips. “How many sheets have you got?”

“6,” I replied. “We have 6 sheets.”

The merchant smiled. “Wonderful! Fortunately, I’ve got a pouch full of gold and silver for you!”

I stared at the pouch skeptically. “May I see it?”

The merchant rolled his eyes. “Go ahead.”

I opened the sack. The merchant kept his word. Pieces of gold and silver glistened from the pouch, as there were many more pieces peeping out from the holes.

I smiled, happy that our trade was really successful. “Trade... Accepted.” I let out my numb hand, as the merchant grasped it tightly, shaking it delightfully.

He released each sheet of silk from Ming’s hand, as she was ready to head back to our carriage.

Ming laid her back on the lightweight carriage, as our horse dusted his hooves on the snow, all of us ready to head back home.

I played with the small pieces of gold and silver. I looked back at the land of Europe, who simply lent them their precious pieces.

★ ★ ★

Many days passed whilst travelling back to China.

Finally, we reached our home.

Me and Ming looked around the small village, as we found our mentor walking towards us. I quickly got out the pouch of gold and silver, ready to present it to our mentor.

Our mentor stood in front of us, and had an unpleasant look on his face. “Welcome back girls. May I inspect what you traded with...”

I handed him the pouch. “Europe.” I answered, “We traded with Europe.”

He shook the pouch, and pulled its parted strings. After a close look of the stones, he let out a distasteful look.

“Go back to Europe. I certainly do not accept this trade.”

I clenched my fists. “Sir but—”

“Six sheets of silk, just for a few pieces of *rocks*? Mei, you may think it’s worth it, but it definitely isn’t.” Ming took a step forward. “Sir we worked very hard and travelled many different countries and—” Our mentor shook his head. “All of your other teammates actually put in some effort and,” He pointed to the side. “Look at all the valuable things they got! Food, garments, horses and camels and much more! And look at what you got.” He dangled the pouch in front of my eyes. “Pieces of *rocks*.”

My face turned red. “Sir, they aren’t just rocks! They’re pieces of gold and silver! Aren’t they valuable enough to you?”

I was going to protest some more, but my mentor said his final words to us. “I said my words. *Go back to Europe*.” Ming and I glared at him, and set off for one more journey.

★ ★ ★

Some time passed. Once again, we were in the cold air of China.

Ming turned to me. “This is so unfair. We don’t even get a second of a break! Honestly, at this point he’s probably just ungrateful.”

I didn’t reply. A colony of dread fluttered around my feeble body.

Ming sighed. “He can just be so harsh on us sometimes.”

Suddenly, our carriage stopped. Ming got up. “Mei? What happened?”

I looked down. “I—I don’t know.” I got off of our carriage, and inspected our horse. I gasped in shock.

“Ming, he looks much too tired.”

Ming got on our carriage, and ruffled through our goods. “Mei, the only thing we have here is heaps of silk and a few carrots.”

“Carrots? Is that the only food we have?”

Ming nodded.

I gulped. “Feed him carrots. Now.”

“Mei, but—”

“Now.”

Ming bought out the carrots reluctantly and tossed them into the snow. Before I fed our horse one bite, he let out a huge cough.

Ming looked over. “D—Do you think he’s ok?”

I ignored her. I kept on trying to put a carrot into our horse’s mouth, but our horse refused. Suddenly, he let out one last cough and collapsed.

“What? **No!**” Ming came rushing over to our horse.

“He *died*? What?!”

I was flooded in despair. While Ming was ranting about how we had to walk all the way to Europe, I remained silent.

I thought about how we were going to get tortured by the mentor, considering the fact that this was his favourite horse. Or perhaps his favourite animal. Even if we had a good trade to our mentor’s acceptance, me and Ming would have to be aware of one thing we would face when we reach back home...

★ ★ ★

The rest of our journey continued on foot.

Ming kept on grumbling and complaining about her sore feet, as heaps of silk laid its weight on my numb hands.

A few days passed.

I looked ahead. The blurry sights of Europe almost came visible. I wondered how much faster we would reach our destination with the help of our horse.

“Hey Mei,” Ming whined. “I’m hungry. Starving.”
“We’ll get food Ming. It would help if you end the complaints.”
Ming sighed. Suddenly, a spark lit up in her eyes. She grasped my hand and started shaking it.

“Hey Mei! Look! It’s *Europe!*”
I looked forward. It really was Europe! My pace increased, as Ming limped forward.
I saw the same merchant as before. He grumbled.
“Oh, you guys again?”

Ming sighed. “Our mentor didn’t approve of your trade.”
I nodded. “Is it ok if perhaps... The trade is better this time?”
The merchant muttered under his breath. “How ungrateful. Oh well, for *that* much worth of silk, I guess I can lend you a carriage and some food.” He looked behind us. “Considering the fact that you came all the way from China on foot.”

Ming seemed quite skeptical. “Food? And a carriage? That’s—”
The merchant interrupted us. “Do you want it or not?”
I let out my hand. “The trade is... Accepted.”
The merchant smiled, and swung my hand in delight. He released the silk off of my sore hands, as Ming rushed to sit on the carriage.
I followed her. Ming was now admiring the food. “Mei! The food is hot! It’s still hot!”
I smiled. “At least the trade was successful this time!”
The merchant appeared behind us. “Good luck travellers.”

★ ★ ★

The journey back home felt like a rush.
It was much better than walking on foot all the way from one country to another.
Soon, I saw my village, alongside with our mentor standing near it.
“Hello girls, I see a new carriage?”
I nodded. “That was our trade sir. Along with some food.”
Our mentor smiled in delight. “That’s wonderful! This carriage looks amazing!”
“Thank you sir.” Me and Ming both said in unison.
He came walking towards our carriage, admiring the beauty of it. “I wonder how comfy this would be! I can’t wait to go on trips with my lovely carriage.”
I wanted to agree, but some part of me opposed that idea. “*Your* carriage? Me and Ming went on two trips, suffered by walking on foot, and completely followed your set of instructions. And you’re calling it *your* carriage? Why don’t you go on an almost month-long trip from one continent to another?”
Our mentor clenched his fists. “Mei, this is certainly—”
“No. This is both mine and Ming’s carriage, as we both deserve a reward for this hard work.”
Our mentor sighed. “I heard from the emperor of Europe. A very successful trade you both accomplished. Keep the carriage. Keep the food. Keep the useless stones you both collected. I just want to appreciate your hard work.”
He nodded, and turned away.
Ming smiled. “I can’t believe we get to keep the carriage! The trip was so worth it!”
Soon, the news of our trade spread amongst various countries, as they all were willing to trade silk in exchange for silk, and remained popular for more than a millenium.

Mysterious Silk Road

Korean International School, Wong, Ching Yiu – 13

In a busy village near the Silk Road, a 13 year old named Theo discovered a map in his grandma's basement. The map shows the direction of a dragon's treasure filled with gold and artifacts. He showed it to his best friend Mikey, both of them really like adventures so they both decided to try to find it.

They ask Elder Wu who warns them that there will be a spirit named Xiang guarding it, and in order to reach it they will need to solve three riddles.

When they arrived in a dry and hot desert, they got their first riddle. It was on an old piece of paper : "I am a path through mountains and sand, where traders and caravans make their stand. What am I?" Theo answered correctly, "The Silk Road". Then it led them to a hidden path.

Next, they had to climb a mountain, which led them to another riddle about the silk road. They got suspicious about why all the riddles are about the Silk Road even though they don't know what it is, but they just focused back on getting to the treasure.

Lastly, in a cave, they met Xiang who gave them their last riddle: "I am a treasure that flows like a stream, I'm worth my weight in the merchant's dream. What am I?" Mikey shouts "Oh, I know, Gold," and gets it correct.

Inside, they found treasure but it was only the Silk Road. They took a few artifacts and gold back, creating a museum for people to find more about the Silk Road.

Have You Ever Wondered

Korean International School, Wong, Race Chloe – 12

Have you ever wondered what the silk road was like? Were there any dangers? Why is the Silk Road so important? Well, here is the story of the three merchants that made history...

Vivi, Evi and Navi were three sisters that were inseparable, they would do everything together. One day, the trio were out buying some snacks after school. As they strolled along, Navi stopped as her eyes trailed to the dirty ground as she felt a slight discomfort on her shoes. "Hey look guys, there's a watch here!" Navi exclaimed. They crowded around it quickly, staring at it in silence as it glistened in the sun. On the clock it said "19:20". Evi swiftly checked her watch in confusion. "That clock's wrong! It's only four!" Evi yelled. "Don't worry guys. I can fix it." Vivi suggested. They nodded in agreement. Vivi clicked a button as the time changed by one hour, then another. "Why is there such a strong gust of wind suddenly?!" Navi shouted through the current, as they gripped their feet on the ground...

WHOOSH! WUSH! The wind faded when Vivi changed the watch to the correct time. They looked around. The buildings they once knew were gone and crumbly brick walls that looked unstable were put up instead. The air was fuzzy and soulless, "Where are we?!" they yelled. It was all a blur, all the technology was gone. All that all that was left were thousands of mountains and markets in this vast world that they were clueless about. The trio walked around, trying to find a way out of this place. "Wait! The watch I was just holding is gone!" Vivi shouted. They looked stunned. "Maybe you dropped it during that big gust of wind," suggested Evi. Vivi laughed it off clumsily as they looked Navi and Evi looked unsurprised. Then, a sudden thought shot through Vivi's head like a bullet. "What if we went back in time literally because of that watch! You know, when I was changing the time all our surroundings were changed through that big gust of wind and it looks like like we were in the 19th century!" Vivi exclaimed. Navi and Evi exchanged confused looks. "Ah! I know!" Navi called. "I learnt about this during class! We're on the Silk Road! It all makes sense now." It was now clear to them. Evi looked confused as she was the youngest and hadn't learned about it yet. Even though they knew, they still didn't know how they were going to get out of here. As they walked around, Navi and Vivi educated Evi on the glorious history of the Silk Road. The sky darkened as the dying sun left the trail of shadows that dimmed. Their chatter filled the journey with fun as they journeyed through obstacles.

As they hiked the treacherous mountains, all they felt was hopelessness. The vanilla moon loomed around as the audience of stars chattered. Their hair blew in the wind as they all sighed. All of a sudden, Evi instantly saw a bright light coming from a distance like a speck of hope. "I think it's a village!" Evi cried. They all sprinted across the field with joy. It wasn't all hopeless now. Maybe this could be their only chance to get out of this place! When they arrived at the village, they heard shouting and chatter all around the village filled with life. They walked up to a market that was selling spices. It was a old man in a rigid tent selling "exotic" spices. "How much is it for one spice?" Vivi said politely. The old man looked up weakly, cracking his neck. "Anything worth some value." Evi had an idea. She remembered that Navi told her that paper was valuable during this time. She scurried through her pristine school bag as she got her notebook and aggressively ripped a page out. "Wow!" The old man exclaimed. "This paper is very good quality! Here are some spices." Evi looked blank as the old man hastily handed her a handful of spices. They looked at the spices, trying to process that it worked. "You know that watch we lost earlier?" Navi said. "What if we could try to find the watch and buy it back with the valuable things we trade for?" "That might work..." Evi and Vivi said at the same time. After some time thinking, they nodded in agreement as the quest to find the missing watch started.

They saw a happy family that were selling unique pottery. "Hello! Would you like to buy something?" the happy mother exclaimed. "Yeah... We would like to buy that pot over there." Navi said hesitantly. "For, uhhh..." Navi whimpered as she grabbed a pen from her pencil case. "This pen! It's very good quality and valuable!" Navi said

weakly as her persuading skills weren't very good. Vivi and Evi stayed quiet looking concerned. The lively family gathered quickly as they had never seen a ball point pen before. In good condition too because it was new. "Wow!" she said. "Really? Thank you so much!" She cried. The mother happily handed the pot to Navi. Navi felt a sense of pride because her persuading actually worked this time. The family smiled as they said their goodbyes.

They kept trading for hours end-to-end until it was morning. Although they were very, very tired, they kept pushing through. They walked and talked with many different kinds of people, from different countries to different cultures.

They wandered through this ominous town filled with fog and gloom. They approached a woman that had her hair tied up with chopsticks. Her eyes were as sharp as an eagle. "What do you children want?" The woman growled. Vivi jumped, getting caught off guard. She hesitantly looked around the stall as her eyes caught the most valuable thing sold on the Silk road. "Could we have that piece of silk there?" Vivi asked. "It's very valuable. Very valuable." The woman said seriously as her eyes locked with Vivi's. They exchanged looks as they thought together deeply. Paper? No. Spices? No. Pottery? No. Then they all looked at the keychain hooked on Navi's school bag that she had bought from a convenient store the other day. "How about this?" Vivi said, offering the keychain quickly. "Oh! I've never seen that before! And it's such good quality, it must be very valuable right?" They nodded hesitantly with an awkward chuckle. Then the woman instantly swapped the piece of silk with the keychain. "Thank you very much girls!" the woman said as she changed her personality instantly. As the trio left, they couldn't help but burst into laughter as they just scammed the woman. "I thought she was going to scold us for offering something that cheap!" Vivi cried. "I know!" Evi said. They laughed together as they approached new areas of the town.

They wandered around looking soulless in desperate hope that they would find the watch. Their hearts were aching in impatience. It had been so many hours that they have lost count. Now, it felt like an impossible task to reach...

Suddenly. All thoughts were gone. There it was.

A man was sitting on a creaking chair. His hair thin and pale. The wrinkles on his face sagged as he waited. He was also selling a watch. It wasn't the watch they lost, but it was most certainly a watch. They marched up to him. "Could we have that gadget you have there?" Evi asked, assuming that they didn't know what a "watch" was. "Uhh-huh. But what do you have? It needs to be extremely valuable because I dug up this gadget so it's very valuable." the man snarled. Navi and Vivi pulled up the piece of silk they traded earlier up to him. The man's eyes widened with disbelief. "Deal," he said smirking. The man threw the watch into the air as Vivi clumsily caught it. They looked at the watch with joy and relief. On the watch it said "16:00". "Finally this nightmare can end," Navi said. Vivi changed the time from four to five, then six. The air swirled around them as the rapid wind blurred their surroundings.

WUSH! WHOOSH! The wind calmed down as the surroundings turned back to normal. They looked around in disbelief. They screamed and jumped in joy. Hugging and crying together.

A month after that situation there were reports on finding modern keychains and pens and many replicas of them on the silk road. They looked old and broken but are confirmed to be the same ones we use today...

New Tales of China's Silk Road

La Salle College, Calderon, Matthew – 14

Strong winter winds rattled the banners above the imperial palace in Chang'an. A cloaked messenger burst into the throne hall, collapsing before the emperor. "Emperor," he gasped, "the eastern borders have fallen!"

Emperor Wu rose in fury. "Thirty thousand men, and none could hold a single tribe? Pathetic!" The generals and officials bowed low, trembling—except one man.

He stepped forward calmly. "Great Emperor, I have a plan to end this war once and for all."

Wu's anger gave way to intrigue. "Who dares speak so boldly? State your name and plan."

"I am Zhang Qian," the man replied. "I've fought on the western front and know the Xiongnu's cunning. We cannot overcome them with strength alone. But if we travel west and ally with the Yuezhi—who were driven from their lands by the Xiongnu—we can strike together. I will go myself if Your Majesty permits."

The court murmured at the proposal. Some scoffed at venturing into the endless desert; others saw a faint glimmer of hope.

Emperor Wu stroked his beard. "A perilous path, yet one that might restore Han's glory. Very well, Zhang Qian—you shall go. Take one hundred men, gifts, and my imperial seal. May Heaven guide you."

At dawn, Zhang Qian stood before his company: one hundred warriors, horses laden with gold and silk, provisions stacked high. Among them was Hallfinger, a captured Xiongnu soldier turned guide, his eyes bearing the weight of exile. Emperor Wu approached on a black stallion.

"You carry the hope of the empire," he declared. Pressing a jade dragon pendant into Zhang Qian's hand, he added, "Let this remind you of home."

Zhang Qian bowed deeply. "I will not fail you."

The palace gates creaked open, and the company rode west into the rising sun.

Weeks later, the journey through the Hexi Corridor had ground them to exhaustion. Desert winds scoured the land, and the men's spirits withered under the blazing sun.

"We should soon reach the Xiongnu city of Dune," Hallfinger murmured. "But if Ohamed's guards spot us, we're doomed."

They crested a ridge, and the city unfurled below—black andesite walls shimmering with veins of glowing amber. At its center rose a monstrous coliseum shaped like the head of a god, serene face carved in stone yet twisted grotesquely. Its mouth gaped open into darkness, and plumes of smoke curled from nostrils that seemed to breathe.

"Abomination," Hallfinger whispered.

Before they could withdraw, horns blared. Xiongnu cavalry poured from the gates—hundreds of riders wielding spears and bows.

"Form up!" Zhang Qian shouted. They dismounted and raised shields, but on open ground, the defense dissolved under a storm of arrows. Men fell screaming. Zhang Qian fought desperately, cutting through the chaos until a lasso yanked him from his horse.

When the dust settled, most of his men were dead. Hallfinger's lifeless body lay in the sand. The survivors—Zhang Qian among them—were bound and dragged toward Dune's gates, their silks and gold seized, the imperial seal gone. Above them, the carved Buddha-face seemed to smile.

That night, Zhang Qian was hauled before Archduke Ohamed, who sat upon a throne of iron and wolf pelts. "So this is the Han messenger," Ohamed scoffed. "You thought to forge an alliance by marching a hundred men through my lands?"

"I am Zhang Qian," he said, voice steady despite his wounds. "Kill me, and Han's vengeance will follow."

Ohamed smiled faintly. "Perhaps you'll amuse my people first. Tomorrow—the coliseum."

In the pits below, thirty-one survivors huddled in darkness. When the guards drifted to sleep, Zhang Qian produced a hidden shard of obsidian and worked at his chains. Hours later, a faint click freed him. He and a soldier named Ganfu crept through the shadows, silenced the guards, and unlocked the others.

They split: one group to create chaos near the livestock pens, the other—led by Zhang Qian—toward the north gate through a network of tunnels. At first, the plan held. Then horns blared once more. Riders gave chase as they burst into the night.

Ganfu turned at the gate. "Go! I'll hold them off!"

Zhang Qian hesitated only a moment before fleeing with the survivors into the desert, leaving the grotesque coliseum fading behind.

The desert wind lashed their faces as they ran beneath the stars. "We can't outrun their horses," gasped young Li Wei, blood streaking his cheek.

"The Qilian Mountains," Zhang Qian panted. "If we reach them, cavalry can't follow."

By dawn, the peaks loomed ahead, jagged and radiant under the rising sun—but behind came war cries and pounding hooves.

"Keep going!" Zhang Qian yelled, turning to face the pursuers. He struck down the first rider, dodged the next, a blade grazing his arm. Then stones rained from above—the remaining men had reached the cliffs and hurled rocks upon the enemy.

"Zhang Qian!" a voice called. Ganfu, bloodied but alive, stood on a boulder. "This way!"

Zhang Qian scrambled up as the Xiongnu faltered below. Together they escaped into the mountains, the enemy fading in the distance.

By nightfall, they found shelter in a cave. Of the hundred who had left Chang'an, only twenty-three remained.

"What now?" murmured Chen Yu, the eldest. "Do we return in disgrace?"

"No," Zhang Qian said. "The emperor charged us to find the Yuezhi. We press on."

Li Wei protested, "We have no seal, no gifts—how will anyone believe us?"

Zhang Qian held the jade pendant aloft. "We still have truth, and the will of Han. The Yuezhi hate the Xiongnu as we do. They will hear us."

Ganfu nodded firmly. "Then we finish what we started."

Weeks became months. They trudged across barren plains and mountain passes, trading labor for food, dodging Xiongnu scouts, and burying comrades claimed by hunger and accident.

At last, nearly a year later, they sighted a vast encampment—green pastures dotted with bright tents, horses grazing, banners snapping in the breeze. At its center stood a grand wooden palace.

“The Yuezhi,” Zhang Qian breathed.

Armed riders approached, spears ready. Zhang Qian raised his hands. “I am Zhang Qian, envoy of Emperor Wu of Han. We come seeking alliance against our common foe.”

One rider dismounted, skeptical. “You claim to be Han, yet you look like beggars. Where is your proof?”

“Our gifts were stolen,” Zhang Qian replied, “but I speak truth.”

The rider studied him, then gestured. “Come. Our king will decide.”

They were led into the Yuezhi palace where King Qiuci—tall, sharp-eyed, and regal—awaited. Zhang Qian knelt and told his tale: Han’s suffering, the emperor’s charge, the imprisonment and escape, the journey across deserts and mountains. His voice wavered but never broke.

When he finished, the hall was silent.

“You have endured much,” said the king. “Yet you offer no proof.”

Zhang Qian unclasped the jade dragon pendant and placed it at the king’s feet. “This is all that remains of my emperor’s trust. Take it as proof of Han’s sincerity.”

The king examined it and smiled faintly. “Keep it. A man who survives such tribulations has no need of tokens. We will hear your proposal.”

That evening marked the beginning of something new. For weeks, Zhang Qian and King Qiuci spoke of empires and enemies, of trade and friendship. Gradually, an alliance took shape—a pact of mutual aid and exchange.

When the time came to return, the Yuezhi sent emissaries and gifts to accompany Zhang Qian home.

Two years after his departure, Zhang Qian finally approached the familiar gates of Chang’an. Word spread swiftly. Crowds thronged the streets as he led fifteen weary survivors toward the palace.

Inside the great hall, Emperor Wu rose in astonishment. “Zhang Qian? We thought you perished long ago.”

Zhang Qian knelt, laying Yuezhi gifts before him. “Great Emperor, the alliance is forged.”

Wu descended from his throne, tears glinting in his eyes. “You have done the impossible, Zhang Qian. Han owes you more than words can repay.”

Years later, trade thrived between Han and Yuezhi. Silk, jade, and spices flowed across lands once barren and silent. Together, their forces drove the Xiongnu back into the steppes, and the routes forged in those years became the arteries of a new world—the Silk Road.

Zhang Qian was hailed as a hero and made chief envoy of the empire. Yet in quiet moments, he would touch the jade dragon at his chest and remember the hundred who rode with him into the west, the roar of desert winds, and the promise he had made beneath the emperor’s gaze—the promise that changed history.

Long Roads Lead Home

La Salle College, Chung, Tin Lai Isaac – 13

The road ahead is long.

Truly.

I gaze ahead towards the horizon, but what else is there to be seen other than the winding sea of sand?

Even then it is an understatement.

I am amazed by the sheer size of the view, but it also strikes regret into my heart—for I know I have very, very little time left. My journey has eaten away at my supplies, and under the scorching sun, my parched lips crack with dehydration. The last well I found was weeks ago, and if I do find one, will I even have the strength to pull the bucket up?

And it's not really about my supplies either—I am old and worn. There was a time when I was young, energetic, ready to walk every last inch of the earth, to see with my very own eyes all the places my ma told me about when I was a child. But my youth has slipped away, for time waits for no one. I am tired, ready to exit this life into another, but I want to see one last place. Only then will my life be complete.

The Silk Road is an imaginary line on the map that connects country after country. I have seen so many of them, but one fascinates me above all else—the Dynasty of the dragons, China. The end point of the road.

Again, time doesn't wait for anyone. I set off on my journey, dragging my limp limbs forwards.

I have no travel companions, so my imagination and memories keep me occupied on these trips.

Sometimes there just isn't all that much to remember, so I think back to my childhood.

My mother would describe the many places she visited when she travelled along my father, a merchant who delivered goods across the continent. Of the many that caught my attention—the man eating swamps filled with alligators, which I scoffed at as a child, only to stumble upon the area myself as an adult. Or the rocky peaks of the five continuous mountains that she could not climb herself. She really wanted to know what could be seen from there. I did it for her, completed her dying wish of sorts, although long after she had died. Not like it was her real dying wish anyways. That was for me to be happy—and I always was. With her, or with the journey.

Of course, I've met many interesting people in my travels as well. I was once sold a bottle of snake oil that turned out to be a fatal poison—rather unfortunate for the bandits who stole it from me and died from the poisoning. There's also the time I met a king who loved comedies and was delighted by the plays I knew of. He offered me a position in his court, but I told him that I only wanted to travel—upset him quite a bit.

I often lament the short lifespan of us humans—can there not be a way for us to see everything? But in my heart, I know it's a stupid question. With infinite time, we can do anything, never die, and life loses its meaning. If I didn't sacrifice my lifetime and everything I could have—a family, a peaceful, quiet life—would my travels have been meaningful as they are? Life is meaningful because it ends. It's bitter, but where else would the word “bittersweet” come from?

The musings and ramblings of an old decrepit man.

I can now barely make out a silhouette of a city far ahead—nothing more than a murky shadow, but still present.

Perhaps I've found the place.

As I keep walking, the question of mortality comes up again—if I make it in time, if I don't have to die of starvation or dehydration, should I go on? Should I be content? I loved travelling because it's about seeing new things, making connections with people and places, but truthfully, my body isn't the only part of me that's weary. I want to stop.

The more I think about it, the more sense it seems to make...and I can't go forever. This seems like a good place to stop.

I arrive at the gates of the city. Register my name. State my intention. But even my weariness can no longer suppress my excitement. A lifelong dream, built on layers of hardship and roads, has finally been accomplished.

I find a small shop selling noodles. Language is always a problem in a new region, but I believe a willingness to communicate is enough to shatter any barrier. Currency is a different thing. Lucky for me, I have valuables. I walk out of the store to explore the city.

This seems to be a rural countryside area, but it satisfies me nonetheless. I've walked long enough. This is where I'll spend the rest of my days.

I feel homesick sometimes. But being the natural-born traveller I am, my destination is my home.

And this is perhaps my final destination.

It's okay.

All journeys come to an end. All roads have a stopping point.

But I'm happy.

It's all that'll ever matter.

The Loom

La Salle College, Fung, Pak Kiu – 13

In a vast, rarely-explored desert, there lived a person named Mei. Mei's house, with cracked clay walls and sagging beams, showed years of aging. Since her grandmother's passing, with no one left to care for it, the home had fallen into deep disrepair.

Mei stood against the cracked wooden door of her grandmother's workshop, inhaling the faint smell of dried jasmine and dust. Rolls of silk lay stacked in a corner, their colors faded. In the corner stood the loom her grandmother had guarded all her life, carved with mystical creatures from all of history.

Her grandmother's final words echoed in her mind: *"This loom carries the memory of the Silk Road. Guard it well."*

Mei brushed her fingers across the loom. The threads shimmered faintly, as if it contained some magical powers she knew nothing about. She laughed nervously. "It's just old silk," she tried to convince herself, though her voice trembled. After all, how could this simple loom carry the memory of the Silk Road? It just could not seem true to Mei. However, Mei was curious to know more.

The First Weave

That night, Mei's curiosity took the better of her. Mei set the loom upright and began to weave. There came a clicking sound, and the threads tightened. With it, the fabric suddenly glowed, lighting up the room with an eerie yellow light. In that yellow light, Mei saw different pictures of people along the Silk Road.

A caravan trudging across the Taklamakan Desert, camels swaying under the weight of spices and porcelain.

A Persian merchant laughing with a Chinese monk, their voices blending in a language Mei didn't know but somehow understood.

She gasped, taking her hands off the loom. The vision dissolved, leaving only the shimmering cloth, showing no trace of the scene that had appeared so vivid just moments ago.

"What are you?" she whispered to the loom, to no reply.

Curious to understand the loom, she returned, night after night. Each night, the cloth would reveal a new picture.

A Kashmiri musician teaching songs to a Uyghur child.

A Roman trader working at porcelain.

A Mongolian rider carrying letters across endless steppes.

Mei didn't feel like just an artist anymore. She felt like she was watching history. The loom was more than a tool. It was like a window showing her the history of the Silk Road.

Temptation

News of this magical loom spread quickly throughout the world, and caught the attention of a large group of investors. One afternoon, a man in a posh suit appeared at her door. Zhang, a wealthy collector, stared at the glowing cloth with hungry eyes.

"This loom should not be here. It belongs in a museum. It would be even better in my private collection," he said, leaning forward. "Think of what you could do with this money. Wouldn't you like to live a wealthy life? You and your family would never struggle again. All you have to do is sell me the loom."

Mei's heart raced. Her rent was overdue, and her mother's medicine was growing expensive. Zhang's offer ensured that she would be set free from this hard life.

Yet that night, when she went to the loom again, the loom showed her darker pictures.

Caravans were ambushed, the treasures inside stolen by bandits.
Merchants arguing over prices, blinded by greed.
A traveler lost in the desert, dying of thirst, his footsteps pressing into endless sand.

The loom seemed to be warning her of something dark, something that would happen if she sold the loom. It seemed to be telling her that selling the loom was not an option.
Mei sighed, and pressed her forehead against the glowing fabric. “I don’t know what to do,” she whispered. The loom pulsed faintly, as if listening.

The Journey

Mei decided to see the Silk Road for herself to understand more about the loom. After days of travelling, she came to a small town famous for its markets and weaving.

The streets were full of color. Pieces of cloth hung from the stalls, swaying gently in the breeze.. The air around smelled of dye, wool, and fresh fabric. Everywhere she looked, people were weaving. It was like Mei had stepped into a world made of cloth.

She walked slowly, watching the weavers. Some were young, laughing as they worked, their fingers fast and light. Others were older, weaving with years of practice. Each loom had its own rhythm, and the sound of wood and thread mixed with the weavers’ voices in the busy market.

At the end of the road, Mei noticed a stall that caught her attention. In the stall, an old woman was sitting by a loom. Her cloth was simple, but something about the patterns seemed special, as if full of meaning. Mei held her glowing cloth close and approached the old woman.

The woman looked up, aware of her sudden presence. Her eyes widened when she saw the cloth. She reached out carefully, with trembling hands, and touched it. The piece of cloth seemed to hold a special value to the woman. “My grandmother told me of this design,” she whispered. “She said it came from travelers long ago, people who passed through this city carrying stories and goods. I thought it was gone forever. How... how did you get this?” Mei’s heart beat fast. “The loom shows me stories,” she said softly. “I don’t always understand them, but they feel real. My grandmother left it to me when she passed.”

The old woman nodded. “This cloth keeps our history of the Silk Road alive. When we weave, we keep our memories of the past. Your loom...” she paused, as if in deep thought. “Your loom carries more than cloth. It carries history and time.”

Other weavers gathered around. They touched the glowing fabric, their eyes wide with wonder. “This pattern is in our family. We use it for weddings,” one said. Another added, “It is also used for mourning. It symbolizes both joy and sorrow.”

Mei listened carefully to the weavers. She realized the loom was not only showing her pictures of the Silk Road. It was connecting her to living people, to families who still held the history of the Silk Road in their thoughts.

Mei stayed in the town for many days. During this time, the weavers welcomed her like family. They showed her how they chose the colours and patterns that they used for weaving. Red stood for love, blue for peace, and black for loss. A diamond stood for protection, a flower for hope, and a wave for travel.

During her stay, Mei also tried weaving with the weavers. Her hands were clumsy at first, but the old woman guided her patiently. “Slow down,” she said. “Weaving is a very precise task. A rushed cloth holds no value.”

As Mei worked, the loom’s visions grew stronger. She saw faces from the past along with ones from the present. Merchants, travelers, and families all seemed to join her at the loom. As they did, the cloth continued to glow brighter and brighter, and the pictures of the loom grew larger and larger.

When it was time to leave, the old woman pressed Mei’s hands. “Do not sell this loom,” she said firmly. “This loom belongs to everyone. The Silk Road is more than a piece of history; it lives on in our weaving and the lives we share.”

Mei walked away, carrying not only her glowing tapestry, but also the voices of the weavers. She knew now exactly what she was going to do with the loom once she returned.

The Choice

Back in Dunhuang, Mei approached her broken-down house, with curious children peering inside, as if looking for the loom. At the door, Zhang was standing, having returned with a final offer. “Name your price,” he said. “We’ll ensure that we will give you as much money as you ask for.”

Mei looked at the loom, then at the children peering through the window of her workshop, their eyes wide with curiosity and wonder. Zhang’s offer might have been tempting, but she had already made up her mind. She looked at Zhang, and smiled softly. “It’s not for sale,” she replied.

Instead of selling the loom, she decided to open a gallery instead. Since that day, visitors had come from across the world to witness the loom’s magic. Each piece of cloth glowed with pictures: merchants, monks, musicians, explorers, and ordinary people whose lives shaped civilizations.

The final piece of cloth in the gallery showed an endless road, caravans and traders alike stretching endlessly into the horizon, its figures containing people from ancient travelers to modern traders.

The cloth was a promise: the Silk Road would live on, connecting past journeys with those yet to come.

The Storybook Dumplings

Maryknoll Convent School (Secondary Section), Wu, Hoi Ching Cadence – 13

In the far distant streets of Chongqing, raindrops fell on the pavement in a persistent yet gentle way, slowly turning the city's bright neon signs and lights into a series of blurry smears of colour. Tao Tao wiped the hot steam from her small, delicate glass cabinet for the hundredth time, and couldn't help eyeing the rows of plump, uneaten pork and chive dumplings sitting coldly above the cabinet. In a city known for its bustling atmosphere, her dumpling cart truly felt like the loneliest outpost in the city.

"Just one more hour," she whispered to herself, driven solely by the sheer hope at this point. It was a long, long and lonely day for her and her dumplings. She let out a small cloud in the chilly air, and looked up at the sad sky, who was pouring its tears down as if it was meant for her. When all of a sudden, a flash of white darted from the darkness of a nearby alley. Slowly, a faint shadow of a mysterious creature caught the attention of Tao Tao, she watched as it jostled past the alley swiftly. Before Tao Tao could even react, she found it sitting primly before the cart, staring at her with piercing eyes. It wasn't a robber, certainly not a ninja, but instead, a slim, white fox with eyes that filled with what looked like hunger, its gaze never once leaving the cold dumplings. It was unlike any fox she had ever seen. Its fur was the colour of moonlit snow, and its eyes glowed with knowing amber lights.

Tao Tao understood the fox's intention and carefully placed a single dumpling on a scrap of wax paper and set it down. The fox sniffed, then ate it swiftly. Truly a mysterious creature indeed. It then nudged a small, cloth-wrapped bundle toward her feet with its nose, its presence slowly warming up to Tao Tao.

Tao Tao unwrapped the cloth with shaky hands, and found a single, perfect peach. It was round with skin that seemed as if it blushed with dawn, and it smelled of sun-warmed orchards. The fruit's alluring scent instantly made her mouth water, it was utterly inviting. Her stomach rumbled at the sight of it, and finally, she gave in and took a bite.

As she enjoyed the sweet flavours exploding in her mouth, the world around her: the fiery sound of her still hot stove, the flickering streetlamp and the distant sounds of the crowds in the night market, shimmered, dissolved, and spun away.

She felt a pang of dizziness hit her head, and when it finally resided, she found the rain gone, and instead replaced by a blazing sun in an immense, lapis-blue sky. The air was hot, dry, and filled with a symphony of unfamiliar sounds: the jangle of camel bells, the babble of a dozen languages, the creak of cartwheels on packed earth. Tao Tao stood, stunned, her dumpling cart now wooden and sturdy, parked on not pavement but at the edge of a sprawling, dusty oasis. Oblivious to the fact that before her stretched the legendary, renowned, Silk Road.

The white fox sat beside her, its tail curled neatly. It gave a soft purr and trotted forward, looking back as if to signalling her to follow.

The fox's movements were swift and steady, and within minutes they swept through the chaotic crowd of the market to set up her own stall. Tao Tao couldn't help notice all the activities going on next to her. She saw a Uyghur man pulling strands of laghman hand-stretched noodles, slapping them against a flour-dusted board with delicate precision. Next to the man stood a Persian vendor who sold jewel-toned piles of saffron and dried barberries. On the opposite stall came a Mongolian family stirred a vast pot of creamy, brick-tea suutei tsai. The aromas of roasting lamb, cumin, sandalwood, and animal hide swirled around her. She had truly never seen anything like this before, and it fascinated her very much.

Unfortunately for Tao Tao, no one seemed to find a time-traveling dumpling cart remarkable. But the fox had other plans, and led her to a group of worn out Tang Dynasty soldiers, their armour dusty and carrying scars of war wounds. They looked extremely parched and hungry. Tao Tao, moved by instinct, fired up her stove. Soon, the familiar, comforting sizzle of dumplings in the pan cut through the exotic scents. It was a small and simple dish, yet at that moment it became the soldiers meal

The soldiers ate in silence, the air filled with only their hungry biting noises, after eating, she noticed the big smiles drawn all across their boney faces. Looking at the hungry soldiers devouring every lasting bite of each dumpling made her stomach feel a sense of warmth. Perhaps it was the feeling of knowing that her dumplings were enjoyed so much by someone, was the reason which made her feel so content.

The fox just always seemed to know exactly who needed a taste of her food. And so, they would constantly travel all around, the cart and the fox and Tao Tao all together travelling the ancient trade routes with fresh piping hot dumplings.

They went everywhere, hoping to feed as many people as possible. In the Byzantine Empire, under a green dome, she fed a homesick Byzantine merchant whose eyes filled with tears at the taste of juicy, fulfilling pork filling. On the Pamir plateau, she served steaming dumplings to a shivering Tibetan monk. Each time, in exchange, they'd offer her something back as well, sometimes a pinch of precious salt, a handful of sweet dates, or even a lesson in how to fold Central Asian manti. It wasn't gold or any valuables, but to Tao Tao, it was the most precious thing anyone could ever ask for.

Finally one day, the white fox brushed against Tao Tao's leg once more, and a small round peach rolled into the palm of her hands. She took one last bite of the miraculous peach, and returned back to the lonely, dark street of modern Chongqing.

Tao Tao looked at her cart. It was the same cart, yet it hummed with a quiet, ancient energy. It all just felt..different.

Not long later, the first customer, a young busy man, came to Tao Tao, looking tired and hungry, muttered out, "Just something quick, please."

Tao Tao smiled, and began preparation. This time, she no longer saw him as a normal customer any more, but instead, one of the voyagers, just like the ones she saw on the Silk Road. She prepared the dumplings with the same ingredients, same recipe, but only this time, with an additional layer of the love and dedication her heart poured in along with the memory of deserts and mountains.

The man took a small bite on the sidewalk, and couldn't help but just stand there from shock, trying to process the flavourful bomb bursting inside his mouth. Each dumpling was packed with flavours that complemented each other, and when combined, all of them had brought along its own story as well, as if it was a ticket to an adventure of its own. It was a combination of pure perfection. And it had the man devouring each and every one happily, even licking the remaining juices on his thumbs.

As time went on, word began to spread, and no doubt, a long line began to form at her 'new' shop, "Storybook dumplings." Although this sudden popularity had Tao Tao work tirelessly, with her hands full constantly. She never once considered giving up and instead worked happily. Every day creating fresh batches of new 'adventures'. She knew her once lonely, lifeless dumpling had turned into an out of the ordinary delicacy, a 'storybook' loved by many. Never would she ever think that something as simple as food was enough to create the adventure of a lifetime.

As the years went on, she continued to serve her mouth-watering, story-filled dumplings to people from all parts of the world, but sometimes, she'd still occasionally glance into the shadows of the alley. Hoping to catch a glimpse of a

white tail or be able to see those glowing pair of amber eyes once more. Hoping that she could give the fox, as a thank you for turning her dumplings from a lifeless dish to something that could hold the soul of a journey, another plate of dumplings.

The Road I Shall Take

Marymount Secondary School, Luo, Peng Emma – 13

14th December, 3025, 1908th day of the Blaze era

I lay hopelessly on the hot sand, the wind blowing dust particles and sand into my face, the Huyang tree casting dancing shadows in my eyes.

Hopelessly clinging on to the hope that my tribe would come and retrieve me.

I could still hear the bells of the camels, fading gradually.

Perhaps my father would decide to turn back.

No, I knew he wouldn't, it's easier for him to think of me as dead.

I could never forget how he looked when they announced my exile.

I was going to die. For stealing bread to save my starving family. For breaking a rule in despair.

A tear or anger ran down my cheek, forming a puddle of despair on the smooth grains of sand, and instantly dissolved into wisps of smoke, twirling and dancing into the blazing hot sun.....the reason for all my problems.

Five years ago, the world broke. The Earth shifted, tilting closer to the sun. I was only eight then, knowing only my parents' fear.

Panic everywhere, even my grandmother was shaken. A widower, who didn't even flinch when she was exiled, frightened.

How I missed her

But I'll see her soon enough.

I staggered up. My head was thumping, my body threatening to topple over once again. I carefully leaned onto the lonely tree for support.

I felt my fingers find a small pattern in the bark of the tree. I stared at it. A small circle with a six-petaled flower in the middle, a lotus flower, etched deeply into the brown wood.

My grandmother had once told me of that symbol, in her many whispered tales, a fading memory. It was a symbol from long ago, from our ancestors, a symbol that meant peace and hope.....one that meant eternity. It had been long forgotten, buried like many ancient cities underneath the earth.

But this symbol wasn't a monument of history, it was newly carved. A symbol that was put here on purpose.....but why?

My gaze shifted towards the small line underneath the symbol.

It was an unmistakable arrow, pointing forwards, towards the setting sun. Under it was a small type in my father's handwriting.

"The Mogao Caves. Old Silk Road. Follow"

16th December, 3025, 1910th day of the Blaze era

The blazing sun shone on me, piercing my skin slowly burning my insides into ashes. I had been trenching in the Taklamakan desert for two days.

Was my father trying to lead me anywhere at all?

The Mogao Caves.

Some old myths from my grandmother.

"The famous palace of eastern magic, a combination of two different yet same cultures, settled next to the old trade route. The very oldest, the Silk Road. A place truly of magic, the works of our ancestors."

I had been following the old trading route, where my dad, as a merchant, had often brought me on his expeditions as a child. Yet I still couldn't find anything.

I could go no further. Two days without water. This was the end.

The fact hit me hard, like someone had punched me in the stomach. I was really going to fade from this earth, without anyone remembering me.

I sat down, my legs giving away, my heart filled with sorrow.

And that's when I finally realized how the sand beneath me seemed abnormal.
The sand beneath me wasn't shifting, it was solid.....rock.

A path

The word came to mind, making me recall another one of my grandmother's old stories. One of us, our last conversation together.

"Goodbye Eula. Remember, follow the path in your heart."

"But Gran, how would I know if it's the right one?"

"Our ancestors have already shown us the way, we just have to be wise enough to follow it."

I was already headfirst in the sand, but I forced myself to keep going. Going west, towards the horizon. Yes, I remembered this Path. A banned path right near the dark market, one that had always been out of bounds. To a child, a dead end, but to a desperate wanderer.

Hope

The more I edged forward, the clearer I could see the large sand dune ahead.

Only it wasn't a sand dune, it was an independent cliff. A cliff that seemed like a punctured canvas of ragged paper, hanging upon the pale-yellow sky.

It was a short cliff, covered in man-made caverns.

Hope was not entirely lost.

It was a cliff.

17th December, 3025, 1911th day of the Blaze era

It took me hours to haul myself into the caves.

I lost consciousness right afterwards.

I came too the next morning, still on the cavern floor.

The caves were cool and dry, the exact opposite of the burning weather outside. In some dark corner, I could even hear the sound of dripping water. Penetrating the silence like a ray of sunshine reaching the earth through storm clouds.

Only, this sunshine wasn't deadly. It was the sunshine we had long ago, before the Blaze era, a patch of light from my childhood, engulfing me in hope.

I tried to focus my gaze. My sight must have been playing with me.

Bits and pieces of colors dotted my view, swirling and twirling as I continually blinked my eyes, trying to make them fade out of sight.

Only, they didn't fade.

They started taking forms. Just like the forms in my grandmother's tales.

Dancing deer revolving around a red sun, pictures of lively blue birds spreading their wings, ready to fly. A man riding a phoenix, two men hunting a boar, a girl holding a Pipa, sleeves flowing behind her like clouds at dusk.....

Paintings in the Mogao caves. Myths from my grandmother.

And the lotus pattern, it was everywhere. As old as the dust beneath me, engraved upon the caisson ceiling. Giving me hope as I remembered their meaning.

I hoisted myself up to a sitting position. Instantly my muscles screamed in protest, my eyes watered with pain, I suppressed an urge to yell out in agony.

White lights danced in my view, for a moment, I was completely blinded by them. My vision was blurred and unfocused, but after the white streaks vanished, I could finally see through the mist in my eyes.

And what I saw made me freeze in place.

The most stunning pictures of blue and orange peacocks, revolving around a life size sculpture of a man, sitting in a carved dome, eyes looking down, a smile engraved on his fading features. His hand outstretched, welcoming me forward. Half of his body was destroyed, covered in dust.

This cave was something I have never seen before, something we've never learned in our lessons. Something different from the common knowledge of how our history was just made-up folklore. Folklore of a world long before World War 3 ended in complete destruction of countries and people a century ago. This was something even older than that.....much older.

My grandmother's old tales were no imagination. Her stories of civilization long ago, the stories that led to her exile, were no fantasy.

They were true.

And so are we.

This was where I came from

Where my history belongs.

And in that instant, it didn't seem so horrible, to face the prospect of death, for I knew that the world was not coming to an end. There was still hope, hope that had been settled a million years before me, when this statue was destined to stand here forever, despite the wars that had scared his face, and the losses that brought a deep etch in his heart.

I came from a civilization that had planted a seedling of hope in this land that nurtured me.

My grandmother's tales of our ancestors seem to finally have a meaning now.

They've left a road for me, a road that looks back, while continuing forward, a road where history finally has a meaning.

My consciousness was slipping away, and I felt myself fall backwards.

I closed my eyes.

Perhaps I am to lie here in eternity, until I turn into dust and become the sand under me, part of the land that I was born from, and in hopes that someone will take the road ahead of me. Knowing one day, as the ancestors of a generation to exist, I shall contribute that dust into the ground beneath their feet.

I felt myself being lifted into warm hands. Engulfed in a soft glow. My gaze staring into a face I knew too well.

Was it a dying hallucination.

Or was it a homecoming welcome?

"Gran?"

"Yes Eula, you have found the path."

And now I have turned into part of it.

To Icarus.

Marymount Secondary School, See, Yu Yeng Seana – 14

1603, Jianyuguan.

Wang Mie drinks his Baijiu in a gulp, the alcohol flowing into his throat: it tastes like those in Beijing, yet so unfamiliar at the same time.

Fire, it was. Heat coursing through his bloodstream, his head a mess — one second, he was still in the tavern; another, he was under the light of the crimson moon: omen to the drought which rampages throughout Ming.

“...Feels like the world is on fire, doesn’t it? Baijiu does that,” A stranger next to him says, her own cup in hand. A shimmer of blue catches his attention — a sapphire bracelet.

“Indeed,” He says, taking another sip, “That bracelet, it’s of good quality. Father’s a merchant?”

A chuckle leaves her lips, “I don’t hear that often, not many pay attention to the artistry,” She swigs her Baijiu, “My husband; he got it from Tibilisi, Persia.”

“You’re lucky, its value is immense — the wealthy love those.” A hollow laughter escaped him, “Especially officials.”

“I’m surprised you would know,” The merchant’s wife took a sip, “I’m here to celebrate the season, got to take as many victories as I can... how about you?”

A wry smile tugged at his lips, “I wish it were for such a noble reason. I’d be lucky to survive now.”

She paused midway, cup awkwardly hanging in her hands.

“From the drought?”

“Yes,” Wang Mie says, “The Yellow River’s all dried up because of it — what’s the fate of Ming now?”

“Aren’t you a superstitious one?” The merchant’s wife answers, an easy smile on her lips.

His gaze flickered to the candles around the tavern, “I’ve been told so.”

“There cannot be two suns in the sky, nor two emperors on the earth,” Wang Mie thinks, the sayings of Confucius at the back of his head — words from the perfect saint — *respected* and *acknowledged*.

The merchant’s wife smiles, “Superstitions... I’m not familiar with the ones back in Ming, but as for the West...my husband told me ‘bout a tale of hubris — A boy called Icarus: flew too close to the sun for a stint of freedom.”

She lifted her cup, gulping the Baijiu all at once.

“...How poetic, his spirit’s admirable,” Wang Mie says at last, the slight tingling of alcohol under his skin, *and if only the bright light of the moon were here—*

He paused, his eyes flickering to the robes he was wearing, then to the roof of the tavern — if he just closed his eyes, he could almost see the faintest outline of Polaris, the star pointing forever to the north.

He glances at his cup.

“...But there won’t ever be a place for him.”

Under the cover of his room, the glow of the moon slithered in — once again did he put everything down; once again was he before the sky of stars.

“Unchanging,” He whispers, the taste of Baijiu lingering in his mouth. He reached out, grasping the stars in the skies with an open hand.

He blinks, and a spell takes him — again he was in Beijing, dark and unmoving in the night.

He’s wearing his Buzi, a robe of scarlett with the motif of a red-crowned crane. A sapphire bracelet adorning his wrist, heavier than it was glamorous. No matter what he did, Wang Mie couldn’t shake the weight of his robes.

Icarus had wings of wax and feathers, he thinks, staring at those garments, each stitch a reminder of his past, just as the silk traded along the Silk Road carried stories from distant lands. He had a duty to the people, yet *the sun* never listened, waving him off with a carefree smile, much like the crows who chase profit, oblivious to the drought’s grasp on the land.

He blinks, back to the present. He reaches for the ink, a flurry of words on paper.

Icarus, *Icarus*, the boy from a merchant’s mouth.

To Icarus,

Instead of a hymn to the moon, I dedicate this to you.

Breathing with a noose around your neck, the spread of wings must've been freeing. Is that why you've lost yourself in whispered strides, flying so close to the sun.

Remember—

your past.

The burden on your shoulders.

Why had you let it go? For the brief stint of freedom?

1607, Roads to Samarkand

"Excuse me, kind sir,"

"Yes?" Wang Mie replies, gaze drifting to the one who had asked — a man with distinctively olive eyes, scrolls in his hand. A traveller.

"May I have some of your food?" He asks, and he couldn't help but raise a brow. The traveller sits next to him regardless. "You're from the East, aren't you? I, Greece!"

'Stories are exchanged like currency,' Wang Mie remembers, the quote from Sima Qian's epic at the back of his tongue.

"For stories?" He offers.

The traveler nods.

He rips the bread in two, "Take a bite, then," He says, a gentle smile on his lips.

The traveler immediately devours it, only speaking when he was done.

"Look up, my friend," He says, "Do you see the constellation right next to Polaris?" Without waiting, he continues, "We call it Ursa Minor, and it's there because of our gods..."

The traveller tells the story of Arcas, of mother and son, of the consequences from ignoring the wishes of the gods.

"In Ming, it's known as Ziwei, the castle for the Imperial family. But... under the rule of Emperor Wangli, it got harder and harder to see the skies, and in turn, respect its authority."

A lesson learned the hard way, he thinks, scriptures on bamboo flashing across his eyes, the familiar notes of Confucianism burning in his mouth.

"He who exercises government by means of his virtue may be compared to the north polar star, which keeps its place and all the stars turn towards it."

"...a lighter story then," The traveler hums, "A boy named Icarus; who flew too close to the sun."

"Icarus," He says, the name sticking to his tongue like a curse, "Icarus..."

The traveller was soon gone. He told a few more tales of constellations and stars, yet the only thing that settled in Wang's mind was the whisper of the boy who fell.

He rolls open the parchment from that fateful day, and dips his pen in ink.

The sun is unkind, you knew that. Why had you flown so close to it, oh boy who fell?

A traveller from a distant land told me it was because of ambition, of hubris. You believed in your mechanical wings, and thought you owned the skies. How laughable, I say, looking back. Child, the word of the sun is law, your home is your cage. Ming isn't the home you need.

1610, Tbilisi

"Are you from the east?" A trader asks him, "Those eyes could only belong to a man who knows spice like me!"

"It completes a dish," Wang Mie says, "I'm from Ming. You?"

"Mathura," He says, a smile on his lips, "Anything that interests you?"

"Just tumeric," He smiles, a hand reaching for his coins.

"No need!" The trader laughs, clasping his hands, "The harvest has been kind, we have more than enough to spare. On the house, brother!"

He laughs, "My mother taught me better; how about a story in exchange?"

"A story? I wouldn't dare decline, it's not everyday I meet someone from Ming."

Wang Mie smiles, "If it's alright, could I inquire about your bracelet? I've seen it on a merchant's wife before."

The trader raises his hand, "This? Well, not much could be said — it's made of sapphire from Sri Lanka, got it for a good price; The Persians say sapphires are a sign of Divine Favor, and in Constantinople, its protection. Long ago we didn't even know each other existed, but now, the magic is in this — different versions of stories are everywhere!"

He lifts his head, and— *wings of wax on fire*, he thinks.

"I once heard of a boy falling from the skies—"

"Sampati?" The trader interrupts, "I know this one, it doesn't count!"

Not him, Wang Mie wanted to say, *Icarus*. Instead, he laughs, "I once heard of a boy from Ming; passed the Civil Servant exam, brought glory to his family. A promising one he was, but he failed to heed the warnings of the blood moon. And so, he was banished from his land, the Silk Road his only way out."

The trader handed him his spices, a smile. "Personal stories, my favourite."

Wang Mie stays silent, looking at the skies. If he could just blink, the stars that day in Beijing could almost be visible.

To Icarus,

I'm telling a tale of years apart, dear boy of the sun: no longer am I haunted by the phantoms of the Ziwei. For in the trading hubs of the west, his hand can no longer reach me.

Below is my dedication to you:

Hail, Icarus of the East; the man who forgot his place under the sun's decree.

Romans 12:10

Marymount Secondary School, Wong, Hay Tung Sophia – 14

1507: December

Snow crunches below Minghou's feet, though he hardly hears it before his own heartbeat. He thinks it's worth trudging through the cold for their Eden. For *their* tree. And, there it is, with the green peeking out beneath the frost and the red glowing like an oil lamp.

Laying by the foot of it is a pomegranate; prim and ripe. He picks up the fruit, rubs it clean against his silk scarf and presses it against the warmth of his chest. Minghou swears that when the storm's not so vicious and himself not so stubborn, he'll pick the rest off the tree and grow some more. He'll do what he promised in a summer that was cold and to a friend he learnt so much from.

1504: July

The sun is shining onto the balcony, onto Minghou. He wishes it were colder, though Urumqi winters are no less cruel than the summers. He's holding a persimmon, overripe and glistening. He finds it quite sapid, still, if not to eat then at least to peel at as he watches the market— which, Minghou sees, rests for none. But now he's only watching a dark-skinned foreigner and his caravan of pomegranates. He knows it's a Silk Road traveller— they frequent Urumqi often enough for Minghou to know— but it's still amusingly strange to see. The traveller looks ridiculous; yelling louder than even the most seasoned hawkers and carrying satchels too large for his skinny frame.

By the time Minghou finishes his persimmon and returns with another, the traveler is gone. A strange little feeling claws at Minghou, though he'd rather watch the sunset than prod at it.

It's fate when they meet again on level ground. At first, Minghou is none—the-wiser— standing in a crevice in the market, hands fidgeting with a persimmon but not in the mood to eat it.

Suddenly: "It's a cold summer."

Minghou looks up, first in confusion and then in realization. It's him, the traveller from before. Seeing him up close, he's almost reminiscent of a swan. Lithe long neck and eyes so dark Minghou swears he sees stars in them.

"Mhm," Minghou mumbles. It's ninety degrees, but he's agreeable enough. Looking back down, the persimmon is still glaringly orange in his palm. So he offers, tentatively, "Do you want it?"

The traveller looks pleased, a smile on his face that's equally shy. He offers up his own fruit— predictably, a pomegranate. "Here," he smiles wider, "an Iranian nicety of my own."

It's an olive branch of the purest kind, but Minghou remembers to be civilised. Noble. His Chinese manners don't fail him even as they trade fruits, and he remembers to wait before he devours the pomegranate.

"Minghou." He says, both an introduction and an offer for more.

"Cheers. Karim."

And Minghou etches it into his mind— Karim, Karim, Karim.

Later, Minghou mutters, "It's good,"

He's licking at his fingers, feeling he's treading the line between imbecilic and animalistic. Karim laughs regardless.

"I'll bring ya more next time." He says, and Minghou doesn't ask *next time*? He just smiles.

There *is* a next time. And a next, and a next.

Karim's hands start smelling of persimmon. Minghou's, of pomegranate.

"I'll be leaving in August."

Resignation flashes across Minghou first. He knew, of course, that Karim wouldn't stay forever. But now he looks down at the dirt below and deciphers that feeling from so long ago— of regret, for not meeting Karim far earlier.

"I'll teach you to farm before then." Karim offers tentatively, "I'll teach you so much about Iran, okay?" Minghou nods solemnly, but the faultlines are forming too quickly to be stopped.

"You're lost in thought."

Minghou blinks out of his daze. Karim's rather good at reading him; they've made a habit of seeing each other and eating together. Karim says Minghou's better company than the people in his fleet. Minghou doesn't mention how that had lingered in his mind for days after.

"Mm."

Karim frowns, "Cold?"

Minghou isn't; he's only daydreaming. But it is cold—undeniably so—for a day in July.

"Wear this." Karim says, peeling off his scarf and wrapping it around Minghou's neck. So simple and easy that Minghou can't help feeling something nipping at his heart. Not quite uneasiness; he trusts Karim, he does. It's another feeling, guilt. The sort that stays in your consciousness long after you've accepted it.

But Minghou ignores it, and wraps it tighter around himself. It's silk, he finds. Cold and smooth against his palm; Minghou rubs it, once, twice, before letting go.

Karim, dimpled and sunny, says: "Iranian summers are much hotter."

Minghou says nothing and tucks it into his heart like it's important. August looms, but he lets himself ignore it a little longer.

August

Bitterness takes root in Minghou like a weed. Karim is making good on his promise—figs are sprouting beautifully by the door—but it's not enough. Never enough. Minghou wants, when Karim smiles or laughs or looks at him, for him to *stay, never go*.

"You look so funny, Ah-Ming." Karim says, smiling even as he watches Minghou plant another crop of figs by the garden. "A mouse is gonna eat you."

Minghou doesn't even bother asking what he means, because Karim is always odd. Odd little swan with stars in his eyes and nothing but—

Nothing but the desire to leave, Minghou thinks, so bitter it disgusts even himself.

However weakly, Minghou smiles back. The venom inside him stills in the cold of summer and the warmth of Karim's delight.

You can't completely cross out a part of someone so much as you can accept it. Minghou can do nothing but let each moment linger.

Slipping the bracelet onto Karim's wrist, Minghou wonders if this is a little too brash. But the pomegranates, and surely the scarf, need repayment.

"I like it," Karim smiles, radiant. He twists his wrist, feeling the heaviness against him. "Thank you."

Minghou smiles back, not at all shining but at least reflective. "You've been so good of a friend, and," he swallows—*so hard to let go of too*, "I think this is the least I could've done."

Silence falls, so Minghou allows himself one last indulgence; pressing along the warmth of Karim's palm and towards the cold of the jade. When his fingernail leaves a half-moon indent, he thinks: *good*.

Karim coins tonight as *Sham Akhar*. Minghou's not sure what it means, but he's too drunk to care.

They're bingeing the last of Minghou's best baijiu and Karim's best wine. It's not smart, but Minghou thinks it's too late to regret. Karim's back into the sands of the Silk Road tomorrow; they'd rather deal with it drunk than sober.

Inebriated, Karim declares, "I'll never forget you."

When the moonlight hits Karim just right, it looks like a halo. Minghou believes him, because he is nothing if not devout. It's just that he wants more. A selfish promise of forever.

He slurs out that much, anyways.

Karim laughs, reeking of booze—Minghou clings to it like flowers to sunlight. "Then we'll plant a tree, 'kay? By the balcony you love and the market I live by. Keep it goin' forever and ever."

When he holds out his pinky, Minghou meets it. Their arms are propped on the mahogany table, cheeks hurting from laughter.

Minghou knows, inexplicably then, that there will be no unloving. There will only ever be forgetting, and even then it'd be easier to have not met Karim at all.

In the morning, when Minghou wakes up, he vaguely hears Karim yelling far out in the distance: '*Zàijiàn! Ah-Ming!*'

Minghou— heart and head aching— can only think of getting up and saying goodbye. But thinking is pointless without doing, so the yelling grows fainter and fainter; until even that is gone too.

Until Karim is undeniably gone too.

Doostat dāram, Minghou thinks; an apology and a confession and a 'see you soon'. *Be salāmat*.

Only when he's sure Karim is long past Urumqi does Minghou trust himself to look out the window. The cold stings his cheeks, so Minghou haphazardly puts on his scarf and trudges outside. Again he holds a pomegranate, still red and ripe as he claws at it— picking off the fruit and lapping up the juice.

The seeds are white and tiny— glimmering in his palm. Sowing them, Minghou feels like he's God; pressing seeds into the soil like stars in the sky. In a few years a tree will bloom, when Karim has become a nice, yellow bruise; one that only hurts if Minghou really presses down.

But he has time to wait— now their friendship is planted into the very earth of their garden, their Eden.

Minghou has forever and then some more, so for now, he peels a persimmon and sits by the squares of soil. He watches the sun set far above and waits for an eternity that is soon to come.

The Merchant of Echoes

Marymount Secondary School, Yung, Pui Yan Bella – 13

The silence was jarring, or perhaps it was music to the Traveller's ears as he watched the sand shift under his feet. As he walked across the vast desert of Taklamakan, the scent of the pungent and earthy aftermath of desert rain filled the Traveller's nose, and he breathed in deeply.

The mist around the Traveller's face swirled in the soft wind, caressing his face as a mother would to her child. The air felt pleasant against the Traveller's bare skin, and so he spread his hands wide, feeling the breeze flowing through his fingers.

In the distance, there were faint figures moving around, their movements serene and calm like the waves in a still ocean. Funny-looking creatures were scattered around the figures, their skin a brownish-yellow shade and two lumps on each of their backs.

The Traveller, his curiosity peaked, slowly began to glide towards the strange crowd.

As he approached, the figures looked up and swayed towards the Traveller. Soft, confused murmurs reached the Traveller's ears, and he raised up his hands as a sign of peace.

The people, satisfied but still throwing looks back at the Traveller, went back to what they were doing before. A few lingered around the Traveller, their hands reaching out to touch his milky white skin.

The Traveller let them, observing their features. Their peculiar, dark skin with lumps and dents across it. Two round circles at the top of their faces, a straight lump in the middle and two long lines at the bottom. Such odd shapes made up such beautiful pictures. The Traveller was fascinated. He had never seen such funny creatures before.

The Traveller, interested, glided around the creatures surrounding him and stepped along the faint path in the sand. He stopped at the brownish-yellow, large creature he saw before, and stared into the two black circles on its skin. It stared back, emitting a loud groaning noise.

The Traveller reached out, and the large creature pushed its head against his hand. Before the Traveller could investigate further, one of the figures from before came up to the Traveller and started to make unintelligible noises. It held up a piece of large cloth, flapping it in front of the Traveller. The Traveller, confused by this strange action, raised his hand automatically to accept the cloth. It was silky soft to the touch, and he held it gently, trying not to destroy such a precious thing.

The Traveller turned to continue his exploration, when the creature suddenly emitted a high-pitched sound and he startled.

The Traveller swung around, expecting to see that harm had come upon the being, but all he found was the scrunched-up face of the creature.

The Traveller watched as it stomped up to him and suddenly snatched the cloth back from the Traveller. He was stunned and just watched as the creature started to part the two long lines at the bottom of its face. It started to speak in what he was assuming is its language, and the Traveller, confused, shook his head.

Then the creature suddenly extended its hand, waiting for something.

The Traveller glanced around, helpless, and saw something similar happening near them. A figure was placing something in the outreached hand, and in return, got a tiny piece of cloth.

The Traveller, understanding what he had to do now, removed an iron ring from his finger and gave it to the waiting creature.

The creature stared at the ring, and brought it up to the sunlight.

The ring flashed a bright light as the sunlight reflected off of it, and the creature jerked. After a while of the creature inspecting the ring, it finally emitted a cheerful, curious sound.

As the Traveller retracted his hand back, the creature draped the cloth over the Traveller. The soft fabric brushed against his skin, feeling cool and warm at the same time.

The creature happily walked off with the ring, and continued to wave its cloth all around.

The Traveller, feeling a warm sense of...something filling his body, resumed his path, hoping to find more curious things to discover.

The Traveller glided along the sandy path, noticing it turning to a greyish, hard surface. The scene shifted around him, the world turning from a peaceful, refreshing desert to a bustling street, though the stalls were still on the side of the road. Loud noises filled the Traveller's mind.

He slowed, stopping to stare around the crowded place. The creatures were now rushing, moving quickly and pushing each other. Everyone was shouting, strange pieces of metal being waved around. The air was filled with the smell of metal and gas.

Apprehension filled the Traveller.

With a lot of effort, the Traveller managed to push through the creatures and stop at one waving a piece of iron around. It was shaped like two pieces of iron were stuck together horizontally and vertically. The creature in behind the stall handed the iron to the Traveller, and yet again reached its hand out for something in return.

The Traveller, with nothing else to give, ripped a section of the cloth he had and handed it to the creature. The creature smoothed it against its skin and smiled at the Traveller.

He now felt another...feeling in him, this one more sour than the one before, and stopped walking along the path. The Traveller inspected the piece of iron and smoothed his hand across the surface.

It was the same material that his ring was.

Turning it around, they noticed it had a small hole at the end of one piece of iron, like something was supposed to come out of it.

Investigating it a while longer, he eventually found some type of lever and pulled it.

Bang.

The Traveller blinked, and the world had shifted once again.

He looked down. The path?

Red.

He looked up. The sky?

Black.

He looked left and right. Creatures of all types were lying on the ground, motionless. The world, yet again, was silent.

Absolute, torturous silence.

The Traveller walked along the red path, and each time he lifted a leg, his feet were stained with red as well.

The air was a mix of copper, sulphur and charcoal. Thick with pain and suffering, the air pressed down on the Traveller, pushing him down and down until he went down to his knees.

Screams and wails surrounded the Traveller, and he desperately wished for it to stop. The sounds built up and up until...nothing.

Something caught his attention then, a white glimmer amidst the floor of red.

The Traveller approached it, tripping and falling on the way but eventually reached it. He bent down and picked it up, holding it up to see the very same piece of cloth he had given up earlier for that piece of metal.

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The Traveller slowly looked up and saw the creature that had given them the iron staring up at the dark sky, the two circles on their face filled with nothing but pain.

The Traveller trembled, falling to the ground and shaking with pain. The weight of the truth dawned on him. The mist surrounding his face faded away to reveal a flat plane of white skin. The Travellers' mind filled with memories and knowledge, all that were not his.

Overwhelmed with agony, the Traveller screamed silently in his mind. Humans, Earth, the road, war, destruction, pain and love, Him. It all made sense now. The Traveller, no longer able to think of anything else, caved in into himself, his body in a fetal position. All the while, one thought echoed in his mind.

'What have I done?'

New Tales of China's Silk Road

Pui Kiu College, Cheng, Yu Yan – 14

The desert absorbed noise. Sound fell into the sand and disappeared, leaving behind only vast silence. The crescent moon above was a curious, silver thing, hanging amidst the velvet black sky. A man ushered his camel-drawn carriages. His father had once called this animal, now old and grey around the muzzle, the key to their family's livelihood, and for three generations, that key had unlocked the road from Chang'an to the west.

But this journey was walking towards closure. The world was turning its face toward the sea. The great, humming hostels—once places of clattering dice, heated barter, and the musical clash of tongues—now stood like empty skulls, their courtyards whispering only of ghosts. The great empires along the Road were fracturing, the peace that once made the trek relatively safe was a fading memory, and bandits multiplied like desert scorpions after rain.

"One last time," he murmured, the words lost in the camel's fur and the vast grand desert. "Then we walk the road home for good."

Near the end of his route, he met a young Italian merchant whose eyes were wide with a mixture of exhaustion and wonder, the first person he'd seen for a long time. The man had come from Venice, drawn by legends of the East. He has saffron, silver, and a strange, revolutionary idea pressed into a sheaf of papers: sketches for a "printing press".

"They say in Mainz, a man can make books not by hand, but by machine," the Italian said, struggling with his few words of Chinese. "Imagine stories, knowledge, traveling not by one wagon, but by a thousand books."

And he, despite their fractured conversation, understood the magnitude of the situation. He thought of the monk he met years ago, painstakingly copying sutras by candlelight for a whole year. After barely a split second's hesitation, he traded a small jade carving for a single, carefully copied page of the Italian's sketches.

The Italian left at first light, and the silence after his departure was a physical thing. Perhaps it was the absence of the Venetian's broken Chinese, or the sigh of his tired horse. Perhaps it was loneliness, or something else entirely.

He stood in the courtyard of the crumbling hostel, the diagram of the printing press folded small against his chest.

The paper felt alive. It held a future he would not see. In this lonely place, where the wind spoke only of endings, he had been given a seed of a beginning.

He would carry it east. That was his purpose now—not silk, but the ghost of an idea. But something in him rebelled against being the last person to walk the desert, against the silence that would follow his footsteps. He knelt by the hearthstone of the hostel, where centuries of travelers had warmed their hands. With his eating knife, he scratched three things into the soot-blackened rock. He etched the camel, a book, and then, with a surge of desperate, wild hope, he etched a train. He did not know the last shape, not truly. It came to his hand unbidden. A long, linked thing, like a metal centipede, rushing forward on a line.

A ship sailed from port to port, from one anonymous harbor to another. It bypassed the heart of the world. It would not stop for a monk or a stablemaster. It made the inner continent, the mountains, the deserts, the thousand small kingdoms and people, completely irrelevant. It would render them silent. The train was a prayer for the world to remember the places between the seas, for the Silk Road to wake up again.

He covered it with ash. A message for a future he would never see. A wish thrown down a well of time. *Do not forget us. Do not let the heart of the world go silent. Find a way to make it beat again.*

It was the year 2015.

The maglev train arrived soundlessly. Mary stepped onto the platform, her hand instinctively finding the small jade crane in her pocket—the same one her ancestor had traded centuries before, according to family legend.

She was meeting Chris, but found herself drawn first to the exhibit at the concourse's center—a single hearthstone, blackened by ancient fires, on loan from an archaeological site.

She leaned close. There, beneath the museum lighting, were the etchings. A camel. A book. And that impossible, prophetic train.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" Chris's voice was soft beside her. "We carbon-dated the ash layer covering it. Mid-15th century. The very end."

"He was drawing the future," Mary whispered.

"He was drawing a future," Chris corrected gently. "One he hoped for. Connection, and continuity."

Mary glanced at the words carved proudly into stone by the exhibit on the Silk Road: *150 countries. The world's largest international trade project in world history.* Her smile was a quiet, private little thing. *He carved one line for a train,* she thought, *and we answered him with an entire world.*

In the luminous silence of dawn, a new maglev train prepared to depart.

The Gossamer Thread of Antiquity: A Tapestry of the Silk Road

Pui Kiu College, Cheung, Yik Ham – 14

“Grandpa, what are those carts for?” a child pointed earnestly toward the vague sea of trade carts in the distance.

It was 1025 CE in China.

“Oh,” his grandpa answered with a warm smile, “I used to be part of them.”

He grabbed a tiny wooden chair, worn smooth with age, and sat down in front of their porch, the sun casting a warm golden hue over the scene.

“Let me tell you, young one, about the tales of the Silk Road, a path forged by the dreams and courage of our ancestors—a journey that carries the essence of who we are.”

The child settled beside him, eyes wide with curiosity, leaning closer to catch every word woven from the threads of memory.

“In my youth,” the grandpa began, his voice carrying a soft nostalgia, “I remember the excitement that filled the air as merchants prepared for their travels. You could feel the buzz of anticipation, the electric energy of possibility. They spoke of treasures and wonders: silk from our looms that shimmered like the stars in the night sky, golden spices with scents bold enough to awaken the sun, and stories that flowed like the rivers we crossed. Each journey was not merely a trade of goods; it was a bridge of encounters, where ideas and cultures mingled like the colors of dawn, painting a mosaic of unity amid our differences.”

The child listened endearingly, captivated by the vivid imagery whispered from his grandpa’s lips.

“The Silk Road,” he continued, his gaze extending beyond the horizon, “is a journey that stretches far beyond our familiar hills and rivers, linking our great land of the East to the distant shores of the West. It weaves through rugged mountains and endless deserts, traversing landscapes that told tales of their own.”

“I had been trading alongside many friends of mine when we ventured to Chang’an,” his grandpa said, a hint of adventure gleaming in his eyes.

“Chang’an?” the child echoed, intrigued.

“Yes, my dear. Now, imagine, if you will, the sights before you: the bustling markets of Chang’an, alive with color and sound, where vibrant fabrics undulated like waves crashing against the shore. Foreign traders paraded their exotic animals—strange creatures that had never once graced my eyes. And there, too, were fruits I could hardly have imagined.”

The grandpa looked longingly toward the horizon, as if summoning the sights of his youth.

“I remember so vividly the first time I beheld a watermelon. It was gigantic, its outside a deep forest green while the inside glowed a radiant red. The sweetness of it was a revelation, succulent and refreshing, as if it held the very essence of summer in every bite.”

The child gazed at his grandpa with unrestrained envy, imagining the taste dancing on his tongue.

“The city served as the grandest meeting place in the world, a shimmering jewel where merchants from far and wide came to exchange not only their wares but their wisdom. From the Persians, we learned to weave tales with silk, discovering patterns that told stories of their own. From the Greeks, we gleaned knowledge of mathematics and philosophy, ideas that would stretch our minds beyond the familiar.”

As the sun poured through the beautifully carved windows behind the two, painting their faces with patches of warmth, the grandpa continued, “I remember the laughter of my new friends—men and women from lands as diverse as the vibrant threads of our silks. Travelers offered me their fiery and fragrant spices, and I savored them in my steaming bowls of rice, where stories mingled just as the grains did, creating a feast not just for the body but for the soul.”

He gently took the child’s hand into his weathered palms, his grip full of warmth and wisdom.

“But dear child, the journey was fraught with perils as well,” he said, his voice now serious yet steady. “The deserts stretched vast and unforgiving, where the sun bore down like a relentless foe, testing our limits. Bandits lurked in the shadows, their intentions as murky as the twilight, and storms could rise as suddenly as a fleeting thought, turning the tranquil path into a mad rush for shelter. Yet, through it all, the spirit of the Silk Road thrived. It taught us resilience, courage, and the enduring bond of shared humanity.”

“So, as you rise to take your place in this world, remember the Silk Road,” he urged, his eyes twinkling with pride. “Embrace the diversity of cultures, for they are the silent colors of our shared journey. Speak with curiosity, tread with respect, and may your dreams weave a new tapestry that spans even farther than the paths we once traveled together.”

He looks at the child with cordiality, his eyes glistening under the warm glow of the afternoon light.

“Thus concludes my tale, but the journey continues with you.”

Echoes of the Ancient Path: A Young Merchant's Odyssey

Pui Kiu College, Ip, Ji Yau – 12

As I opened my eyes, I couldn't believe it. After 2 years of hard work and plenty of near-death experiences, I was finally here, walking in the infamous Silk Road. This was a dream come true. I glanced around, as if I was refusing to accept my place here. I mean, this is the most famous place that every single merchant has been talking about for the past few years! After all the excruciating challenges I have faced in my quest, this was definitely worth it, and it was the best I've felt in years. I dashed off to some of the nearby carts, looking at the hundreds of delicacies that included freshly baked pastries, delicious rice and some delicious pasta that made my saliva drip (I know it sounds gross too) and the thousands of ancient, delicate artifacts. I looked around, not believing that this place was so perfect in every way, while also being so heavenly at the same time.

Finally, I found an empty land so I can start my first story. Hi. Hello. Erm, how do I exactly start this? I don't know, and don't blame me. This is my first time writing. I'm extremely sorry for the long intro of my first time on the Silk Road. It's just the editor's fault. He told me to write more, claiming that if my intro is longer, it can catch more people to see my work and that will help the Silk Road flourish as this book will apparently grab more people's eyeballs (or so he says). My name is Max, a young, beautiful merchant from present-day Hong Kong. I was 12 years old when I embarked on this "adventurous odyssey" (as some of my friends would say mockingly) to the Silk Road. And after these 2 years of relentless adventures, I, the youngest lady to endure all the challenges faced in the quest to the Silk Road, am telling you, fellow hard-working merchants, the tough journeys I have encountered during my journey. So, hold on, because we will be having a shaky and bumpy ride that I don't suppose you will like.

The first challenge I faced was the first day after I left my beloved mother. Mother dear was heartbroken, her only child embarking on a quest that no child has even imagined. She was always like that. Too protective. Anyways, the first thing that stopped me was the limited transportation. First of all, there were no cars back then. We only had our legs, and considering that I was a 12-year-old girl back then, the so called "transportation" was limited for sure. That's why for most of the 2 years I spent on this journey, I had to walk by foot. The rest was me running (mainly due to my excitement of accomplishing a mild milestone) or jogging (to get myself moving) or just simply swimming and wading across rivers (to be honest I didn't sign up for swimming tests). That's why to rest and save up as much energy as you can, as you really need plenty of energy to finish what you decided to start.

The second challenge is about food. I didn't think much of it at first, considering how much I had underestimated the whole challenge (and mainly forgetting how much I love food). I brought not much food and water (because those things were pretty expensive at the time and me being an underaged merchant didn't earn much), which turned out to be insanely critical to my conditions afterwards, as I not only finished all that in a matter of 5 days, i almost died of hunger and hydration for four times afterwards too. So, if you decide to embark on this journey, take notes and remember to bring plenty of water and food so that you won't need to meet death itself.

Third, the scariest obstacle in my opinion is the forests that you pass during night. You will never know what's in there, let alone know what will happen there. You might encounter my very "favourite", some wolves that are ready to chew and suck every drop of blood out of you, or some adorable black panthers that somehow make things worse, those stupid panthers being able to blend in with the pitch-black darkness of the night and climb up the tall trees to wait for you to mess up. So, hold your horses and don't act stupid by going into the dark forests at night, thinking that you will tell a brilliant story that will make your fellow villagers and friends worship you like a god. I don't even think you will be able to make it home if you decide to do that. So, my advice, don't.

So, after the woods, after the forests, you will find a couple of rivers. 3~4 if I'm not mistaken. The currents will probably sweep you off your feet the very moment you step into those waters and carry you with it, so remember to cross the rivers by using a bridge or build a boat if you can. Also don't rush to cross it at night also, because the currents will be even stronger than before at night. Therefore, it is best advised to cross the river in broad daylight instead of at night.

Lastly, the most interesting challenge of all in my opinion is walking through the great wall of China. I know it may seem that I am exaggerating, but it really is a fun idea to cross it. I mean, you will find marvelous landscapes that mother nature has personally designed herself, with plenty of beautiful greenery surrounding you as you stroll through the ancient roads. After all, you will need to cross it if you need to reach the silk road.

I know I said that that was the last challenge, but make sure you do prepare yourself for this journey thoroughly, as this journey is not only difficult and tough, it creates the illusion that you may think that you feel defeated. That's why, the last difficulty is overcoming your emotions and controlling yourself to lead yourself to success.

That's the end of the guide to how to go to the Silk Road, and wish you the best of luck and a successful journey. Meet you there, fellow traveler!

Oh! You have to try their spaghetti that they made. It's so good.

Ghosts of the Fallen Legion

Pui Kiu College, Liu, Alan Yifan – 12

The sun hung high over the Roman palace, casting sharp shadows across the marble corridors. It was AD 29, and Emperor Tiberius awoke to the soft, insistent voice of a servant.

"What is so urgent that it cannot wait for the morning to settle?" Tiberius grumbled, rolling over with the sluggishness of age.

"A band of merchants, Caesar," the servant whispered. "From the East."

Tiberius sat up, the fog of sleep clearing instantly. Memories of his adoptive father, Augustus, flooded back. Decades ago, Augustus had funded an expedition into the unknown lands of the Orient, and Tiberius himself had finalized the transaction. The return of such men was not merely a matter of trade; it was a matter of legacy.

Minutes later, fully robed and seated upon the throne, Tiberius listened as the lead merchant spoke of wonders beyond the borders of the known world.

"We heard whispers of the Land of Dragons, Caesar," the merchant said, his voice low with awe. "They say dragons dwell on a mystical island known only to the True Dragon Emperor."

The claim startled Tiberius. While it sounded like a traveler's tall tale, the strategic implications were real. If such an empire existed, Rome needed either an alliance or a foothold. By royal decree, a massive caravan was assembled, laden with gifts for the Han Emperor. To ensure its safety, Tiberius called upon the Legio XII Fulminata. Its commander was Maximus, a *legatus legionis* who came from a storied line of Roman steel.

A month later, the expedition crossed the final borders of the Roman Empire. Maximus rode at the head of the column, his eyes scanning the horizon. Beside him, the lead merchant prattled on about the path ahead, but Maximus wasn't listening. His thoughts were miles away, anchored to a ghost.

Years ago, his father, Titus, had led a legion to secure the Silk Road from bandits. They had walked into the dust and never walked out. A lone survivor had told a harrowing tale of an ambush in a narrow pass, and Maximus had spent every year since dreaming of vengeance. As the terrain grew rugged, a cold sense of dread settled in his chest. Everything looked hauntingly familiar, like a half-forgotten nightmare from his youth.

Suddenly, a flash of light caught his eye—sunlight glancing off polished metal. Maximus tensed, hand moving to the hilt of his gladius.

"Search the perimeter," he commanded.

There, half-buried in the sun-bleached dirt, was a Roman pilum. Its wooden shaft was rotted and colorless, but the iron tip remained lethally sharp. It looked like a discarded relic, a toy left behind by a forgotten age. Maximus felt a shiver trace his spine. He knew this weapon. He had seen it in his father's hands.

Before he could process the discovery, a deep, booming gong echoed through the canyon. It was followed by the mournful blast of a goat horn.

Then came the chaos.

Hundreds of figures poured from the surrounding cliffs, leaping from ledges with a grace that defied gravity. They were clad in white cloaks emblazoned with a single lotus, wielding long, curved blades that shimmered like water. These were the White Lotus, the legendary bandits who had once vanished alongside Maximus's father.

"Formation!" Maximus roared.

The Romans scrambled into their disciplined boxes, but the White Lotus fought with a rhythm the Legions had never encountered. Their movements were fluid, shifting from a defensive line into a "snake" formation that struck at the gaps in the Roman shields. They were not mere bandits; they fought with the precision of a martial arts academy.

"Charge!"

Maximus led the counter-attack, his spear darting like a silver viper. Red and white clashed in a violent wave. The battlefield became a blur of steel and screams. Maximus watched in horror as his men were picked apart; these attackers didn't just swing for the chest—they targeted the gaps in the neck and the joints of the armor with terrifying accuracy.

The Romans held through sheer numerical weight, but the cost was staggering. By the time the White Lotus began to retreat, the XII Legion was a shadow of its former self. Maximus looked around, his heart sinking. Less than a thousand men remained.

The silence that followed was worse than the screaming. It was broken by the sound of heavy metal dragging across stone, sending sparks flying into the air.

From the shadow of the mountain emerged a nightmare. It was a metal statue, massive and weathered, its chest plate wider than a man. Vines clung to its rusted limbs, and ancient runes—worn smooth by centuries—glowed faintly. Beneath its helmet, two hollow eye sockets burned with an unnatural, hellish flame.

It was an automaton, a primordial relic from a lost age. In its massive gauntlets, it swung a double-bladed battle axe that seemed to weigh more than a horse.

"Stand your ground!" Maximus shouted, though his own voice wavered.

The statue moved with a terrifying, mechanical speed. With one sweep of its axe, it sent a dozen Romans flying. Swords bounced harmlessly off its thick bronze plating. Realizing the end was near, Maximus spurred his horse into a desperate gallop, aiming his spear at the creature's throat.

The statue swung. The impact was deafening. Maximus was launched from his saddle as his horse was crushed instantly. His shield shattered into splinters; his spear snapped like a twig. Dazed and bleeding, Maximus staggered to his feet. Adrenaline was the only thing holding him together.

He drew his gladius. He realized that on foot, he was more agile than the lumbering giant. He moved in a frenzy, dodging the heavy, telegraphed blows. He channeled every hour of training, every ounce of his father's legacy. In a split-second window, he saw a gap in the statue's neck joints—a place where the internal mechanisms were exposed. He lunged. The blade sank deep into the gears.

A heart-wrenching, metallic scream erupted from the statue. The ancient system seized, its internal counterweights failing. As the machine collapsed, blood—thick and dark—began to leak from the seams of the armor, suggesting a human pilot had been crushed within. The hellfire in its eyes flickered and died.

The remaining White Lotus vanished back into the mountain mists, leaving Maximus alone among the dead.

The adrenaline began to fade, and with it came the cold. Maximus looked down to see three arrows buried in his side. He hadn't even felt them strike. His knees buckled, his bloodstained armor creaking as he knelt in the dust.

As the world began to lose its color, everything finally clicked. The familiar pass, the ancient pilum, the disappearance of the White Lotus—this was where his father had made his final stand. The bandits hadn't just defeated Titus; they had evolved, using Roman steel and Eastern secrets to become something more.

Maximus let out a long, ragged sigh. He had found his father at last.

The world turned to grey, then to black.

In AD 29, the Legio XII Fulminata was officially recorded as lost on the Silk Road. In the depths of the underworld, the final member of the legion finally marched into the ranks of his brothers.

The Banished Story About the First Expedition of the Silk Road

Pui Kiu College, Ngai, Sheung Fu Xavier – 13

The world's boundary ended at the gate, beyond the gate was an endless barren of wasteland, an orange desert with harsh climate and no signs of life visible, a silent sanctuary where even breathing would cause disruption in the empty peace, no one in the Han Dynasty ever dared to step foot on it, everyone was horrified by the mysterious place, no one dared to face the unknown. One day Chinese imperial Zhang Qian was curious and interested in what was beyond it, and had an idea to see what was beyond the desert, a new species of animal, a majestic environment to build civilization or even civilization with other people that had technologies beyond our comprehension and become allies with them. These ideas lit Zhang Qian and decided to send out people on expeditions to explore beyond these lands and I was one of them.

My name is Wong, I am one of the many merchants, like many others we were chosen by Zhang Qian, but unlike the others who were excited to go on this journey, I was concerned by the safety measures Zhang Qian was willing to take, and even though he fully assured that we were safe, I still had a feeling that something would go wrong, but the I didn't want to disappoint Zhang Qian our glorious Chinese imperial and decided to still go.

Our expedition included many people like merchants with our leader called Biang Hang, he was our leader to lead us through the adversity that we are going to be traversing, he gave us silk to bring with us in case we discover new civilization as we would be able to be allies and for us to trade technologies with each other. In addition, we had supply packets where there was enough water and food to last up to 4 months. The other people were enthusiastic to go on this exploration journey, excited to explore the unknown, discover new things they have never seen before, and explore mystical areas. But I am scared, horrified about the stuff out there, what if there is no end, or we get brutally slaughtered by species.

Our plan includes us walking until we see new civilization and interact with them, while others seem to think this was an amazing idea, It seems to me to feel like a suicide mission, a mission that would get most if not all of us killed either to lack of food or attacked by other people.

We started walking on 114 BC, for the first few days we walked tirelessly across the desert around us, our feet would sometimes sink but everything seemed fine, there were no signs of dangers, but no signs of people either, it seemed oddly peaceful, surrounded by us were mountains that weren't tall but weren't low either, but they seemed tiresome to go over and we would sometimes use 2 days' worth of supplies in one day just to make up for the energy we would use in one day, some have given up and have traversed back to the Han Dynasty, I want to go back too, but I have a voice in my body that is calling me to keep going, so instead of doing what is easy I have chosen to continue to finish this expedition

It's been 3 months and most have given up, only 8 of us remained, our leader Biang Hang lost his life due to lack of food. The other merchants have either chosen to go back or have not survived due to them using up all of their food. I only have 1 day of food remaining. Mountains are ubiquitous, it's imminent that we are all going to die in this desert, but right as all our hopes are gone, we saw a change in environment, instead of nature surrounding us there was a small wooden hut. We walked up to the hut and knocked on the door, then someone came out.

"Hello?" The person who came out from the wooden hut said, he was a tall man but instead of the yellow skin tone we thought was the same for everyone, his skin tone was more on the darker tone, it was a lightish brown tone, his eyes were brown, instead of the eyes we have which is black.

“Hi, we are from a place called Han Dynasty, what is the name of your place?” I asked.

"We are from Bharata, we have never met people from your place, I will bring you to our king since you obviously have a reason to visit us,' he exclaimed.

We followed him, and as we proceeded, we saw more and more people with the same skin tone as them, perhaps their place's skin tone is different from ours. As we proceeded, we went up a flight of stairs and eventually came before a massive building with golden pillars holding it upright.

We went up to person who we realised was the king and preached, “We are from a place called Han Dynasty, we have gone on an expedition to find new people and exchange resources and information, as a gift, here is a silk from our land, we wish you would give us something in exchange for this and wish you to ally with us and make trade roads to interact and trade with each other.”

The person looked at us and nodded, he proceeded to give us fabrics, we have not seen this before and he gave us large amounts then proceeded to tell us, “We accept your trade and accept your peace offering and your wish to trade with each other, to help you with your journey back, we will also provide horses and supplies to aid your journey back to Han Dynasty.”

We were bewildered by his kindness and agreed. After 1 month, we returned to the Han Dynasty and talked to our Chinese imperial Zhang Qian about the journey.

He was buoyant to realise the situation, we asked about the people who came back early, but he said that they never came back and Zhang Qian seemed to realised he underestimated the adversity that we would have to overcome in this expedition, he realised the his idea have killed many innocent people and apologised for what he have done and promised the next time people traverse through that place again, he would take the safety precautions needed and not underestimate it. As a reward, he gave us large sums of money that could last us a lifetime in exchange for the suffering we had to endure and told us to never tell anyone about what happened on the first expedition and forbade us to ever tell anyone what happened and banished the story out of the public eyes.

Zheng He

Pui Kiu College, Wong, Cho Fung Max – 13

A long time ago, there was a brave Chinese explorer named Zheng He. He was known as one of the finest captains in the world, proudly guiding the "treasure ships." Zheng sailed around the world, bartering spices and silks with the other countries near the Silk Road.

One night Zheng and his fellow sailors were bathing and telling stories as they sailed under the stars in their ships. Suddenly they saw blackened clouds rolling in upon them. The lightning was flashing all about them, as though questioning their lives with every strike.

The sailors had become frightened and began to tie and check every rope and line, lower the sails, and do everything else they could to protect the ship. Just as the ship had become a little steadier, a huge wave suddenly heaved. A terrifying sea monster suddenly!

Panic began to spread among the crew. The sea monster made its move, and in the blink of an eye, the sailors and parts of the ship began to fall. Zheng shouted, "We cannot give up! We must fight together!" A plan came into his mind quickly. He ordered his sailors to fire the cannons of the ship to draw the monster's attention while the archers prepared to shoot arrows.

Zheng and his men kept hitting the sea monster. Finally, the sea monster realized that he was not able to fight back, so he went back into the ocean and vanished. The storm stopped, and the sun arose and shone brightly down upon the ship. Zheng He and his men then celebrated their victory.

Years and years passed, meanwhile, the story of Zheng He and the sea monster spread wide and far, and inspired many sailors to be brave. From that time forward, Zheng He was not only known as one who bartered with other countries, but as a hero who fought against a sea monster!

New Tales of China's Silk Road: A Tapestry Woven With Lost Threads

Pui Kiu College, Wong, Lok – 14

The heavens must have heeded my prayers! I feel a wave of euphoria wash over me, adrift in a sea of joy which words cannot chart. The great Emperor Wu has blessed me with the duty of leading an expedition in furtherance of the Silk Road's development, procuring a new approach for the trading route. If I am successful, who knows what fame, glory and riches await me! It pains me to leave my wife and unborn child behind, but such a chance is one in a lifetime! The heralds have yet to disclose the duration and whereabouts of the trip, but the opportunity was irresistible. I can't wait to see the surprised look on my wife! She'll surely be overjoyed for me!

Yuánshòu 4th year, 9th month, 13th day

I had a dispute with my wife today. Apparently, she was appalled at the idea of me being away while our child was being born, an *Yuánshòu 4th year, 9th month, 12th day* d begged me to stay. The envoys today revealed that I was going to be away for at least 4 years, and the chances of survival weren't high. I will be leading a team of 500 men traversing in a Northwestern direction to Europe, traversing through deserts and mountains where few have returned. Prevail, and I would attain the title of highest honor and propitiate the emperor, gaining his favor onto my household. At the palace, I happened to overhear other servants mocking me for being foolhardy, accepting such a chimerical trial in hopes of glory. Thinking back now, my blood still boils with rage remembering their words. I will not disgrace my family name and let such scum look down on me!

Yuánshòu 4th year, 9th month, 19th day

I woke up at the crack of dawn, leaving the house without a trace. Alerting my wife would simply make it harder for me to leave, as I could not bear to see her heartbroken face again. Escorted by my team, we left the city gates and advanced towards Europe.

Yuánshòu 4th year, 9th month, 20th day

I'm getting to know some of the people accompanying me today. Turns out my bodyguard XuSheng is from the Northeastern province, and has a wife with 4 kids waiting for him. He was rewarded with a hefty sum to his family for journeying with us, and was also promised a further payment if successful. We were sharing a few drinks at night when he suddenly started sobbing. Drunk, he started to spill how much he yearned to see his wife and children again, stepping back into the home he loved so much. As I listened to his lament, I felt my own sorrow rising inside. Besides XuSheng and myself, how many others accompanying us were also forfeiting their connection to their families?

Yuánshòu 4th year, 11th month, 9th day

We have finally reached the border of our country. Further out, we would be stepping into precarious territory, labeled both dangerous and lengthy. However, I believe in my men and I. We wouldn't back down no matter the circumstances. Leading them, we ventured into the new land.

Yuánshòu 4th year, 11th month, 12th day

We met face to face with a desert whose dunes exceed the horizon today, which I remember is what was known to be the Taklamakan Desert. The sight was both breathtaking and chilling, reminding us of what we were about to traverse. My men seem shaky, but we've still managed to carry on.

Yuánshòu 4th year, 11th month, 19th day

It's been a week since we've entered the desert terrain, but the horizons seem to stretch without end. The hot sun scorches our head throughout the day, burning through even the strongest of men. Our supplies are still plentiful, but the complaints from my men are starting to increase. Some seem to be regretting coming on the trip, while others wait silently but impatiently.

Yuánshòu 4th year, 11th month, 21th day

The situation is looking dire. We have lost sense of direction, and are wandering aimlessly in the desert. We do have an astronomer on our side, but the progress is slowly dwindling. I pray for my men's mental fortitude to carry on.

Yuánshòu 4th year, 11th month, 23th day

Bandits raided us today. Under normal circumstances, such feeble thieves should be a piece of cake for my men, but under the blistering heat their morale had been heavily weakened. We successfully fended them off, but not without the loss of 20 lives. However, on the positive side, we've reached the midpoint of the desert according to the astronomer. XuSheng shared a few drinks with me again in our tents at night, and from our conversation I could tell how tired our men were. Some even were beginning to think if this trip was worth it. However, we could not turn back. We had already sacrificed so much, and turning back now would waste all of the efforts paid.

Yuánshòu 4th year, 11th month, 27th day

Supplies were stolen while we slept. Turns out, a few soldiers were fed up and decided to sneak back. The number of supplies taken weren't a problem, but this incident was another detrimental hit to my men's morale. I'm worried. I don't know how much more of this they can take. I'm usually optimistic about the way things go, but I'm being realistic about this situation. Should I turn back? Can I go on? What will my men think? Then I remembered what was waiting for me back home. My wife. My child. The servants, envoys.... that look down on me. I can't retrocede now. I.... can't.

Yuánshòu 4th year, 12th month, 2th day

What I've been fearing for happened today. 200 of my men, almost half of our group, started revolting. They wanted to take the supplies and leave. I couldn't blame them for thinking that way, but I also couldn't just let them be. With no other choice, we started a fight amongst ourselves. Gaining the upper hand, we started pushing them back. Amidst the battle, some soldiers resorted to fleeing, even knowing they wouldn't get far. Rounding up the mutineers, I gave them a choice: continue the journey or face death. Suddenly, a renegade leaped forward with a blade, rushing towards me, and stabbed XuSheng who blocked me with his body at the last second. The renegade was quickly subdued, but XuSheng's life was slowly flailing. I still remember how as I held him in my arms, his gash in the stomach wouldn't stop spurting out blood. He was like a dear friend to me, yet how could he die so soon? The nights we spent drinking and reminiscing about our families—His family. He has a family at home waiting for him. They're waiting for him. They don't know. He's dead. He isn't coming back. He died saving me. I can still see his blood on his hands, his writhing face in front of me. There's so much blood. I feel sick. I don't know if I can continue. Someone please, just make this end....

(2200 years later)

2025/4/24

Dear Diary,

I've just learnt about the Silk Road in History Lesson today. Turns out, it was developed over 22 centuries ago, and spanned from China to Europe! Learning about this, I wondered how they even created this in the first place. I can imagine how fun it was navigating through deserts and mountains, traversing and discovering different paths! Those people must have had the time of their lives!

Good night, Diary.

The Eagle's Last Flight: From the Ashes of Byzantium to the Gates of Tang

Pui Kiu College, ZHANG, Diyao Yordi – 12

29th May 1453

If you are reading this, remember: the Legacy of Rome never failed.

Just yesterday, Constantinople—the Queen of Cities—fell to the invaders. The thunder of cannons still echoes in my mind, signaling the end of a millennium. I, Praetor Lucius Aquila Severus, and the Praetorian Guard barely managed to protect the Emperor and escape the burning ruins through hidden postern gates. We lost our empire, but not our spirits.

With the West indifferent and the North a wilderness, we looked to a desperate legend: the "Rome of the East."

Traders speak of the **Tang Dynasty**, a land of powerful armies and safety. It is thousands of miles away, but we have no choice. Today, our five hundred men marched the first twenty miles. We are the last of Rome, carrying the spark of an empire into the unknown.

7th June 1453

I plan to keep this diary so our offspring remember this retreat; they must know their ancestors were the iron-willed survivors of the greatest civilization on earth.

We reached Galatia today and were staggered to find five thousand legionnaires from the Twelfth and Fourteenth Legions. They had been posted on the frontier and rushed back only to hear of Byzantium's fall. Now, with the Emperor in their midst, they have pledged to follow us to the edge of the world. Looking out at a camp of five thousand Roman soldiers, I truly believe we might make it.

9th June 1453

We fought our first battle today—a sharp encounter with a Turkish scouting force. Roman discipline held; the scouts were cut down with no survivors. However, the tension has increased; the enemy is searching for us.

We also encountered a convoy of Roman traders. Their leader, Julius, knows the "Silk Road" and confirmed the existence of the Tang. He promised to guide us there in three months in exchange for protection. The entire Guard voted to follow this path into the sunrise.

15th June 1453

We have arrived at our first true trial: a shimmering wasteland. Julius believes the heat will shield us from Turkish pursuit, but thirst is a physical weight. We have already lost a hundred men to fatigue.

The Emperor stood atop a dune, his armor reflecting the dying light, and reminded us of our reputation. "Your forebears fought through Tartarus to reach Elysium," he shouted. "We are going through living hell to arrive at a mortal heaven!"

20th June 1453

We crossed the sands! The relief of seeing trees and vibrant wildflowers was like a god's touch. We lost over a hundred souls, but the Emperor's speech kept the survivors moving.

We are resting in a small town. The locals were wary until our sentries dispatched a band of marauding bandits with effortless Roman precision. Julius says a mountain range lies ahead, but for now, we enjoy the salty coastal air.

27th June 1453

The mountains are far more formidable than imagined. We separated from our six hundred cavalry today, as the narrow passes cannot sustain both men and horses. I watched Centurion Paulus lead them away with a heavy heart.

The ascent is brutal. We used our hands to claw up jagged, barren rock as a howling tempest threatened to rip us from the face. I watched a fellow guard lose his grip and scream as he fell into the clouds. Yet, standing at 1,300 meters, I felt a strange pride. We were above the world.

5th August 1453

The Emperor is dead.

During a landslide, a falling block of sandstone caught him in the forehead. He died at noon, whispering his final command: "Bury me on the highest peak as a mark of Roman defiance." His son, **Praetor Claudius Julius Caesar**, has taken command. We formed an arch of five thousand swords for the body to pass under. We carved his stone: *Here lies the last Emperor of Rome, but his legacy marches on.*

10th August 1453

A city! Its defenders wore turbans, but Julius assured us they were not Turks. The city is a marvel of wide pavements and markets that rivaled the forums of old. It brought tears to my eyes, reminding me of the home we lost. When I asked if this was the end, Julius smiled. "This is nothing. Wait until you see **Chang'an**."

1st September 1453

The final desert was a nightmare of quicksand. Praetor Claudius has collapsed with fever, and we carry him on a litter; the bloodline of Caesar must not end in the sand.

Amidst our struggle, we met a Tang patrol. They were suspicious of five thousand armed Romans, but they have agreed to escort us to their capital. The end is finally in sight.

10th September 1453

We have arrived. The Tang Dynasty is richer than anything Julius described. We traveled for ten days under an escort of 30,000 Tang warriors—a force so precise even our centurions admired them.

Today, we entered the palace. Gold lines the ceilings and limestone reflects our battered armor. We stood there—five hundred Praetorians, the iron core of a fallen world—in full combat gear. The Tang Emperor asked for our story.

I stepped forward and drew a deep breath. "We are Romans," I said. "The last of Rome, the legacy of a great empire, seeking a new dawn."

The Encounter of Spines and Fluff

Pui Kiu College, Zhang, Xin Yu Sissia – 13

The two are as unlikely as any creatures in Hong Kong. Hazel is a prickly little hedgehog who has sharp spines to pierce narrow branches like needles. Finn is a red fox with a soft and fluffy tail that shakes like a baby's hair when he is excited. They live near between two mangroves at the Sai Kung Country Park. They have frictions all the time. These fights make them grumpy and annoyed with each other.

Hazel hates all things that break her daily routine. Every morning, she climbs out of her leaf-covered burrow. She looks for beetles and snails among tree roots. Then she lies down on a hot rock shaded by bamboo to nap.

"Finn is such a trouble maker!" she said to passing sparrows that day. "He just messes around meaninglessly!" The sparrows repeated the same words together. Hazel immersed in dissatisfaction. She crawled into her burrow. "He's a noisy nuisance. If he stopped talking so much, this forest would be heaven," she mumbled.

On the opposite side, Finn is full of energy all the time. He runs fast to check every corner of the woods before dawn. He takes food from other animals' homes without asking. His visits make Hazel angry. She has told him off many times for entering her space without permission.

Finn saw Hazel napping on the hot rock and suddenly said, "The woods are for all of us." Finn added. "It's a public place!"

Hazel complained, "You run into my napping spot and ruined my peace!"

Finn spoke angrily in return, "What peace! You only bring me trouble! Your quiet place? When did that rock become only yours?"

Hazel moved her spiny tail as a warning. "It's mine! I sleep here every day at the same time!"

Finn laughed in a mean way.

"You scare all my beetles away with your noise!" Hazel was getting even angrier.

"Beetles are boring! Chasing grasshoppers is much more fun!" Finn snorted.

"I don't want fun! I want peace!" Hazel shouted loudly.

From that day on, Finn called her "Prickles". Hazel called him "Bounce". Their meetings became very tense. If Finn came near, Hazel crawled away quickly. Finn rolled his eyes and thought "no sense of humor at all."

Old Mr. Tortoise is the oldest resident in the park. He had lived there for 50 years. He shook his head when he saw them avoiding each other. A chattering squirrel sat on his shell. It asked, "Will they ever be friends? He's too wild. She's too grumpy." Mr. Tortoise smiled a little. He said, "Even the prickliest cactus blossoms. The quickest rabbit must slow down either." Sadly, no one paid attention. A hedgehog and a fox could never be friends.

Then a summer typhoon hit. The park's warning system was on. The sky turned dark gray. Wind howled like an owl. Rain poured down heavily. The stream grew into a roaring river. It swept away branches and stones. Hazel was in her burrow. She heard a loud crack. The bamboo roof fell in. It trapped her inside. Mud walls broke apart. Water seeped in. It made her shiver. She called for help. But the wind covered her voice. Fallen bamboo held her legs down. She could not move at all.

At the same time, Finn sat bored in his wooden sofa. He had no butterflies to catch. Then he thought of Hazel. Her burrow was lower. It was so close to the dangerous stream. What if she was in great danger? He hesitated. He asked himself "Really? The hedgehog who hates me." But he said to himself, "I'm doing this because I'm nice, not because I care." Then, he picked up a big leaf to keep the rain off him. He stepped into the wind. The wind almost knocked him over. He said out loud, "Stay calm, Finn. Hazel is counting on you, even if she doesn't know it."

Finn ran fast through the rain. He slipped on muds which are as slippery as detergent. When he reached Hazel's burrow, it was 99% destroyed. Only a small opening was left. He called her name. This time, he finally got a response. "I'm stuck! The walls are falling!" she squeaked. "Hold on, Hazel! I'll get you out!" Finn yelled, breathing quickly. "Finn? Is that you?" Hazel asked in surprise. "Who else would face this storm for you?" Finn said loudly. He tried to sound brave even though he was afraid.

Finn looked into the opening. He saw Hazel curled in a ball. Her spines were dripping with rain. He needed to protect his paws from her spines. He chose the gigantic leaves. He made cushions by the leaves he collected. He had learned this skill when making nests for baby birds. He ran back. He said, "Hazel! I have leaves on my paw to protect me. Don't curl up, okay?"

Hazel hesitated. Then for the first time, she saw Finn not as a noisy fox but as a rescuer. She slowly uncurled her body. Her spines relaxed a little. She said, "Okay. Just be careful—my spines can hurt..." "I know. I'll be as careful as I can. Trust me," Finn whispered.

Finn pulled her out gently. "You're freezing!" Finn wrapped his fluffy tail around her. "Let's go to my den, it's clean and safe."

"Thank you, Finn. I never thought I'd say that," Hazel whispered.

"Don't get used to it." Finn joked. His voice was kind. As time flew, the storm finally died down outside.

After the rescue, they did not speak for a long time. One day, Hazel reached out, "I'm sorry I called you bounce and pricked your paw. I thought you'd ruin my only safe place."

Finn shrugged his shoulders. His tail swung. It showed that he was not annoyed. He said, "I'm sorry that I crashed your spot and called you Prickles. You're the only one who doesn't laugh at my jokes."

Hazel smiled. She said, "Your jokes are stupid... but kind of funny when you're not annoying."

"I'm always funny!" Finn pretended to be angry. They laughed. The warm sound melted the last of their tension.

The day after, sunshine sparkled on leaves like diamonds. The animals stared in surprise. They saw Finn and Hazel walking together. Finn was teaching her to chase fireflies. Hazel was showing him how to find juicy snails. The squirrel gasped. Mr. Tortoise smiled from his log. He said to no one in particular, "Told you so. Friction isn't about fighting. It's about learning to fit two different pieces together."

We all have a little Hazel and Finn in us. Sometimes we're the hedgehog. We put up spines to avoid getting hurt. Sometimes we are foxes. We crash into others' quiet spaces without thinking. Friction is not bad. It is a sign showing that we are different. And it is totally fine. If we listen instead of arguing, if we wrap our "paws" in leaves instead of getting angry when pricked, the world will be nicer. We don't have to be the same to get along. We just have to be willing to try.

In the end, the mangrove woods are better with both the quiet hedgehog and the bouncy fox. The world is better with all of us—different, prickly, bouncy, and perfect just the way we are.

The Red Silk

Pui Kiu College, Zhang, Zirong – 14

West of Dunhuang, 138 BC

The wind was the worst of it. It didn't just blow; it scoured. It took the skin off your face and the hope out of your heart, one grain of sand at a time. Zhang Qian felt his face pulling tight, the skin cracking like old pottery. He had been an envoy of the Han court, sent by the Emperor to make alliances. Now, he was just a man walking through a furnace.

Out of the hundred men who had started, there were only a handful left. The horses were gone. The gold was gone. The silk—meant to buy their way through the kingdoms of the west—had been traded, lost, or buried with the dead. All but one bolt.

Kao, his attendant, stumbled as he walked. He looked at Zhang Qian, his eyes sunken and desperate. "Sir, we have no water. Let us trade the last bolt. Even for a guide. Even for a promise."

Zhang Qian didn't answer. He reached back and touched the heavy roll of fabric strapped to his back. It was dyed a deep, unbroken crimson. It was the color of the Han dynasty. It was the only thing he had left that meant he was still a representative of a great empire, and not just a starving vagrant.

"We do not trade it," Zhang Qian said. His voice was a dry whisper. "We show it. It is a question. It asks: Do you know who made this? Do you know the people who can?"

They walked until they could walk no more. They fell, more dead than alive, into the hands of the Xiongnu—the very horse lords they had been sent to find and outflank.

They were taken to a camp of felt tents. The chieftain was a broad man with a scar across his cheek. He took the bolt of crimson silk and held it up to the sun. The light shone through it, glowing like a piece of the sun itself.

"It is pretty," the chieftain said. He rubbed the fabric between his thumb and forefinger. "But it is weak. It tears in the wind. It rots in the rain. Why would a man die for a pretty thing?"

Zhang Qian stood as straight as his aching bones would allow. "It is not the cloth," he said. "It is the fact of the cloth. It proves that my people, beyond this desert, can make such a thing. Imagine what else we know. Imagine what you have that we lack. This desert does not have to be a wall. It can be a road."

He stayed with them for ten years. He was a captive, but he was also a witness. He learned their tongue. He mapped their lands in his mind. He studied the tall, swift horses they bred.

And in a small oilskin pouch, hidden against his skin, he kept his real treasure. A handful of alfalfa seeds. A cutting of grapevine. Things the Han empire had never seen.

The silk was the message. These seeds were the first answer.

When the chance came, on a night with no moon, he ran. He ran until the campfires were nothing but stars behind him. The wind was at his back, and in his hand, he held a torn scrap of the crimson silk—frayed, stained with dirt and blood, but still bright. Still a question.

Months later, a figure in rags approached the gates of Chang'an. The guards moved to drive him away, but the flash of crimson in his hand made them stop.

In the palace, Zhang Qian knelt before Emperor Wu. He opened the oilskin pouch and poured the contents onto the marble floor. The alfalfa seeds scattered like tiny stones. The grapevine cutting lay dry and twisted.

He told the Emperor of the Xiongnu lands, of the fast horses, of the kingdoms in the west waiting to be known. The Emperor looked from the seeds to the man, and in his eyes, a fire kindled.

The Silk Road began that day—not in the desert, but here, on the cold palace stones, with a handful of seeds and a scrap of red cloth that had refused to be bartered away.

Questionnaire to the Silk Road

Sacred Heart Canossian College, Chui, Man Yuet Alice – 12

The journey across the world was exhausting for Zhang Qian. He had discovered many new gadgets and new things. His head felt like it was about to explode after acquiring the new knowledge, and his heart felt like it was about to burst out of his heart because of how excited he was to tell everyone about his discoveries.

His back ached. The glorious facilities of China could be seen in the distance. He was almost there! Just then, two monkeys materialized in front of him. One was completely covered head to toe in some kind of white powder; the other had some sort of black paste applied all over its body. The sudden appearance of the monkeys startled Zhang Qian, who almost dropped his bag of souvenirs in shock.

“Who do you think you are? Scaring people like that,” he scolded. “We just want to conduct a short questionnaire,” the white one said innocently. “Yeah, we never meant any harm!” the black one added. “No! Monkeys are always up to no good. I don’t want to be a victim of your shenanigans,” Zhang Qian stated blankly, trying to walk around the monkeys and continue his journey. “Please!” the monkeys got down on their knees and started pleading. Taking sympathy in them, Zhang Qian stopped on his tracks. “Okay, fine. I’ll take your stupid survey.”

The monkeys exchanged a grin. “This is not any survey,” the white one started. “It doesn’t include a pen and paper,” the black one informed. “Why conduct a questionnaire if you’re not using a pen and a piece of paper? Aren’t that part of the basic requirements of those forms?” Zhang Qian grumbled. The monkeys ignored his brooding and continued with their blabbering.

He zoned out after a while of getting bombarded by the monkeys’ talking. He was sure that the survey hadn’t even started yet, so it wouldn’t hurt anyone to just take a short nap —

“Hey, Sir! Are you even listening?”

Before he knew it, Zhang Qian was swooped off his feet and carried high in the air. He was unable to open his eyes, so he had no clue what was happening to him. Asking the monkeys was out of the question as his lips were numb and unable to move. His hearing still worked, but other than the sound of the whirling of wind, nothing else was audible.

After what seemed like forever, his senses finally worked normally. He opened his eyes to find himself in a dark and dreary dungeon. Zhang Qian was relieved to see that he wasn’t inside one of the cells, but fear kicked in afterwards, as he was unable to identify his exact location or the transport he took.

The two monkeys emerged from the darkness. “May the questionnaire begin!” they said in perfect unison. Zhang Qian was confused. Out of all the places in the world, why is the survey hosted in a castle’s jail?

With flashes of green light and clouds of orange smoke, a child and an adult appeared inside two cells in front of him. After a few seconds of awkward silence, the two of them began to scream for help at the top of their lungs. The screaming was so aggressive that Zhang Qian covered his ears with his hands.

“It seems like both are in trouble,” said the white monkey. “Who would you save if you could only save one?” asked the black one. Zhang Qian could hear their voices loud and clear even through all the screaming. “What? Umm...” he looked at the two of them. “Can’t I save them both? They seem like they’re in a pickle...” “But one of them is acting,” the white one’s voice delivered well despite the screaming in the background. “Yeah, the acting one isn’t actually in trouble.” The black one’s voice was as smooth as the white one, without a hint of panic — just perfectly nonchalant.

Zhang Qian thought for a moment. “I’ll rescue the adult!” he exclaimed. “Children always fib. There’s no way I can trust them!”

At that moment he was unable to move, speak or blink. The adult took a set of keys from his pocket and unlocked his own cell door. He used the keys to unlock the kid’s cell door and snatched the child away. Zhang Qian’s vision faded to darkness...

When he awoke, he found himself back in his own bed. The bag of treasures he got from his journey was propped against his bed like a sack of hay. On his bedside table laid a note. With curiosity, he took it and began to read:

Dear Sir,

Your performance in our short questionnaire isn't up to our standard. May we inform you that no children or adults were harmed in the process of the survey. It's all just an illusion.

The lesson we were trying to teach you is not to judge a book by its cover. We could see from the moment we first met that you're quick to judge, for example, you thought we were mischievous just because we are monkeys.

I hope you will reflect deeply on your behavior.

Best regards,

Anonymous

Besides from the rest of the amazing souvenirs, Zhang Qian found along his journey of China's Silk Road, the moral he had learned with the monkeys was the richest and most fruitful yet.

Whispers Along the Silk Road

St. Clare's Girls' School, Lee, Cheuk Ying – 14

I swear I'd instantaneously crumble that arrogant smirk on his face if we didn't share the same blood. I couldn't care less about obscuring my rather rude retort directed at my ill-mannered, ignorant and belligerent brother who's been urging me to go on this quest, a trip to an ancient market along the silk road, for the past 20 minutes. "Stop procrastinating. You know we need those poppies to make our medicine. It's not like we can simply buy them since they're extinct!" Sighing in defeat, I agreed to finish the quest of my own free will. "Fine. I'll finish the quest. Anything that gives me a buffer zone from you." With a light huff in victory, Fiyero tossed me a crumbled yellowish map. He then greedily clawed at a beige duffle bag and dumped it towards me. My slate gray eyes narrowed in aggravation and stepped into the pod of the time machine, meanwhile stealing nonchalant glances at his slender fingers swaying gracefully over the aesthetic panels on the counter of the time machine. "You've got 5 hours. You'll be teleported back once your time is up."

With a powerful gravitational pull, I felt my body being sucked into the abyss of the portal. A fall of a thousand stories underground is how I'd describe it. Not much of a view here, only a depressing pitch-black space without dimensions, somewhat feels like existing in the place between the cusp of birth and the dawn of afterlife, or how the process of reincarnating would feel. I couldn't feel the moment my legs swam beneath me, nor did my slender fingers twitch.

With a soft thud I land ungracefully with an idiotic grunt in a wagon brimming with fabrics of raw silk. My traitorous gaze sweeps from stall to stall as heavenly concoctions immediately bombard my nostrils brutally right before my eyes. Rich scents of spices kept hurtling towards my way, surrounding the city with a tantalizing and addictive aroma. A slight inhale of the symphony of pungent spices and the refreshing fragrance of a newly explored city was indeed intoxicating. Meanwhile, merchants of stalls with shimmering emeralds glimmered beautifully under rays of sunlight. A fresh aroma of green tea lingered by, wafting up my nose. Curious, I checked my surroundings, only to be awaited with a vibrant and bustling city, packed with chattering local and foreign merchants who were eager for trades, artistic men weaving pottery baskets skillfully with those gnarled hands of theirs, elegant ladies delicately preparing traditional tea. I sauntered as waves of goosebumps rippled across my arm, meanwhile laying sight on a young maiden. I took a shuddering breath as my heart thundered in awe. She wore a white gown with elegant lace pointed corners, cinched at her waist and tied into a neat bow behind her back. Natural lilac soft curls cascaded down her shoulders. The cherry on top was her indigo blue eyes, struck with a light shade of magenta and flecked with hints of shimmering silver. The way her eyelids would flutter nonchalantly. The way her rosy lips glazed under rays of sunlight. She was ethereal. Surreal. It'd be an understatement to even call this sight phantasmagorical. Caught in deep thought for 2 minutes with a sluggish and awkward smile hanging on my face, I finally came back to my senses. I zigzag my way through the hustle and bustle, mindlessly crippling people with my urgent steps of desperation. Love at first sight is not something that could be easily tamed. Ruthlessly elbowing and shoving away batches of blabbing merchants and traders, I stumbled myself upon her stall meanwhile huffing in exhaustion. Clearly startled, she managed to ooze out an awkward smile of politeness, as if she was gesturing an offer of help. My gaze wandered aimlessly at the items placed neatly on that stall of hers, until they landed on a woven basket labelled "dried poppies". Perfect. I was about to purchase them before she suddenly clawed handfuls of the merchandise into a massive bag. "Run! Now! The cops will be after us!"

I scrambled to grab hold of a fistful of her shirt as we sprinted through numerous alleys. My palms were drenched in sweat as the distance between us and the cops shortened. With a quick turn to our left, we were encountered with a dirty, retching alley with parasites swarming on abandoned rags of poor beggars. I huffed in exhaustion while holding my rib area. A light smudge on my shoulder shook me from my stupor. "A little help here?" I looked as the maiden struggled to grab hold of the packets. "Only if you spare me a packet." I smirked while snatching packet after packet of dried flowers as I fumbled to stuff them in my pockets, attempting to tamper. A mix of nervousness and

desperation flashed in my eyes as sweat rolled down my head in rivulets. With a frantic glance over my shoulder, I instantly panicked as the cops were sprinting towards our direction. I managed to morph myself into the perfect picture of innocence as they skidded to a stop right beside us. "Everything alright here?" I clenched my fists till my knuckles turned pale as I nodded nonchalantly. The fact that tampering with evidence is a heinous felony did not do me any good in the situation. Fortunately, they didn't dig too deep into it and left before eyeing me suspiciously. I let out a sigh of relief as I flattened my back against the grimy brick wall, fatigued. I plucked out fistfuls of baggies as I handed them back to the maiden, not forgetting to spare myself a pack. " Want a little stroll around here? You look like you're new. " I nodded vigorously as I held my hand out. "I'm Otis." She shook my hand with a chuckle. "Izumi."

Pushing through throngs of haggling tradesmen city, silks in the colours of ivory, scarlet red and royal blue draped over racks caught my eye. Handcrafted ceramics and opaque glassware glazed under midday sun with vibrant visuals of bizarre geometric shapes. They were extraordinary handiwork which I've never seen before. Brick walls were ornately vandalized with intrincating paintings. I took a deep breath, inhaling the sweet scent of cinnamon. As we passed through dozens of merchants, commodities in sheer shapes and sizes amazed me. Rubies, sapphires, gold chunks, emeralds, and diamonds were neatly displayed on a wooden bench. They were nothing like I've ever seen before. This city was awfully vibrant, with energy palpable in every single corner. After a long stroll, I drifted my gaze towards her as she picked up a delicate silver chain adorned with a sapphire pendant. It was a divine piece of work. My dimples lightened as she hung it over her neck. She was just...gorgeous. I was enjoying the peak moment of life when a portal solidified beside me.

A hybrid of anguish and devastation ravaged my heart into shattered shards as realization rams. My 5 hours were up. Summoning every bit of strength, I have to suppress the instinct to bawl my eyes out, I bit my lip, feigning nonchalance. I held her in my arms, swallowing heavy gulps, carrying the weight of everything. Neither could I bear the thought of losing her or leaving this city. Asteroids collided catastrophically with a brutal punch to my gut. The thought of it was distressing, devastating in fact. "I have to go." I choked out. The shimmer in her eyes faded, obscured with tears of misery and despair. I pulled away reluctantly, dragging my heavy steps towards the familiar portal. "I'll come back for you." I murmured.

I vanished as I collided with the portal.

I trudged through thick layers of snow. The mist curled beneath my feet, swirling in thin wisps. Flickering lights sparkled deliriously. Twilights dotted the sky. Echoes of Christmas carols erupted. None of that swayed me. The hollowness carved in my core couldn't be healed. I dragged myself strolling pointlessly in the bleak winter. I couldn't care less to even spare a glimpse at anything. My jumbled thoughts kept my gaze fixated on the ground. I walk quietly while watching gnarled petals fall from the trees and my imprints in the thick blanket of snow. A faint ethereal glow illuminated the path before me. In a moment of instinct, I slowly raised my head. A figure stood in the gleaming light. The sudden realization of the familiar silhouette had my heart leap. Izumi. A dizzying surge of surrealism instantly welled my eyes with tears. My hands instinctively cupped her face, lingering for a few seconds. It wasn't an illusion. I take a moment to mesmerize her smile, drowning in the essence of her beauty. Words that have been bordering on frenzy for eternity slipped past my lips.

"Even if you were buried in the abyss of the ocean, or ascended to the stars, a promise of devotion never falters."

New Tales of China's Silk Road

St. Margaret's Coeducational English Secondary and Primary School, Au, Choi Ni Jovi – 13

In the vast, shimmering desert, the blistering sun hung heavy in a cloudless sky like a roaring heating furnace. The desert floor groaned under the weight of a sun so fiercely scorching. “So what lies ahead is the legendary "Desert of No Return," “I would turn into fried chicken if we continue to walk under this heat” said Zhu Bajie, half-pig, half-man creature. “Couldn’t say no to free meat” Sun Wukong (The monkey king) said as he sat on the floor with his legs crossed ten feet above the ground. “Wukong,” the monk said softly. “This is the path the Emperor intended for us to follow, this is the Silk Road. We will be the first people who dare to venture to the silk road, it is said that there will be lots of challenges along the way” said Tang Sanzang. He is a Buddhist monk whose skin was said to grant immortality, he is also the group’s powerful and rebellious chief protector. “He is right, not only that this will be a long journey, we might also face various monsters and demons. We have to be very careful for every move we make” said Sha Wujing (Sandy) as he looked at the horizon. Sun Wukong eyes turn towards the land, his golden chain mail glinting in the dying light.

A few days have passed, “Master, I need a break, my legs are hurting after walking this much and my stomachache has been growling for the longest time, we haven’t had a single proper meal since we first ventured to the Silk Road!” Bajie said as he dropped to the ground. The monk got down from his white horse, looked towards Wukong and asked “Wukong, is there any food or water near this area? Would you please help us find some?” In a split second, Wukong jumped onto a cloud, shading his eyes with a furry hand, and used his “Fiery Eyes” to scan the area. A few moments later, he got back down, took out his iron staff and drew a circle around the monk, Zhu Baijie and Sha Wujing. A line of shimmering gold began to follow the trace in a circle. “Master, this place is cursed, there is nothing but barren land here, and I can sense demons lurking nearby. However, I see a glimpse of light towards the south, I will head towards there to investigate. By all cost, you must not leave this circle until I have returned” then he vanished into the sky.

In a nearby cave, Baigujing, the White Bone Demon is watching them from a small dark globe. “HaHaHa...the day I have been longing for has come, I can finally taste the monk's flesh which is rumoured to make whoever consumed his flesh will be granted immortality.” She laughed. “However, he is protected by a circle of dharma, I will do whatever it takes to lure them out. “She hissed. She recited a spell and swiftly, her pale and bleached body turned smooth and soft porcelain skin. Her rough white hair turned into dark, wavy and smooth. In only a brief moment just transformed into a beautiful young woman. She magically conjured a bamboo basket full of fresh apple, then she grinned as she made her way to them.

Zhu Baijie’s nose twitched, he could smell the smell of food coming towards them. “Master! Master! I can smell food! A miracle on the Silk Road! Look over there!” “I see a young lady holding a basket, it must be something delicious” Sha Wujing looked at the girl, his heart skipped a beat. The young girl smiled and said “Hi there, I was just on my way to bring lunch for my husband, but you look like you are about to die from hunger. Here, take this offering.” Sha Wujing began to step out of the golden circle and reach for the basket. Just then, a golden streak descended from the sky. Wukong landed down with a roar, his staff on his hands ready to attack. “Demon! How dare you show up!” And in a swift movement, he swung his staff and hit the young girl. The girl fell to the ground, her body all broken. “Wukong! What have you done! How dare you murdered a girl!” The monk screamed. “Master this is all an illusion, look at the basket, the apples are full of poisonous worms, you could’ve died!” “I don’t believe you, how dare you lie to us” Bajie squealed. But Baigujing was smart, she had cast her spirit out of the body at the last second, leaving only a body behind, to look like it was all real. She transformed once again disguised as an elderly woman, she went back to them.

Later, Baigujiing returned as an elderly woman, she told the group “Hello, have you seen a young lady passing by just, she is my daughter, I haven’t seen her in a while and I am trying to find where is.” Sun Wukong sees through Baigujiing's disguise once again and he shouts “Master she is the demon in disguise, she wants to murder you for your flesh.” he then swings his staff and hits her. The old lady falls to the ground, and Baigujiing as her spirit out of the body again and escaped. Tang Sanzang looked at the dead corpse in horror, he suddenly turned furious and shouted “Are you out of your mind Wukong? This time you won't be forgiven” He started to recite the band-tightening spell, and in an instant Wukong’s golden head band started to tighten. Wukong screamed in pain, he fell onto the ground and shrieked “How could you do this to me, I was trying to save you! Master! Please stop!” After Sanzang stopped reciting the spell, the group continued to not believe. Baigujiing transformed for the third time as an old grandpa. She went back to the group and said “Hello young travellers am looking for my wife and daughter, have you ever seen them?” Wukong again saw through Baigujiing’s tricks, thus he hit her with his staff for the third time. However, this time he finally killed her, revealing that it was just a skeleton spirit. Wukong shows this to Sanzang, but he thinks that Wukong cast a spell to make the old grandpa look like a skeleton to escape the band tightening. “Wukong, leave.” Sanzang said softly “I don’t want an apprentice who murders people” After hearing his master's words, Wukong left and went back to the Water Curtain Cave.

A few days later, Tang Sanzang gets caught by the Yellow Robe Demon, and both Zhu Bajie and Sha Wujing try to defeat but fail. Zhu Bajie has no choice but to ask for Sun Wukong's help to save Tang Sanzang. After Wukong tricked the Yello Robe Demon and eventually saved Sanzang. The group finally starts to believe in Sun Wukong, they apologised for the misunderstanding of Baigujiing's deception. The group continued their journey West afterwards.

Over time, the group continued to venture along the silk road, they met many different creatures, made friends and fouts, these created diplomatic and social impact. Which includes the Sino–Indian Relations. The pilgrimage established a deep intellectual and spiritual "joint venture" between China and India, strengthening ties that lasted for over a millennium. They not only learned each other’s cultures, they exchanged foods, potteries and language for examples grape, spices, weapons, gold, silver, papermaking and silk. The journey also demonstrated the "harmonious coexistence" of Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism (the Three Teachings). The group promoted a cultural tradition of religious tolerance and social harmony in the regions they passed through. This shows how the significant changes due to their visit to the Silk Road.

New Tales of China's Silk Road

St. Margaret's Coeducational English Secondary and Primary School, Chan, Hay To Andre – 12

As I was playing my new video game— Silk Road, the screen suddenly became blurry. I tried to wipe my screen, but it was still the same. All of a sudden, the surroundings of the game started to become more vivid and realistic with every second. It now feels like I am part of the game just like when I used to play games with my VR glasses, except the temperature of my room has been taken over by the scorching heat. My gaming controller also disappeared from my hands. I thought hard, trying to wake myself up from this ‘dream’, but I realized that I can’t escape and found myself inside the Silk Road.

Right in front of me was a gigantic castle which looked like the ones I have seen in my Chinese history textbook. I gasped so I try to accept that I have just been sucked into the video game. At the same time, I was in awe with the intricate designs and carvings on the castle walls and rooftops. The castle was filled with lights, and the architecture was simply outstanding. There were guards in armour and holding spears on duty in the 4 main entrances. But what really caught my eye was the tiny, small house in the distance next to the big tower to the right of the castle. I slowly walked towards it, trying to take a quick peek. But then, a shadow suddenly appeared. It raced from the tower to the forest, and out of curiosity, I followed it. After a while the forest cleared out and I found myself looking at a farm. Under the moonlight, I could finally see the shadow again. The shadow was actually a man who headed over to his family on the farm. I had a lot of questions to ask them but was too scared to do so. I quietly and slowly edged over to their house, but all of a sudden, I bumped into one of the stallions on the farm and it screamed and caught the family’s attention. The man immediately jumped out of the house towards me and demanded to know who I was. I explained that I suddenly found myself near the castle and wanted to explore the area. But then, I saw his shadow skimmed by, so that’s why I followed him. Luckily, he accepted me into his house even though he thought my story was bizarre.

As we stepped into his house, I greeted his family and he told me his name was Zhang Qian. The name sounded very familiar and then I remembered hearing this name in my Chinese history class during exam revision. Ms. Chui, my history teacher, has mentioned that he was the Chinese explorer who started the Silk Road because Emperor Wu from the Han Dynasty asked him to initially settle the feud with the Huns and later to venture out to find new merchants and to expand trade with other people. Zhang Qian thought I was also an explorer like him and had wandered to Emperor Wu’s castle. So, he sat me down in front of the fire and asked his wife to cook me a meal. He started to tell me about his adventures and how he has visited many different places in the Middle East. But his journey wasn’t easy at all. He faced many difficulties and challenges. There were many times when he had to starve for many days while crossing in the Gobi Desert. On top of that, when he first started his journey, he was captured by Xiongnu who was the ruler of the nomadic people living in Central Asia. Fortunately, he was finally able to escape with his men and they ventured out to the Gobi Desert and the snow-covered Pamirs. He continued to describe how there were other challenges when trading with other people from different cities. They might misunderstand him, thinking that he might harm them and attack him. They might also not like the trading terms offered, making it hard to communicate and to compromise on deals with them. He will always remember these hardships which he faced during the many years of travel.

As I listened to Zhang Qian adventures and stories, I realized why the Silk Road is one of the most popular and successful historical events of the world. It not only connects different countries together to trade silk, spices, precious metals, porcelain with each other but also to learn about the different cultures from each other. The Silk Road was not only discovered by Zhang Qian but also by many other explorers. The Silk Road affected Asia to Europe greatly by expanding all the way to the Roman empire. Through exchanges and discovery, countries could share their religions such as Christianity and Buddhism, making the people who believe in these religions to be found worldwide nowadays. It also improved technology by sharing inventions such as paper making, printing and gunpowder with each other so that they could improve their daily lives and the future generations. Last but not least, it also led to cultural exchange, like cuisines, arts and so forth. The Silk Road wasn’t just a path, but a golden bridge connecting places together to form a global chain.

Even though the Silk Road was discovered a long time ago in 138 BC, it is still affecting us greatly in the future. China has introduced the Belt and Road Initiative in 2013 which is essentially the modern version of the Silk Road. It will open bridges and tunnels to connect different countries so that we can easily travel and transport goods along to other countries. It will also open new sales markets, providing opportunities for different companies, making the bonds between countries stronger. The Silk Road can also be a role model to future generations to dream big and to never give up. Follow your dream and nothing is impossible.

Zhang Qian's wife prepared a wonderful meal for me. Zhang Qian continued to talk about his life adventures while I ate and enjoyed the food. I was starting to respect him because he was very hardworking and had trust in himself. He never once thought about giving up and would not doubt himself. He believed that if you follow your dreams, you will achieve but with only one rule— Trust yourself. If you don't have trust, you will always fail. I too always follow this rule in my life, even when I am scared or nervous. Being true to myself has helped me a lot. I am now braver and will try new things independently. Zhang Qian is definitely a great model for everyone, not only because of his discoveries but also because of his amazing personality.

Suddenly, I heard a small sound near my ear, whispering my name. *Andre... Andre...* That tiny voice was gradually becoming louder and louder and it kept calling my name. I really wanted to know who it was and stop it from disturbing my inspiring conversation with Zhang Qian. I tried to yell stop and then my eyes unexpectedly opened, and I found myself lying on my bed in my bedroom. On top of me was mom! She was now yelling, "Wake up, Andre! Or else you will be late for your Chinese history exam!" That's when I realised this whole odyssey was just a dream!

New Tales of China's Silk Road

St. Margaret's Coeducational English Secondary and Primary School, Chan, Shun Hei – 14

In 2013, as the world started to recover from economic uncertainty, a new wave of optimism spread across nations. The Revival of the Silk Road, called the "Belt and Road Initiative," was more than just a project; it was a dream tied to the spirit of connectivity that marked the ancient trade routes.

On a busy autumn morning in Xi'an, formerly known as Chang'an, Wu Ming stood at the edge of a newly built high-speed train station. The air buzzed with excitement as delegates from over 150 countries gathered for the first summit of the revived Silk Road. Wu, a soft-spoken logistics expert, admired the mix of cultures—people in traditional dress mingling with those in business suits, their conversations a blend of languages and ideas.

As the first train of the day was about to leave, Wu sat next to Layla, a lively entrepreneur from Cairo known for her innovative textile designs inspired by ancient patterns. She spoke passionately about her ideas for collaboration, her eyes shining with enthusiasm. "Silk is more than fabric; it carries stories. Imagine blending our cultures," she suggested, sketching her thoughts in her notebook.

Suddenly, the train lurched forward, slicing through the landscape like a silver serpent. Wu looked out the window as fields of golden wheat transformed into vast stretches of sand, remnants of the ancient caravan routes. He thought about how traders once walked these paths, enduring the elements while carrying silk as their prized cargo.

As they traveled, the train stopped in cities that were once bustling centers of trade—Bukhara, Samarkand, and Tashkent. At each station, the delegates disembarked, greeted not only by officials but by musicians, chefs, and artisans eager to share their culture. Layla and Wu explored market stalls filled with vibrant tapestries and spices, each area buzzing with laughter and haggling.

At night, they gathered around campfires, where stories of past and present intertwined. An old Uzbek merchant shared how his ancestors traded saffron for silk centuries ago, their caravans traveling over the same land. Wu noticed the tears of nostalgia in his eyes, a reminder that while the world has changed, the core of human connection remains the same.

Days turned into weeks, and as their journey continued, plans took shape. Layla suggested a fusion fashion line to highlight the artistry of both Chinese silk and Egyptian designs. Wu worked on the logistics to ensure the quick transport of their joint creations, combining modern technology with the art of cultural exchange.

"So, what do you think is the future of the Silk Road?" Layla asked one night as they looked up at the stars, a tapestry of history above them.

Wu thought for a moment before responding, "It lies not only in the goods we trade but in the relationships we build. A tapestry of collaboration can bring us closer, fostering understanding between nations."

As the train approached its final stop in Europe, Wu felt a sense of satisfaction, knowing this journey was not just about profit. It was about bringing back an ancient spirit—a bridge between cultures, where the essence of the Silk Road came alive again, reshaping borders in a world increasingly divided.

At the end of the summit, as Wu and Layla stood together, they realized the Silk Road was not merely a trade route; it was a journey of hearts, a shared future waiting to be discovered. The past echoed in their steps, and with each stride, they moved toward a world of endless possibilities.

New Tales of China's Silk Road

St. Margaret's Coeducational English Secondary and Primary School, Chiang, Sze Yu – 12

In 130 BC at dawn, a young herbal medicine merchant named Liu Yang stood in his home in Chang'an, telling his tearful wife to take good care of their son. He reluctantly looked at his beloved son, who was still fast asleep in bed. After saying goodbye to his wife, he took a heavy backpack and joined the first group of Silk Road travelers, which included religious figures, soldiers, envoys, and other merchants.

Upon reaching the meeting point, Liu Yang observed that some were full of ambition, others were worried, and still others were incredibly excited. And yet everyone was fully prepared to depart. In any case, leaving one's hometown to travel to a distant place was not an easy decision. However, in order to explore business opportunities and improve their lives, they had no choice but to forge ahead on this commercial journey. After a final check of the goods and equipment, everyone mounted their horses, camels, and donkeys, and set off in a grand procession from Chang'an towards the distant west.

After a day of wind and dust, as dusk fell, they decided on a place to rest and everyone pitched their tents. The setting sun shone on the vast land of the Hexi Corridor, making it look like a huge gold bar. As the sun slowly set, the temperature plummeted, and a biting wind swept through the air. Everyone shivered and struggled to light a fire for warmth. At that moment, an old merchant handed Liu Yang a bowl of warm water, saying earnestly, "Young man, the road ahead is long. Take good care of yourself so you can go even further!" Talking with the old merchant, he discovered the man was very knowledgeable. He pointed out that the journey ahead would be extremely arduous. Extreme weather, food supplies, disease, and bandit raids could all cause this mission to fail. But no matter how difficult this westward journey may be, they must persevere, because if this mission to the Western Regions succeeds, it will not only improve the living environment of their generation, but also broaden the horizons and open up unlimited business opportunities for their descendants.

As the old merchant had said, most of the region along the way was arid, with the Gobi desert, and snow-capped mountains appearing one after another. They faced extreme weather conditions such as scorching heat, bitter cold, and sandstorms, as well as treacherous terrain. This harsh environment was difficult for Liu Yang and his fellow Central Plains people to adapt to. They also had to guard against wild animals in the grasslands and mountain forests. In order to avoid the Xiongnu and bandits, they traveled by day and night, sometimes unable to find places to resupply, leading to food shortages. Furthermore, because they passed through multiple empires and ethnic groups, the different cultures and languages made trade and exchanges more difficult. And because there were no maps, they often got lost.

Having faced various major challenges and missing his hometown, Liu Yang had moments when he wanted to give up. However, he and his companions, with the indomitable and united spirit of the people of the Central Plains, persevered for their families and country, overcoming one obstacle after another. Along the way, not only were some goods damaged, but most tragically, some of his companions died.

After more than a decade of arduous travel, engaging in trade and exchange in major cities along the way, exchanging goods such as silk, metal products, and lacquerware made using Central Plains techniques, they promoted the dissemination of technology and knowledge. Liu Yang extended his knowledge of Chinese medicinal herbs, such as how to cultivate them, their effects, and preservation methods, to every region, bringing not only wealth but also promoting Chinese medicinal culture and helping patients around the world.

Exchanging medical and pharmaceutical knowledge with people from different regions broadened Liu Yang's horizons and brought him great benefits. During this journey, he realized that he was promoting not just products, but a deeper exchange of ideas and cultures. Liu Yang supported his fellow travelers on the trip, forging bonds like family. The exchanges also fostered profound friendships among people from different regions, which he found more precious than any financial gain.

Finally, they completed their mission and returned to Chang'an. Liu Yang's son had already grown into a teenager and was very proud of everything his father had accomplished. The goods, technologies, and knowledge they brought back enabled the people to enjoy a rich variety of products from all over the country, such as jewelry,

spices, and glass. They also introduced new crops, such as grapes, carrots, and watermelons, which promoted the development of agriculture. Furthermore, this fostered artistic exchange and interaction between different religions, and the application of new technologies improved the convenience of people's lives. Liu Yang shared his observations and experiences with others, and applied the medical and pharmaceutical knowledge he learned from other places to serve the people and inspired others to embark on their own journeys.

Liu Yang and his contemporaries were among the first pioneers of the Silk Road. With their blood and sweat, they laid a solid foundation for trade and economic exchange between East and West, and passed on their experience and wisdom to the next generation. The Silk Road continues to flourish in new forms amidst global changes, technological advancements, and climate change. If we, like Liu Yang and others, persevere and dare to explore, we can create a new generation of the Silk Road characterized by peace, openness, and innovation. We can hope to expand business opportunities on the basis of mutual benefit and establish sound cooperative relationships with other regions, ensuring the Silk Road remains a bridge for international exchange and cultural communication, continuing for generations to come.

The Sand Silk Map

St. Margaret's Coeducational English Secondary and Primary School, Chow, Sheung Chi – 12

Me, Sham Mak, a weaver came from Dunhuang. In my 16 years old life, I only have read one language— the grain of the silk. Until to the death of my master, brand the 'map' into my entire life.

My master told me that my uncle has been captured and enslaved. Our mission is to mix the legendary silk known as the Flowing Sand Silk with 'Heart-of-Stone' powder to show a map in order to found my uncle.

My master and I hired a car to the west of the palace where my uncle was enslaved when we encountered a team of bandits. 'Give us your silks!' they ordered. 'We won't give you! Never!' I exclaimed firmly. 'Oh, interesting. Let me see is my fist harder or your faith harder.' The leader of the bandits said with a cold smile. Then, he tried to capture us and injure us. As the bandits approach, we only can step backwards. They drove us to the wall. 'Tick'— I accidentally stepped onto a mechanism and master and slide into a slope, we got into a grotto.

Inside the grotto, there was only profound silence and faint glimmer. Suddenly, we found a girl in the grotto, too. Her name is Su Zhijin. She is an archaeologist. She is trying to find the 'Heart-of-Stone' powder to study. 'Hello, My name is Su Zhijin. You can call me Su. I am here because I am finding the 'Heart-of-Stone' powder. By the way, are you finding the Flowing Sand Silk and the Heart-of-Stone Powder?' Su asked. 'Yes, but we still don't know where it is.' Master sighed. While they were discussing the Flowing Sand Silk, a thing dropped out my pocket. 'Wait! Is this the legendary silk known as the Flowing Sand Silk?' master shouted. I suddenly remember that my father told me to kelp this silk well, it's my family heirloom!

Although we have found the Flowing Sand Silk, we were still missing the 'Heart-of-Stone' powder. 'From my experience, I think the 'map' is a silk drawn with luminous pigments. We need to use a developer to make the picture come out.' After master have explained to us, he told Su and I to rest, he will help us finish it. 'You two use the map to go, rest good.' Master said. I curled up at the corner and fast asleep.

Master used a powder called 'Lixin', which is a developer that weaver always uses. He carefully spread the powder on the flowing sand silk, and pour some water onto the silk, and wait for 2 hours, the picture of the silk would appear.

I woke up cold in the morning. I found that master sat near the rock wall, on which was an incomparably clear diagram of groundwater veins and secret passages drawn with luminous pigments. His face was as pale as frost, his breathing was weak, and the eight words drew near him extraordinarily eye-catching— Go now! Don't look back, save more people.'

I saw a little bottle of 'Lixin' powder, which he always told me not to touch. I suddenly remember that my master told me not to touch the 'Lixin' powder, as it is poisonous. I felt so sorry that I didn't stop my master from doing that.

A profound numbness seized me. Yesterday he even said, 'Sham, you got such good eyes, you may see more and more beautiful grain and pattern of the silks.' But now, that eye which taught me the grains and patterns of the world closed forever. Grief choked me, stealing everything in my heart. My mind unraveled in that silent cave. My sorrow hardened into a cold, sharp resolve, and I engraved the map, and his sacrifice, onto my soul. 'The path I forged with life, we cannot end here!' I said to Su, with firmly eyes. 'I need to leave, as I still have to save my relative. And... thank you for you help.' After I spoke, I left the grotto, start my journey again. To let me remember the spirit of my master, I hang the little bottle of the 'Lixin' powder onto my bag.

‘The location of a symbol on the map is precisely west of Dunhuang, where the slave prison are situated.’ I said to myself.

I walked for a day in the desert. The sun was cruel. My water was almost went gone. My body have reaches its limit already, my thoughts were stuck and messy like the threats after a cat have played. However, I did not hesitate to go to which way. As the way is using the life of my master, not only it is just to escape, but also like a rescue extending with endless hope.

Flowing the map, I finally found the slave mines. I slipped through the guards’ gap and into the depths of the prison. The air was thick and murky. ‘If my uncle was enslave here, how can he even live.’ I murmured to myself. I spotted my uncle—locked in a wooden cave.

‘Uncle!’ I yelled out in a low voice from the shadows. He looked up abruptly. ‘My nephew? Why are you here? And... where is you master?’ ‘I am here to save you! But my master...’ As I spoke, I lowered my head. He instantly understood.

‘By the way, I will go to steal the guard’s key to release all the slaves out! I must finish this mission with master’s spirit!’ I said. After that, I tried to tick toe towards the guard. ‘Easy! He is sleeping, thanks for making my mission easier’ I secretly pleased. I stole the key and open all prison.

While I was opening about half of them, the guard woke up because of the sound of the lock. ‘What are you doing, kid!’ he shouted with his rugged voice. ‘Oh no! I am probably doomed. Should I give up and escape?’ All of a sudden, a voice interrupted my thought— ‘Go now! Don’t look back, save more people.’ It’s master! I am here now, should I give up?

‘Guys! Run!’ I quickly shouted. I still decided to keep going. I let the people go first, and I still help the remaining slaves. The last three... last two... last one! Finally, all slaves are free now, and my master and my mission has completed.

I finally realized what the ‘Heart-of-Stone’ is the ‘Lixin’ powder. Although the little bottle of the powder isn’t heavy, it was so heavy like stones. I will not forget the death of my master as he is one of the most important people in my life! The road ahead is long, the world is vast. But I was not just a lost boy finding him anymore...

New Tales of China's Silk Road

St. Margaret's Coeducational English Secondary and Primary School, Fang, Yanqiao – 12

I am Carmen Fang, a Hong Kong secondary student who accidentally went back to the Silk Road time. Back in the days, I was learning about China's Silk Road in English lessons. My English teacher——Mr. Lau took the whole class to a China's Silk Road Museum where had a projector which showed a light green pottery. It attracted me a lot and I could not help myself from touching the projection screen.

A mystery force which push me from the back then a strong light appeared. Once I opened my eyes again, I was already in a totally different place. I took quick look around; the floor was covered by sand. Also, there were five people riding horses few metres apart from me. I immediately gave myself a pinch and realised this wasn't a dream, it is authentic!

I run towards them and asked, 'Hello, nice to meet you. Emm...good cosplaying. Do you guys know where is here?' They looked confused and whispered among each other, 'What is "cosplaying"?' One of them was wearing a silk robe and holding a jade pendant said, 'I am an ambassador of the Han Dynasty. Here is the frontier of Dunhuang. Are you not a local?' I stared at them with my mouth wide open, then stammered, 'Wait... ambassador of the Han Dynasty?' I realised that I travelled back to the Han Dynasty. 'I am not local from Dunhuang, I am from the future China, Hong K...'

Before I finished, a person who looks like a businessman, wearing an indigo robe cut in and question me, "'Future"? Stop kidding!' Then he introduced, 'Take a look here on the cart, from instruments to foods like flute, pomegranate and lychee, here has all you need! I shook my head, then pointed toward the ambassador's jade pendant, and said, 'I am not kidding! This jade pendant is exactly what I saw on the English book!'

The ambassador smiled and said, 'You mean the future still remember the Silk Road? Then our endeavor is not wasted!' I wondered, 'Silk Road... oh! I should know that——I am now in the Silk Road time!' I answered the ambassador, 'Of course we do. It is a big success. It is one of the most important 'roads' in China!'

'But now the problem is how can I travel back to the modern world?' 'I feel sorry about I can't do anything for you. How about this——you come with us to discover the Silk Road?' As my curiosity took over me, I decided to find it out. I nodded and said, 'That is a good idea! I definitely cannot waste this golden chance ——I never thought I can actually be here!' That is when my discovery of China's Silk Road started.

Along the way to the central of Dunhuang, it was scorching heat but I cannot feel any exhaustion. Glancing around, the sunset turned the sand into golden. The mountains were as green as jadeite. Sometimes, the wind howled loudly during the sandstorms which covered all other sounds.

During the way, I asked lots of questions such as "Is Dunhuang not part of China?", "Is Dunhuang part of the Silk Road?" And the ambassador always answered me patiently, 'Yes, the Emperor has established Dunhuang as an official prefecture of the Han Dynasty. Although Dunhuang is already part of China, the Emperor still sends ambassadors like me to here. In order to show his care towards the soldiers and keep the Silk Road running smoothly!' 'Thank you so much for clearing up my confusion' 'No worries!'

Later, we arrived at the trading stop of Dunhuang. And the ambassador said, 'I am Zhang Qian, an ambassador of Han Dynasty. I have already sent a letter to the prefect. Would you please lead us to the prefect's mansion?' I wondered 'Oh! He is Zhang Qian, the one I learned in lessons!'

In a grand hall, I saw a man who was wearing a Jinxian Guan, black long robe. Ambassador Zhang bowed respectfully. Then the businessman came up and show the gifts from the Han Dynasty such as silk in red and gold, vases, murals... The prefect waved his hands. Then, camel, grapes, gemstones... appeared. He smiled warmly and said, 'Thank you for the gifts, we are exhilarated to invite you for staying tonight!' Ambassador Zhang replied, 'Sure!'

After dinner, I went for a walk and saw some flea markets had been set up. I walk toward there. An array of shops appeared, silk, pottery and murals were shown. A light green pottery caught me eyes. Coincidentally, ambassador Zhang and the businessman were also there.

The pawnbroker introduced the pottery, 'This is called the Han Dynasty green-glazed pottery hu. It is a typical low-temperature lead-glazed pottery, fired at 700-800 °C. The word "Han" has been engraved on the bottom of it. It is used for holding drinks. I thought, 'This pottery is the one I saw in the China's Silk Road Museum!'

Just like I did before—I could not help myself from touching it. Once again, a strong light appeared. 'Okay, guys. Let's move on!', the voice of Mr. Lau popped up. I almost shouted out, 'Oh, I am back!' After, I calm down, the scenes these few days played in my mind...

I realised that China's Silk Road is never just the past, but with east and west exchanging wonderful foods, remarkable inventions, stunning art, and creative ideas. This rejuvenating journey will become a reminder for me in the future—be brave to try! Imagine if everyone was afraid of that unknown 'Silk Road' journey, will I still be standing in this museum? So don't be trapped in the rules, be brave to try new paths, maybe you will see new scenery!

New Tales of China's Silk Road: Threads of Time

St. Margaret's Coeducational English Secondary and Primary School, Hau, Ning Yi Olivia – 13

In the year 138 BCE, under a sky full of stars, Zhang Qian was ready for an adventure that would change history. His heart raced with a mix of excitement and fear as he had adjusted the straps of his leather bag. Sent by Emperor Wu of the Han Dynasty, Zhang was headed west to build friendships and trade.

The first day was filled with the smell of old paper and also the sound of silk rustling against the harsh ground. Zhang was not just only a merchant; he was a diplomat, a link between cultures. As he travelled through mountains and valleys, the sun shone warmly, reflecting the precious silk that captured the imagination of faraway lands.

Days turned into weeks, and the caravan moved slowly. Along the way, Zhang met nomadic tribes who depended on nature for survival. One evening, as they gathered around a fire, an old storyteller shared tales of heroes and gods. The air was filled with the smell of roasted meat, and Zhang found himself captivated, not just by the stories, but by the act of storytelling itself—a way to connect people.

“Heard you seek the West?” asked the old man, his eyes shining with curiosity. “What do you hope to find beyond the horizon?”

“Trade and knowledge,” Zhang replied confidently. “Silk for spices and ideas.”

The old man laughed heartily. “And what about friendship? You carry silk, but will you bring something more valuable—understanding?”

That night, Zhang thought about the old man’s words. He realised that the silk he carried was not just fabric; it was a symbol of connection, a thread that could unite different lands.

The Blossoming of Trade

As the months passed, Zhang journeyed through vast deserts of shifting sands until he arrived at the vibrant markets of Bactria, alive with colors and sounds. The air was rich with the aromas of spices like coriander, turmeric, and saffron. Merchants, dressed in vibrant attire, engaged in animated haggling, their hands dancing in the air.

It was in this bustling atmosphere that Zhang encountered a Roman ambassador named Lucius, a man whose presence commanded attention. After exchanging pleasantries, their conversation evolved into a deeper dialogue about trade.

"Your silk is exquisite," Lucius remarked, admiring the rolls. "But what else can you offer?"

"Stories and wisdom," Zhang responded, revealing a scroll.

As they exchanged narratives of their cultures—encompassing art, philosophy, and discoveries—they realized their interaction transcended mere transactions; it was a genuine sharing of identities. In a world divided by borders, they discovered a shared connection rooted in curiosity and mutual respect.

The Final Journey of the Silk Road

By the mid-1400s, the Silk Road had changed drastically. Once vibrant with trade, it lay still, overshadowed by new sea routes. Yet fate had its way of reviving old paths.

In a small village in Xinjiang, a ten-year-old girl named Mei dreamed of adventure, inspired by her grandmother's stories of the Silk Road. "It was a thread connecting hearts," her grandmother would say. Determined to rekindle those connections, Mei crafted small bags from her grandmother's textiles, filling them with local herbs and writing stories about their origins.

Empowered by her grandmother's legacy, Mei organized a market day, inviting neighbors and travelers. The space filled with the aromas of spices and the sounds of laughter, creating a magical reunion of past and present. As she traded her bags, Mei shared her ancestors' tales, fostering connections that transcended mere goods.

The New Silk Road

As time moved on, a new Silk Road emerged, driven by technology. In 2013, China launched the Belt and Road Initiative, expanding connections across continents.

In a busy café in Beijing, entrepreneur Li, inspired by the tales of Zhang Qian and Mei, envisioned a digital marketplace uniting artisans worldwide. She hosted a conference to share dreams of collaboration, emphasizing that "we are threads in a vast tapestry," bringing together Eastern and Western ideas.

The new Silk Road evolved into a celebration of shared humanity, with governments, artists, and entrepreneurs collaborating, igniting creativity and understanding across borders.

Conclusion

The Silk Road, in its many forms, reminds us that every thread in history tells a story. From Zhang Qian's journey to today's connections, it inspires us adventure and collaboration. As we move towards into an interconnected future, may we continue on weaving our stories into history while learning from the past.

New Tales of China's Silk Road

St. Margaret's Coeducational English Secondary and Primary School, Kwok, Hiu Ching Hera – 14

Prologue:

In the grand council chamber, a man in his mid-twenties stood in front of his rulers. His long, flowing ebony hair was elegantly tied back, revealing a strong jawline and dark, almond-shaped eyes.

"General Cai. We have received news of several goods invented by the west that jeopardise our interest in the global market. You must seize these threats and bring them back for examination." Emperor Wu said, gazing upon his trusted envoy and advisor.

Confusion sparked in Cai An Ran's gaze as he stepped closer to his emperor on the dais. "Apologies, your highness, but it might not be a good image for the west if we... capture their goods. It will appear as though we're stealing their technology!" He reasoned.

"It does not matter. Your job is to serve the Han kingdom, not to worry about the feelings of other nations." The ruler's voice boomed through the air, cutting a cold, sharp glare at An Ran, causing him to flinch. Wisely choosing not to further argue, he bowed silently, acknowledging his task. "As you wish, emperor."

★★★★

"Why is this taking so long—" came the millionth whine from Xiaolan, who was seated opposite Cai An Ran, pouting with crossed arms. The girl seated beside her, Maomao, was quietly smoothing her silk robes, ignorant of her friend's behaviour. The council had sent the two maidens to avoid suspicion, to portray as a disguise for delivering them to their homeland.

"Have some patience" The general said with all the calmness a young man could have when he's been trapped in a suffocating, four-wheeled box for the past three hours. His gaze drifted down to the cannon below their caravan, waiting for the west to pass by and unload their cargo.

A flash of movement followed hushed voices that echoed through the vast expanse of the desert, causing An Ran to bolt upright, signalling for the other two girls to follow his lead. They made it down the rocky surface of the cannon and hid behind a giant boulder right as two figures and a camel entered the space.

"Blair, would you please stop talking for a second? I'm trying to navigate" There was a scoff, then, "oh please, you're clearly lost" A male and female, both around An Ran's age, he guessed, judging by their banter.

He was about to step forward when a twig snapped under his shoes, causing the two travelers behind them to glance back, weapons raised. An Ran unsheathed his sword instinctively, blocking the strike aimed for his shoulder, the sound of steel clashed against steel, the two blades catching under the sunlight. Before either of them could pull away, An Ran had them bound by ropes within seconds, tied in a heap on the rough ground. The two strangers' eyes widened in surprise. "What are you doing! Let go of us!" The male, Kai, struggled against his binds, glaring at An Ran as he looted through the bags on the camel.

He held up the pots and vases, gaze fixed on the smooth surface where it caught the sunlight, making it seem to glow. "Is this the full potential of porcelain?" He wondered out loud while marveling at their beauty. Blair let out a huff of surprise, "Porcelain? These are made of glass, it's lighter and more exquisite."

An Ran's eyes twinkled with curiosity as he continued to work through the goods, spotting a jar filled with thick liquid the colour of amber. "That's honey, you could try it if you want." Kai shrugged, already giving up on an escape plan and instead taking joy in Xiaolan's pleased expression when the general opened the jar, inhaling its sweet fragrance, before dipping her golden coated fingers into her mouth, eyes lighting up with pleasure. "This tastes wonderful! General Cai! We have to make candies out of this!"

The general then turns to the two figures. Oh how wrong he'd been when his Emperor thought the west were inventing missiles and other weapons to attack his country. Without a word, he cuts the ropes free, extending a hand to each of them to help them off the sand. "Could you, perhaps, take me to where these fascinations were made?" An Ran asked sheepishly, rubbing the back of his neck with one hand.

Kai and Blair looked at each other before chuckling, mounting their camel. "Of course! Follow us!"

★★★★

Several hours later, when the sun had started to set and night settled over the vast desert, An Ran saw a small city with firelights that could be made out not so far away.

"Welcome to our home, Samarkand." Blair announced with pride in her voice as the camels entered a market, which was bustling with merchants and all sizes of cargo being carried around even in the night.

An Ran blinked at the sight before him, halting his steps. Men and women dressed in colourful vibrant robes dancing around a market square, vendors yelling out for customers where lines of stalls were set up along the road. The thick festive atmosphere, despite having no reason to celebrate, was strangely freeing. He watched as Kai and Blair greeted the folk here, clutching their hands with warm grins on their faces.

So this is what it feels like to be in a western community. Can An Ran thought, glancing up at the blinking stars adorning the black duvet covered across the city. Someone nudged his side then, causing him to look down at a kabob extended toward him. "Come on, General Cai, you're surely hungry! Eat some!" Kai exclaimed, stuffing his hands full.

An Ran accepted the delicious treats with a mix of gratitude and surprise. Xiaolan and Maomao were within the dancing crowd, and he watched as the people taught them their ways, the big fat grins on their faces as they interacted, and turned to Kai.

"I have a proposal for you."

Epilogue:

"The West is ripe with opportunity! " Cai An Ran urged, his voice resonating in the grand council chamber, "We should not steal their ideas, but rather let them be known across the nation! It is time we share with each other the treasures of our cultures. They deserve to know the beauty of our craftsmanship and the richness of our traditions as we should recognize theirs!" He exclaimed, gesturing with an outstretched hand that seemed to beckon the unseen horizons, the light fabric swishing around his arms at the movement, making it seem as though the delicate dragons embroidered on his silk robe are nodding their heads in agreement.

A beat of silence passed as his words hung in the air, and An Ran gazed into the faces of his peers, a mixture of excitement and skepticism reflected back at him.

"Imagine bustling markets where Eastern delicacies mingle with Western delights," he continued, his gestures painting vivid images. "Friendships formed across cultures could strengthen our position and extend our influence." His head tilted slightly towards the corner of the chamber, where Kai and Blair stepped forward, clad in silk robes of the eastern culture. "Our home, Samarkand, can act as the base where all trade comes and goes. It is a convenient midway point between the east and the west for merchants to rest during their journey." Blair bowed before the emperor, who had leaned in with curiosity. His fellow council members listened, enchanted by the vision they laid before them, as if they too could taste the faint bitterness of Mediterranean wine lingering under their tongues and feel the soft cotton of what would be perfect imperial robes with the weight of thousands of luxurious jewelry set upon their necks and heads.

As one, they turned their heads to the man who spoke of a promise, and looked upon him with a spark of thrill in their eyes, that Cai An Ran knew...

...That they stood on the precipice of something remarkable—a tapestry of two cultures beautifully intertwined in a new road, paved behind the visions of a dawning new era. His gaze drifted towards the smooth silk Kai and Blair were wearing, and a name popped up in his mind. The Silk Road, perhaps?

A Memory from the Silk Road

St. Margaret's Coeducational English Secondary and Primary School, Lugue, Caitlin Danielle Ruiz – 13

“To be placed in the possession of Mr. and Mrs. Esmu-Bayan at the residence near the Golden Gate, within the Theodosian Walls in Constantinople on or before the ninth day of September following the year of 1453” — Mr. Li groaned reading this, knowing that this would be his longest journey yet. Though, considering his current situation, the difference was not so great. Mr. Li lived a dull life, where every day was the same repetitive routine — wake up, deliver packages, eat, go home, sleep. Some deliveries were near, others nearly touched the opposite corner of the Earth. No matter the distance, Mr. Li never declined. There was nothing awaiting him when he returned anyway.

However, there once was a time where his life was not so dull. His days were once filled with careless childlike freedom, brought to him by his son. The boy’s mother had left the pair in search of something more and while this pained Mr. Li deeply, having his son radiantly smile up at him was enough to soothe the ache of her absence. Unfortunately, when the boy was about 7, times grew harder, and the two could barely afford to eat. Eventually, his immune system gave way, succumbing to famine. Mr. Li held in his hands the only bit of light in a world so cruel and watched it flicker until it died. Although he survived, his heart stayed forever frozen in that moment. His job now is a mind-numbing, solitary transit — a perfect comparison to his stalled life.

He sighed heavily, packing his rucksack for the long journey ahead of him — the journey from Dangjiacun Village in Shaanxi China to Constantinople. This would take him a winter or two if he took the caravan and followed along the Silk Road. He knew the Silk Road like the back of his hand. He’s made a million and one deliveries along the road each one building a clear image in his head of the shortcuts and nooks and crevices in the road. He watched as the village schoolchildren ran about holding sparklers and chanting nursery rhymes. He stood and watched for a bit, his eyes searching for someone who wasn’t there. He smiled faintly as he heard the firecrackers go off behind him. The year 1451 had just begun.

As the old man set off on his treacherous journey, the familiar scent of Dangjiacun Village left his nostrils and was instead met by the scent of the cold and barren desert. By the first light of dawn, he and his beast of burden had already left Shaanxi. Following the Silk Road to Turpan, he began to feel uneasy, like someone was following him at a distance. There was a rustle of fabric, and a whimper. Bracing himself, Mr. Li turned around, dagger clutched in hand — just in case.

“Who goes there?” he bellowed in a frightening voice like a dark lord from old Chinese folklore rising to power.

In a small, squeaky voice a reply came, “S-sorry Mister..!” Mr. Li looked down and he was not met with a terrifying soldier as he had expected, but a small child no older than 7 dressed in school clothes covered with dirt from desert ash. While Mr. Li was sure he had never seen this child before, there was something so strangely familiar about him that made an unusual warmth spread through the cold-hearted man’s chest.

In a voice much softer than before Mr. Li spoke, “Child, why are you alone in a land such as this?”

“My family has left me, sir.”, replied the child.

Mr. Li’s heart broke for the poor child. How could someone leave a tiny, innocent, and clueless child alone to die?

“Why have they left you, child?”

“The cargo got too large. Too many mouths to feed. My father had to let me go.”, he replied sadly. He looked down, not wanting to meet the man’s eyes before opening his mouth to speak again. “S-sir.. Would you mind if I came with you..?”, he said tentatively.

Mr. Li's heart dropped just a little. The words of the small child faded as his expression turned blank — the boy's pleas dissolved into the old, familiar echo of a young voice pleading for a later bedtime. Seeing Mr. Li's blank expression, the boy panicked and began listing off reasons as to how he would be of use. "I—I'm nimble! I won't take much space a—and I will dine not but a morsel! A—and—".

Mr. Li cut him off. "Come child. You may journey with me to your hearts' desire." The boy's face broke into a radiant smile as his small hands wrapped around him in an act of gratitude.

The journey to Constantinople was a sun-drenched dream. The boy, who Mr. Li had come to call Xiao Bao, "Little Treasure", had proved true to his word. He was nimble, helpful, and his laughter was a bright beam of comforting sunlight along the dusty road. For a handful of golden weeks, the bleak void within Mr. Li was filled.

Then tragedy struck.

Since Mr. Li had not anticipated a companion on his long, winding journey to Constantinople, food supply ran scarce during the midpoint of their journey while they were crossing central Asia, near the desert temples of Bukhara. The two could barely afford to eat. Xiao Bao grew extremely weak and ill due to a lack of nutrition.

One night, as Mr. Li settled to rest for the night, he notices the child curled up on the ground near the caravan, pale and nearly a skeleton. The old man rushed to his side.

His breath was a faint rustle, like a last withered leaf clinging to a branch. He looked up, not at the old man's face, but past him, as if seeing the road ahead. A final, fragile whisper escaped him, "You carried me further than my own father ever did.". His immune system gave way, succumbing to famine. He cradled the light bones against his heart, and only the vast, indifferent sky heard a broken man's second heartbreak, whispering into stilling hair, "I have kept you alive in my memory only to watch you die in my arms once again."

The old man did not rise from where he knelt. He simply laid his own body down beside the small one, curled toward it, and closed his eyes. When the next dawn's caravan found them, it saw only two quiet travelers who had, at last, reached their journey's end.

New Tales of China's Silk Road

St. Margaret's Coeducational English Secondary and Primary School, Tsoi, Wai Kiu – 14

“Hi, everyone! I’m Waikiu, and this is ‘The Silk Road Young Streamer’ channel!”

I waved at my phone’s camera. A comment popped up in the lower right corner of the screen,

“Where are you streaming from today, host?” — from a netizen in Xinjiang called “Camel Brother.”

“I want to see the Terracotta Army in Xi’an!” — from “Sakura Sister” in Japan.

Mom walked past my room, shaking her head with a smile. “This kid always talking to your phone.”

“This isn’t just talking, it’s cultural exchange!” I said seriously.

Three months ago, our teacher asked us to do a project on the Silk Road. I had a sudden idea: why not start a livestream channel to take everyone on a virtual “journey” along the Silk Road?

My first guest was “Camel Brother,” a Uyghur teenager from Xinjiang.

“Look! This is the Grape Valley of Turpan!” He pointed his camera at the lush green grapevines. “My grandpa says grapes from here have been sold all the way to Chang’an since the Tang Dynasty!”

Comments like “So beautiful!” popped up in different languages. I quickly looked up translations and added subtitles for the word “grape” in English, Japanese, and Korean.

My second guest was “Steppe Song” from Kazakhstan. She played the dombra in front of her yurt and sang an ancient welcome song. “This song,” she said, “once welcomed caravans on the Silk Road.”

What moved me most was last week’s stream.

“I’m Marco, from Venice, Italy.” A boy smiled on the screen. “My ancestor, Marco Polo, traveled the Silk Road to China. Today, it took me just 30 seconds to ‘travel to you!’”

We decided to host a “Silk Road Food Day” together. I cooked Xi’an’s pita bread soaked in lamb soup, a recipe from my grandma. Marco made pasta, Camel Brother prepared pilaf, and Steppe Song served milk tea. Four young chefs from four countries shared dinner through our screens.

“Isn’t this the Silk Road?” Marco said. “In the past, they traded silk and spices. Now, we trade recipes and smiles.”

Yesterday, my channel hit 1000 subscribers. Mom finally understood and helped me make a “Silk Road Young Streamer” sign to hang on my wall.

“You know,” Mom said, patting my head, “your grandfather went to Southeast Asia from Fujian. Back then, it took three months for a letter to reach home. Now, you can chat with the world in one second.”

Suddenly, I understood the New Silk Road isn’t a fixed path.

It’s the radio waves connecting Xinjiang’s Grape Valley to Xi’an, the data carrying Kazakh melodies to Venice, the moment when kids from four countries raise their glasses and say “Cheers!” at the same time.

Next week, I'm streaming with a friend from Iran. She said she'll teach me how to write "Hello" in Persian.

My livestream continues. On camera, I hold up a hand-drawn world map filled with colorful lines—not caravan routes, but glowing dots representing every connection we make.

"Welcome to the New Silk Road," I smile at the camera. "Here, there's no desert wind or sand, only Wi-Fi signals. No camel bells, only notification chimes. But just like the ancients, we are connecting the East and the West."

On the screen, "heart" emojis in the colors of different countries float up one after another.

This Silk Road, paved with fiber-optic cables, is one we can all walk and each of us can create our own story along the way.

The Adventure of Alan and Zhang Qian

St. Margaret's Coeducational English Secondary and Primary School, Wong, Cheuk Lam Jasmine – 12

“Boring! I hate Chinese history!” cried Alan. “Can I pass the test?” Listlessly, he stared at a thick and heavy history book and started dreaming and snoring uncontrollably, his saliva dripping onto the desk like a water tap.

“Alan Chan! Stop sleeping! Wake up now!” roared Miss Lau, throwing a piece of chalk towards Alan.

Alan awoke, his face as red as a tomato. “Stand up and read page 43 now!” yelled Miss Lau crossly.

“Twenty-two centuries ago, Zhang Qian discovered the Silk Road... huge contribution...” muttered Alan, opening page 43 and reading it.

“Alan Chan! Read enthusiastically!” demanded Miss Lau, her face stern.

“Seriously? Why are we expected to know about a trial twenty-two centuries ago...?” Alan murmured sadly.

“Alan Chan! Can’t you respect how big a role the journey of Zhang Qian had played?” Miss Lau said, slamming her hands onto the teacher's desk, which made everyone jump. “He devoted his entire life to finding a route from China to Europe, one that was interwoven with a magnificent system of ancient paths that traversed the earth like golden strings. The Silk Road was not simply a road. In reality, it was a bridge connecting the West and the East, spanning over 2,200 years, even now.”

“Oh please!” Alan scoffed. At the same time, the school bell rang. He walked away from school, a maelstrom of doubts churning in his soul. “I can’t understand why I need to study outdated knowledge! It’s not like I’ll actually be using the Silk Road!” Alan thought.

That night, an eerie silence hung over the night, and the moon was oddly bright red. Eerie chills came from Alan’s bedroom. Pop! Suddenly, a cloud of penetrating black smoke burst out! An aroma of burning plastic and evaporated seawater filled the room. A tale erupted to life like a shadow that stepped right out of Alan’s history book. Do you know who the tale was? It was the ancient adventurer, Zhang Qian!

Startled by the loud noise, Alan woke with a jolt. Shocked, he found himself in a sand-filled environment, with the scorching sun pounding on his face like an incessant drumbeat. The beads of sweat mingled with sand in trickling droplets down his boiling hot face. Standing by his side, in the scorching sun, was a man with piercing dark eyes and long silky black hair, wearing ancient long clothes.

“Do you feel alright? I’m Zhang Qian from the Han emperor.” Zhang Qian offered, holding out his hand like a lifeline.

Petrified, Alan's jaw dropped. “I’m... um... all right, thank you.” Alan stuttered, not knowing how to react. Alan quickly brushed off the sand on his trousers and had Zhang Qian pull him up.

Following Zhang Qian, he wanders around, curious about the unfamiliar environment. Suddenly, there was a sharp pain in his left ankle, and he fell onto the ground with pain, screaming for help. A scorpion had bitten him!

Zhang Qian knelt down and checked Alan. “This is horrible! You were bitten by a *Leiurus quinquestriatus* scorpion, also known as a deathstalker,” said Zhang Qian worriedly, searching his bag for some grass-like things.

“No! I’m too young to die! I don’t want to leave my family! Help!” Alan panicked, looking at the bleeding bite.

Zhang Qian professionally applied some dried leaves and covered them with a sack. “These are lavender and plantain, and they help scorpion bites. Don’t touch it, and it should heal.” Zhang Qian spoke softly like an angel, making final adjustments to the wound.

Zhang Qian looked around. “Come along, the sun is setting. I can find shelter before this night engulfs us. The night here can be as dangerous as bullets.”

With a mixture of nervousness and excitement, he couldn’t believe what was in front of him! It was Zhang Qian, the man who discovered the Silk Road, just as in the history book.

"Zhang Qian? Where are we?" Alan asked, his heart pounding like a candle flame in the breeze.

"We are in the Gobi Desert," Zhang Qian explained. "I am convinced that this way shall be a river of change, a passage through which the hopes and desires of future generations shall flow."

Suddenly, a roar came from the bushes, cutting through the air like a knife. Alan turned. An army of soldiers materialized out of the darkness—Xiongnu soldiers, slipping in like specters.

“RUN! The Xiongnu army is upon us!” Zhang Qian yelled, grabbing Alan's hand and pulling him toward the unknown.

It was too late. Viciously, riders mobbed around them like the desert’s storm, and soldiers’ bone-tipped arrows corrupted them. An arrow struck Zhang Qian! His grip squeezed hard with pain and anger. “We...we surrender.” Zhang Qian hissed through his bloody red teeth as he raised his bleeding hands.

The army soon maneuvered around Alan and Zhang Qian, putting them into their wooden cart and taking them to their commander. The Xiongnu commander, dressed in thick fur and iron scales that glinted like the skin of a dragon, rode out on a horse with a thick neck. He surveyed Alan's weird clothes.

“A traveler from the stars? Ha ha! What a joke!” He sneered, waving to his men.

Rough hands clamped down on both of them. Alan was hurled to the ground, and the sudden chill of iron cuffs clamped down on his wrists like steel traps.

“Keep your head down,” Zhang Qian whispered urgently as they were hauled towards the horses. “In their camps, silence is the only armor against the cruel nights.”

They were brought to a dark, dusty cell. There were prisoners surrounding them, making evil faces. Walking down, Alan was trembling with fear. “Here is your cell! Now, get in, and don’t waste my time!” The cruel prisoner guard yelled, pushing Zhang Qian and Alan into a small cramped room. They fell face-first onto the cold and hard floor as the guard slammed the metal door.

The room was ruthlessly small, and it only had a one-person bed and a small shattered vase in the corner. There was also weirdly some haystack next to the bars. The wall has countless scratches and marks that make it seem like someone had attempted to escape before. There was a small hole in the top of the wall that gave just enough light so Alan could see.

Zhang Qian looked around and moved some objects. “Zhang Qian, what are you doing? Why are you moving everything?” Alan asked, all confused.

“You might not know, but tonight is the first part of this punishment. We will likely be brought to the commander and get killed. This is the opportunity to escape.” Zhang Qian said wisely. “You see that hole up there? If we stacked all the items in this room, it would be like a ladder, and then there would be hope for us to survive. Also, there will be more hope if we act at midnight.” Alan nodded in shock. They were only in this cell for a while, and Zhang Qian had already thought of an escape route.

The daylight slowly faded away, and the moon hung onto the sky, which lit up the place. “It’s our action time.” Zhang Qian said, giving a little nod while looking out the cell for guards. Alan climbed the ladder, which was a bit wobbly, but Alan still managed to pull himself up the tiny gap. Then, he forced his body through the filthy gap. At last, he gave a signal to Zhang Qian. When Alan thought he had successfully escaped, a guard peered through the bars and caught them!

“They are escaping! Catch them!” The guard yelled, pointing at them as guards nearby rushed to help. Zhang Qian rapidly climbed and slid through the gap while Alan caught him on the other side.

“Go to the nearest plant!” Zhang Qian demanded, pointing at a cactus just visible from the jail cell. Alan dashed towards the bushes with Zhang Qian behind him as if they were in the Olympics. Dashing, they hid behind the cactus, which just covered Alan and Zhang Qian. The guards did not notice them and ran straight away.

“Zhang Qian, they are gone!” cried Alan.

Then, a familiar aroma filled the place again. It was the smell he had experienced before meeting with Zhang Qian. Smoke filled the air. The world around him clouded and distorted.

When Alan opened his eyes again, he was no longer standing in the desert environment. Rather, the bright moonlight streaming through his bedroom window illuminated his surroundings.

Although it was only a dream, the incident left a profound impact on Alan. Since then, he understood that the journey of Zhang Qian and the Silk Road was not only about a route or far-off countries but also about courage, determination, and a sense of reverence for the efforts of those who had struggled before. The story that he had earlier found so dull seemed so alive now.

After that day, Alan realized that history was not just about boring facts, dates, and names, history was the bridge between the past and the now. Therefore, he made it a point to study history not just to pass his examination, as he did before, but to learn it out of respect for the history that shaped the world that he is living in today.

New Tales of the Silk Road

St. Margaret's Coeducational English Secondary and Primary School, Wong, Chung Hei Ocean – 12

Long ago, before anyone spoke of the “the Silk Road”, it was only a dusty long journey leading west. A young merchant named Bob dreamed of exploring the vast places outside of where he lived, in a small village at the edge of China. At his home village, silk was woven by the villagers.

One day, he packed shimmering cloth onto his camel, Tim. He said to his family, “I will go on a trip to places beyond this village, and sell the cloth to people that have never seen it before.” His mother responded, “be careful, son. On your journey there will be a lot of different obstacles on your way, like bandits, thirst and extreme heat. Be safe.” Without any hesitation, he stepped forward and started his trip.

The first few days passed peacefully. Bob followed a river that flowed forward almost endlessly. Soon, the river thinned, then vanished into the dry sand. Ahead was the deserts, filled with endless sand dunes shining in the sunlight. Bob covered his face with a cloth and moved forward into the desert.

The heat was so unbearable. It pressed on Bob’s shoulder like a heavy hand. By noon, the wind was so big that every step they took the tracks disappeared into the wind in an instant. The next day, disaster struck, one of his water jars fell and shattered on a rock. Precious water seeped through the dry sand and disappeared into the ground.

Panic spread through Bob. He thought of turning back, but soon realized that there were only sand dunes in each direction. Only one direction remained to keep going: forward. He checked how much supplies were left. Food was enough, but only 2 water jars were full, barely enough for Bob himself and Tim the camel to go for 2 more days. Not enough. He thought to himself, “how can I fix this jar so that afterwards I can refill it in a water source?” At night, an idea popped into his head.

First, he used a piece of silk to wrap the jar pieces. Then, he sealed it with melted wax from a travel candle. He had sealed the jar! He continued traveling using the stars to guide him in the cool darkness.

On the fifth day walking in the desert, Bob finally found light and hope. In front of his eyes were mountains and rivers. He almost dropped to his knees in relief. He quickly filled his water jars. He looked up at the mountains that filled the sky. “This is going to be a long way up”, he thought. Soon, he joined a group of traders. The leader was a girl named Kaze who had grown up in the mountains, she knew the narrow paths more than anyone else. She often had laughter in her voice.

One evening, when they were camping under a rocky overhang, Kaze asked Bob, “Why go on a long, dangerous journey just for the silk?” Bob replied, “if people like the silk, they will want more, soon they will come to our country. Afterwards the paths will become roads.” Kaze considered this deeply, then said, “you want to stitch the world together, like your silk.”

One day, when the group was going through a narrow pass, shadows seemed to move along the cliffs. Suddenly, a group of bandits emerged from the stones, blocking the path with drawn swords. “Leave the goods,” their leader said, pointing his sword at them, “and we won’t harm you.”

Some traders dropped their packs in terror, but Bob stepped forward, hands raised. His knees trembled, yet his voice did not shake. “Wait,” he called. “You can steal these goods once. Or you can learn to trade them many times for more money.”

The bandits laughed. “We are not merchants,” the leader sneered. Arin slowly unrolled a length of silk. The shining cloth glimmered in the sunlight. The bandits fell silent. None of them had seen anything like it.

“This,” Arin said, “is worth more than you think. In cities far from here, people will trade gold, spices, and jewels for it. Help us cross these mountains safely, and I will show you how to trade instead of steal.” The leader hesitated, eyes fixed on the silk. Kaze stepped forward beside Bob. “You know these mountains,” she said to the bandits. “You could guide traders, protect them, and share in their profit. But no more stealing.” Whispers passed among the bandits. Finally, the leader lowered his sword.

“Very well,” he said. “We will try your way, silk boy. Betray us, and the mountains will keep your body.”

From that night on, the bandits became guardians of the pass. They walked alongside the caravan, watching the cliffs for danger. Arin taught them how to bargain, how to weigh goods, and how to read people’s faces in the market.

Weeks later, Arin and his group of traders reached a city. Its markets are filled with bright glass, fragrant spices, and huge vases. People stopped and stared as Bob unrolled his silk. Traders put their fingers across the smooth surface, eyes wide with amazement.

Gold coins, fine jewelry, and rare spices piled up for trade. Kaze laughed as former bandits tried their first bargains, stumbling over prices but grinning when deals were made.

Word of Bob’s journey traveled quickly. Other merchants began to follow his path—across deserts, over mountains, through valleys. Standing on a hill overlooking the bustling market, Arin touched the silk scarf at his neck and smiled. “The road is real now,” he whispered to himself. “Not just in my dreams.” He had opened up a trading road across China. He felt wonderful for accomplishing his dream.

New Tales of China's Silk Road

St. Margaret's Coeducational English Secondary and Primary School, Woo, Yan Sin – 14

Zhang had spent three days preparing for his journey which was going to last eight months.

In his courtyard in Chang'An, golden leaves pressed against the flagstones, as he carefully checked the leather straps on his camels. Each knot he tied reflected on his years of knowledge—which ones would hold in sandstorms, which ones would slip in mountain ice, which would be able to cut off quickly if one camel were to fall in a crevasse and threaten to drag the others down.

“You worry too much,” His nephew had teased him earlier that day. “The route is the same every year.”

But Zhang knew it was never the same. The Taklaman shifted its dunes like the weather. The mountain tribes renegotiated their prices with each new leader. The late frost could poison a watering hole for weeks, even months. The Silk Road was not only a road, but a negotiation between human stubbornness and nature's indifference.

He was tying the final knot when he felt the light change.

The first thing Zhang noticed was the noise.

Not the noise itself—he had survived avalanches that roared like angry gods—but its quality. Mechanical hums seemed to come from all around him, vibrating from his sandals to his teeth. Looking up, he realized his camels were nowhere to be found. Panicked, Zhang stood up, only to find himself no longer in his courtyard.

Just then, a young woman approached him, screaming in a language that contained fragments of Chinese but moved too fast, like a river swollen beyond banks.

He would later learn that it was the year 2015. He would learn the words “Logistics” and “Smartphone”, discovering that the journey he had spent his life mastering could now be completed in less than a day.

But in that first moment, Zhang simply did what any good caravan leader would do when faced with the incomprehensible: he sat down, accepted a cup of tea from a confused yet hospitable stranger and began to observe.

It took Zhang a week to understand the modern world, and two to let his guard down.

The young woman who had screamed at him, Mei, was a logistics coordinator for a shipping company. She had eventually stopped treating Zhang like a psychiatric emergency and more of an eccentric uncle who had wandered from a very dedicated historical reenactment.

“You want to see the route?” Mei asked one day, after Zhang had spent an hour studying a map on her glowing rectangle. “The whole Belt and Road thing?”

Zhang didn't know what a belt had to do with anything, but he recognized the names. Kashgar. Samarkand. Tehran. These were cities he had walked into with the spirit of a young man, dusty and triumphant, sharing stories

of silk and spices.

“Yes,” he said enthusiastically, “I’d like to see how the road has changed.”

Mei chuckled. “Roads? Uncle Zhang, there is no road anymore. There are trains, highways, shipping containers. It’s all—” She made a gesture that seemed to convey something massive. “It’s all systems now.”

Zhang nodded slowly.

“Show me,” he said.

The train carved through the Qilian mountains as smooth as a hot knife through butter.

Zhang pressed his face to the mirror, his breath fogging up the glass. He watched as the peaks he had once spent days climbing disappear in minutes. Tunnels swallowed the train and spat it out on the other side of obstacles that would have killed countless men on his caravans.

“This is the Lanzhou–Xinjiang line,” Mei said proudly, not looking up from her phone, “Opened just last year. It’s the fastest way west. We’ll be in Ürümqi no later than tonight.”

“Tonight,” Zhang repeated to himself underneath his breath. His father had died in a blizzard on Qilians eastern face, trying to keep the camels calm. Zhang had been thirteen. He had to dig his grave himself, in ground so hard it took him two days, and marked it with a cairn of stones that he hoped the snow would bury forever.

“Uncle Zhang? Are you crying?”

Zhang wiped his tears. “The air is dry.” He cleared his throat. “So tell me, what do you trade? On this road... that is not a road?”

Mei shrugged. “Everything. Electronic from Shenzhen, Machinery to Kazakhstan. Last week we shipped a thousand computers to Poland.”

“And what do the Poles send back?”

“I don’t know. That’s a different department.”

Zhang nodded. That was the difference, he realized.

In his time, trade was a conversation. You couldn’t move goods without moving alongside them, and you couldn’t move yourself without being changed. He learned to play the Tar in Bukhara because a Persian merchant had taught him in a sandstorm. He briefly converted to Christianity in Kashgar because a beautiful woman had made compelling arguments, and then converted back to Buddhism in Dunhuang because the monastery there had better food. His worldview cracked and reformed like a river through the four seasons, again and again, until he was no longer the young, innocent man venturing out to the Silk Road to trade, but something larger, a mosaic of everywhere he had been.

“Then what do you learn,” He asked Mei carefully, “when the laptops arrive in Poland?”

She frowned, looking confused. “Learn? I guess we get a confirmation code, that the shipment has been completed.”

“No, I meant what you learn *from* Poland. About the people there? Their music, their culture, their heritage.”

Mei paused. Then she laughs. “Uncle Zhang, I've been doing this job for 5 years. I've never met anyone from Poland. In fact, I've never met anyone from most places we ship to. That's not how logistics work.”

Zhang's gaze shifted from Mei to the mountains outside the window.

“No,” he said quietly, “I suppose it qisn't.”

They reached Kashgar in three days.

Zhang couldn't hide his awe, given that it had taken him a little over nine months on his first journey. He had arrived with passable Uyghur, three marriage proposals he had gently declined and a scar on his left elbow from a bandit's arrow.

Now he stood in a modern transit hub, watching shopping shelves stack themselves like lego blocks, lifted by cranes with such inhumane precision. Somewhere in those mental boxes, he thought to himself, were goods worth more than his caravan had carried in their years of journeys. They would arrive in Europe in weeks. They'd arrive untouched by human hands, unshaped by human connection, pristine and efficient, yet utterly lonely.

“Impressive, huh?” Mei said.

“Yes,” Zhang said, “You have made this journey safe and efficient, and you've removed all dangers and bandits. Now tell me, what risk do you take?”

Mei thought for a moment. “Money, I suppose. When we lose our parcels, we lose our contracts, and money is, of course, the biggest factor affected.”

“And if you lose the contract?”

“We find another one.”

Zhang smiled, with streaks of sadness seeping in. “When I was younger, I asked my father why he kept returning to the road. He had earned enough money. He had a family. The journey had already cost him several friends and countless injuries. So I asked him: why risk more?”

“Well, what did he say?”

Zhang turned to stare at Mei directly. “He said that the risk—was the entire point. And it wasn't about the profit. He could've made money selling vegetables in Chang An. It was about the risk. The possibility of loss. It made every success more valuable, more sacred. It made every friendship precious, because we had survived something together. It made every mile meaningful, because each one could very well be our last.”

He gestured at the cranes and the containers.

“You all have built something miraculous. You can move the world's goods in a flick of a finger. But I wonder...” he paused, carefully selecting his words. “I wonder if a road without danger is a road at all. Or if it becomes something else. A pipe, I suppose. A tube through which things flow without ever touching the sides.”

Mei remained silent for a long moment.

“Is that bad?” She asked quietly.

Zhang shook his head. “I don’t know. I’m not familiar with your world, so I’m not the one to judge. All I know is that when I was walking through the Silk Road, I was terrified. And because I was terrified, I paid attention. To the people, to the land, to the thousands of beauties I would come across during my journey.” He smiled. “Your shipments arrive safely. But do they arrive changed? Does anyone arrive changed?” Just then, the crane set down another container, as if a period at the end of Zhang's sentence.

“We should go back to the office.” Mei said finally.

But she didn’t move. She stood beside this impossible old man, watching the containers stack and shuffle, and for the first time in her life, she wondered what it was like to be changed by a journey, to arrive somewhere not only on time, but transformed.

As the sun dipped below the horizon, painting the metal boxes gold, neither of them spoke a word. There was nothing left to say that the silence didn't already hold.

Hidden in Plain Silk

St. Margaret's Coeducational English Secondary and Primary School, Wu, Yat Sum – 14

“Come on, Old Ma, tell us a story,” the girl in the caravan scooted over on the grass plain to where the aged merchant sat, “a story told by the fire would be nice.” The fire crackled, tossing sparks into the night, as if it were agreeing. The others crowded near, even the horses edged closer with a soft ‘neigh’.

“A story? I ain’t got no story to tell,” Old Ma brushed off the request with a wave of her skeletal hand. “You must’ve heard plenty,” another boy quipped, “How about the tales of the Silk Road? We’re all ears.”

I minded my own business, sipping my soup. *A tale of the Silk Road?* I thought. *It’s always the usual, boring tale, about Zhang Qian and his men forging trade with foreign kingdoms.*

Old Ma chuckled, “Alright, listen up, you nosy merchants. A tale of the Silk Road set in the Han Dynasty it is.” The firelight flickered, casting shadows on her face. Every voice hushed, and even the sparkling stars seemed to lean closer.

“In the Han Dynasty...” she began, and the cackling fire, the sky full of stars, faded away in an instant, morphing into —

“Zhang Qian!” A loud voice tore through my sleep as wind kissed its way to our tent. I woke to the blinding desert sun, my throat dry. A soldier loomed above me with worn-out armor. “Envoy Zhang Qian, we will ride soon. The Emperor’s orders cannot wait.”

Everything clicked into place.

I was Zhang Qian, envoy of the Han court.

“We must deliver the patch of silk to the West. We must not waste anymore time,” The soldier reminded me as he mounted, “Word has arrived that the Xiongnu tribes raid again at our borders. This alliance cannot wait.” *Alliance?* I thought. *Isn’t this just a voyage of trade?*

We rode on, reaching a patch of dry, grassy land. The wind sang low and lonely through the reeds. A fellow black-haired soldier approached, uneasy.

“Speak up if you have something to ask.” Zhang Qian – or rather, I – said. The soldier whispered with an accent, “Is it true? Are there secret codes in the silk?” I turned to him, startled. “Where have you gotten this piece of information?” I asked.

He looked troubled, averting his gaze almost immediately. “I... eavesdropped on the other soldiers. Forgive me for the bluntness, Master Zhang.” Then we settled into silence.

By nightfall, we camped. As I left my tent, I glimpsed the black-haired soldier sealing a letter, before a messenger hawk took flight. *Poor soul*, I thought, *Perhaps a letter home*. Pity flared in my chest at the sight.

Is it true? That there are secret codes in the silk? His words gnawed at me long after. I couldn’t resist the temptation to oversee the cargo of goods for myself.

The guard watched as I turned a bolt of silk in my hands — it felt smoother than any other fabric. When held under the silver moonlight, the shine betrayed a strange-looking pattern. Left, right, right, left — *was this the code I’ve been ordered to deliver? Was this the code the West had to decipher?*

“Clever.” The guard jerked his chin to the silk in my hands. “Why not write the message on parchment? Saves much trouble.” He muttered. I contemplated before answering plainly, “Ink can betray.” He smiled wearily, and said, “So do people.” I paid no further heed and left to tend to my own quarters.

Dawn arrived unexpectedly with a present. I woke to swords clashing, and blazing fire burning our tents. “Xiongnu tribes! Xiongnu tribes!” Our soldiers screamed as the enemies attacked. I recalled the hawk, the letter, the soldier’s downcast eyes and the puzzle fell into place. I hurried to hide the silk under my cloak. *Ink can betray. So do people.* I thought as a flash of steel struck me down.

Years passed, and we were dragged north to Xiongnu lands. They took our map and scrolls, yet spared the silk, thinking it was a mere ornament befitting an envoy’s dignity. That mercy became my weapon, and the idea of revenge lingered in my mind. The alliance had to be formed so that Xiongnu tribes could be vanquished. When fate meets luck, I bit the bullet and escaped to the West.

In this foreign faraway land, I handed the silk to a king who did not speak my tongue. He unfurled the silk in dim candlelight, and nodded with understanding. We traded goods and a friendship, along with the Silk Road, was born.

The candlelight guttered, swishing in rhythm to the wind. Candlelight turned into flame and the marble pillars turned into grassland. The ceiling of Christian art blurred and dissolved into a sky of blinking stars. In front of me sat Old Ma, and the eager faces of our fellow travellers.

“... And Zhang Qian returned to the Han Court, bringing glory with the pioneering of the Silk Road.” Old Ma finished her story. “That is so different from the version we know,” the girl frowned, “Yours sound like a rumour.” Old Ma chuckled, “A storyteller never reveals her tricks. Zhang Qian at last did start the Silk Road– but what lies between history and rumour?”

Her knowing gaze slid to mine, and a chill crept down my spine.

The fire popped softly, and for a fleeting moment, I thought I smelled the desert wind, and felt silk beneath my fingers once more.

New Tales of China's Silk Road

St. Margaret's Coeducational English Secondary and Primary School, Yeung, Chi Yen – 12

At the dead of night, everyone in my house had already fallen asleep. Only I was burning the midnight oil. “The Silk Road was a network of Asian trade routes active from the second century BCE...” I read from a book sleepily, rubbing my eyes. However, it didn’t stop me from diving into the fascinating history of China's Silk Road. I read carefully, page after page, and thought I could finish the whole book. Yet, my eyes grew heavier and slowly closed.

“Look at these beautiful silk fabrics! Buy one, get one free!” A woman holding a piece of silk fabric yelled. I vaguely heard something, so I gradually opened my eyes. An array of shops and countless traders and buyers came into view. The scene was exactly like the pictures I had seen in the book. I immediately slapped myself to ensure that I wasn’t dreaming. “Ouch!” I screamed. It was really painful, but excitement overshadowed it. I couldn’t believe I had traveled back to the time when the Silk Road was discovered! I jumped high in the air and smiled like a blossoming flower.

As I was immersed in happiness, a young man suddenly interrupted me. “Are you really from this place? Or did you move here? Why are you wearing these strange clothes?” He asked, looking at me with curiosity. At that moment, I finally realized that I had time-traveled. Wearing modern fashion would be extremely suspicious. I tried to stay calm and pretended that nothing was happening. “Oh yes, how do you know! I moved here with my family last weekend. They are busy finding accommodation and work, so I am just exploring here by myself. By the way, I find trading goods really interesting. Do you mind sharing your experiences with me? I would really appreciate it.”

“Of course! It’s my pleasure to have a chance like this,” he replied with a delighted smile.

“I come from a poor village in India. My whole family struggles financially, and we make a living by selling artworks. There are many people in our family, but most of them are children and the elderly, with only a few capable of working. Creating artwork requires a long period of time and costs very little. Even though my brothers, sisters, and I work hard to earn money, everyone in our family is still starving, and some have even died from lack of food. Therefore, I decided to participate in trading, hoping to earn enough money to improve our family’s quality of life,” he said sadly.

“Oh dear, that’s heartbreaking! I have never been to Arabia, but I have heard it is quite far from here. Is that true?” I asked.

“Yes, it is, and I faced many challenges on my way here. The journey from my village to this place is quite long, and the weather is extremely hot. I bought a camel to ride on. However, due to the scorching heat, it died the day after. I had no choice but to walk on foot. Trekking under the burning sun is exhausting, and I’ve suffered from heat stroke many times. Thankfully, other traders have been really kind; they brought me to the local medical facilities. Additionally, there is a limited supply of food and water, so I have to go hungry every day. The only thing that keeps me going is the thought of my family waiting for me, starving.”

“Wow! That’s so touching! Can you share with me about the cultural exchanges that took place along the Silk Road?” I asked.

“Absolutely! As trading becomes more popular, many people from different places come together to barter for goods they need. This eventually promotes cultural exchanges. Different regions have their own cultures and beliefs, and through communication, we can learn more about each other. To be honest, as I was born into a poor family, I didn’t have the opportunity to read books because they were too expensive. I can only learn new things through my experiences, so I lack much knowledge about the world outside my village.”

After pausing for a few seconds, he continued, “Since I started trading, I’ve seen many strange but interesting things that I never knew before. It’s truly different from what I used to think. I once believed that our village’s culture was the only one in existence until I met merchants from various parts of the world. I talked with them and learned about their lives in their countries. We exchanged information about our religions and deities, local delicacies, and artistic ideas. I learned recipes for their local dishes, which inspired me to incorporate their elements into my village’s cuisine, creating new dishes that blend both wonderful cultures. Although I can’t master the skills of various forms of art, such as ceramics, sculptures, and metalworks, I have gained valuable knowledge. Moreover, I learned about the different gods and goddesses people worship, as well as their religious practices. We all learn from each other’s cultures and enrich them with our own. Different cultures intermingle and form new ones. This is how cultural exchange occurs along the Silk Road...”

Suddenly, a deep and loud voice broke through my thoughts. I could barely hear anything. I rubbed my sleepy eyes and slowly opened them. My mum’s angry expression came into focus. She stared at me and scolded me for lying in and missing school. At first, I felt frustrated and confused, but then I realized that my journey along the Silk Road had been only a dream. However, this dream truly broadened my horizons, and I certainly had a blast with the merchants.

New Threads on the New Silk Road

St. Margaret's Coeducational English Secondary and Primary School, Yip, Lut Yin – 14

Twenty-two centuries ago, caravans set out from Chang'an carrying silk, paper, and porcelain toward lands whose names sounded like distant thunder. The journey took months, even years, and every step left a faint memory on the stones of the Silk Road. Today, trains, ships, and fibre-optic cables cross the same continents in hours, but the questions that travelled with those caravans have not disappeared: How do we trade without losing ourselves, and how do we meet strangers without becoming strangers to our own hearts?

Li Wei thought about those questions as the high-speed train glided out of Xi'an, the modern descendant of ancient Chang'an. Her history teacher liked to say that the old Silk Road had "disappeared" in the mid-1400s, but that it had been "revived" in 2013 when more than a hundred and fifty countries began to cooperate on new routes of trade and infrastructure. To Li Wei, it felt as if a dusty story her grandfather used to tell had suddenly stepped out of its book and into the news. Now her school wanted a piece of writing for the "New Tales of China's Silk Road" competition, and her teacher had added a challenge: "Don't just describe the road," she had said. "Imagine what kind of person it wants you to become."

That was why Li Wei had agreed to join a youth exchange trip running along part of the new overland route. If she could not find a story by staring at a blank screen in her bedroom, perhaps she could find one in the rhythm of wheels on tracks.

Across the aisle sat Arman, a boy from Samarkand whose city had once dazzled travellers with blue domes and busy bazaars. He spoke Mandarin with a musical accent and used his hands so much that his stories almost turned into dances. Next to him was Sara from Mombasa, where a new deep-water port had transformed a sleepy coastline into a forest of cranes, containers, and foreign languages. Her braid swung like a metronome when she laughed, and she carried a sketchbook filled with ships, street vendors, and her mother's café.

On the second day of the journey, their teacher, Mr. Zhang, gave everyone the same task: "Talk to someone from another country and find out one thing the New Silk Road has changed for them—for better or for worse. Then share in the dining car tonight." The assignment sounded simple, but as the scenery shifted from Chinese plains to Central Asian deserts, Li Wei discovered that a road could change people's lives in opposite ways at the same time. Arman said that new trains and logistics centres had brought tourists, jobs, and scholarships to his hometown. His cousin worked as a translator for international traders; his older sister had received a grant to study engineering in Beijing. Yet his grandmother complained that the bazaar no longer smelled of handmade dyes and spices, only of plastic and petrol. "Sometimes I think our city is like a carpet," he told Li Wei, tracing patterns on the table. "Beautiful from far away, but if you look closely, some threads are new and shiny, and some of the old ones are broken."

Sara's story was different but echoed with the same unease. Her mother's café had flourished since truck drivers and port workers from dozens of countries had started eating there. Sara loved listening to their stories and copying their faces into her sketchbook. However, rising rents had pushed many fishing families away from the seafloor, and some of Sara's childhood friends now lived hours from school. "We gained a highway to the world," she said, "but we lost the small paths between neighbours."

That evening, the three of them sat together by the window as the sun melted into a line of copper on the horizon. Mr. Zhang walked past, checked that everyone was working, and moved on. Li Wei opened her notebook but did not write. Instead, she asked, "What if this road could listen to us? What would you tell it to do differently?"

Arman thought for a moment. “I would tell it to slow down,” he said. “Give people time to learn each other’s languages, not just each other’s prices.”

“I would tell it to pay attention to who is not sitting at the table,” Sara added. “The farmers, the fishermen, the kids who have never seen the inside of an airport.”

Li Wei stared at the darkening landscape, where stations sparkled like brief constellations. Suddenly, the idea for her essay arrived, not as a single sentence but as a conversation she had not yet written. She would personify the New Silk Road as a young traveller, woven from rail lines, shipping lanes, and digital cables, who had inherited the memory of the ancient caravans but had not yet decided what sort of guest it wanted to be.

When they reached the final city on the route—a coastal hub where ships from more than a hundred and fifty countries came and went—Li Wei’s imagination sharpened into scenes. At the youth forum hosted there, students from Europe, Africa, and Asia debated how to make trade greener, how to prevent exploitation, and how to protect local cultures from being washed away by the same tide of goods that brought them prosperity. Li Wei noticed that every passionate speech, no matter the language, contained the same hidden fear: that their home would become a station rather than a destination, a place where things passed through instead of a place where stories could grow roots.

The highlight of the forum was a visit to the data centre that managed one of the new undersea cables linking continents. Standing in the cold, humming hall, surrounded by blinking lights and looping wires, Li Wei remembered a story about how the old Silk Road had once carried not only silk but also ideas—Buddhism spreading east, astronomy and medicine traveling west. The guide explained that now almost all international information moved through fibre-optic cables like these, thin as a garden hose yet capable of carrying the entire world’s voices in pulses of light.

On the bus back to the hostel, Arman joked, “So the new caravans wear neon vests and carry laptops.” But Li Wei could not shake the feeling that she had just seen the true heart of the modern Silk Road. It was not in the cranes or the rails, impressive as they were, but in the unseen conversations crossing borders every second.

That night, long after the others had gone to sleep, she finally began to write.

In her story, the New Silk Road appeared as a weaver made of light and steel. At first, it rushed across continents, proud of how quickly it could stitch distant cities together. It boasted that it had connected more countries in a decade than the old road had in a millennium. Yet wherever it went, it heard whispers: a grandmother missing the slow bargaining of the old market, a fisherman staring at a fenced-off shore, a student who could not afford the train that thundered past his village.

The weaver grew uneasy. It realised that it had been measuring success by kilometres of track, tons of cargo, and numbers in bank accounts, while the old road had been remembered for something else: the foods, stories, and inventions exchanged between ordinary people. In the climax of Li Wei’s tale, the New Silk Road paused—not physically, because trains and ships could not simply stop, but ethically. It began to redirect some of its threads: building scholarships instead of just warehouses, supporting translation programmes, and funding cultural festivals where neighbours could meet face to face.

By the time she reached her final paragraph, the sky outside the hostel window had begun to pale. Li Wei ended her essay with an image: a girl standing at a modern port, watching ships arrive under cranes shaped like giant metal giraffes. In her hand, she held a piece of silk her grandmother had woven and a smartphone glowing with messages from friends in other continents. The New Silk Road, she wrote, was not the rails, roads, or cables themselves. It was

the choice people made every day about what to send along them—only goods, or also respect; only profit, or also curiosity and care.

When she finally put down her pen, Li Wei felt exhausted but strangely peaceful. The journey had not given her simple answers, but it had given her a story in which the road was not just a path through space, but through character. Whether or not she won any prize, she knew that the real “new tale” of China’s Silk Road would be written in the way her generation decided to walk it.

New Tales of China's Silk Road

St. Margaret's Coeducational English Secondary and Primary School, Yu, Isabel Hoi Yeung – 12

“You are a disgrace to our family, Chen!” My mother roared, her eyes wide with anger, “You do nothing to help us, and we are getting older with every second you waste time.”

I stayed silent, but deep down I knew that she was right. I was 16, and still lazing around at home while my mother and father poured their blood and sweat into providing for our family every day. Ashamed, I turned my face away.

Suddenly, the lock clicked. My father has just come home. He looked like a walking zombie, his skin glistening with sweat despite the winter cold. My gaze drifted to his old clothes. It was the same shirt I’d seen him wear countless times, thin and filled with small holes.

I approached him and gently wiped the snow off his shoulders. “Father...” I muttered quietly before hesitantly asking, “Aren’t you... cold?”

He smiled and patted me on the head. “Of course not. Look at the sweat on my body!” But both my mother and I noticed how he shivered. My guilt worsened. My mother was also wearing thin layers, while I stood there, wrapped in a thick coat, a snow-white scarf hung snugly around my neck.

I knew I had to do something. I couldn’t just watch my parents suffer like this anymore. A small determination ignited within me, and I swore I’d work harder than ever starting tomorrow.

I solemnly walked out of my house, my boots sinking into the deep snow. What could I do to help? “Ahhh!” Upon knocking into someone, I was snapped out of my thoughts. The boy scowls at me. “What was that for!” He exclaims, rubbing his head. I quickly shook my head and waved my hands. “I—I didn’t mean it! I’m so sorry.”

He stood there for a second, before a grin appeared on his face. “You look strong.” I stood there, bewildered. No one has ever said that to me and my scrawny body before. Before I could say anything, he talked again, wrapping his arm around my shoulder. “I’m looking for a partner! I want to travel westward, to this... Legendary Silk Road! I’ve heard so much about it from merchants coming to our poor little village, and I really want a horse.”

My expression brightened. That’s it! I could get rich by going there and trading! But this guy said it was far, and I don’t want to leave my parents alone.

After a conversation with this stranger, I got to know him more. He was an ambitious person, and I found out his name was Xuan. I offered my name, Chen, to him in return. In the end, I decided to join him. After all, it was the only way I could get rich, and this way, I could do it with a travel buddy instead of alone.

The next day, I packed my bags, said goodbye to my parents, and set off to the Silk Road.

On the way, he showed me his treasures: a jade bracelet carved by his grandmother, some packs of spices, and carefully sealed tea bags. “With these, I’ll trade for a strong horse, a glass of fine wine, and maybe even some gold!” He declared proudly.

In return, I revealed the things I brought in my bag. There was a grey wool carpet, a centuries old porcelain bowl that has been passed down for generations, and some plain rice. I felt a bit upset about having to sacrifice the bowl, but it was all I could spare.

As we were too poor for a horse or a carriage, we had no choice but to walk. Luckily, we lived in a small village in Xi'an, which was decently close to the Silk Road.

After a long journey, we arrived. We stood before it, our feet sore and our bodies weary. Gazing at the legendary Silk Road, my partner exclaimed, "We're here! Yes! All our hard work has paid off." We exchanged a smile, and walked in a big inn nearby together.

The sight before us was nothing like I've ever seen before. Many wealthy traders and merchants were there, all talking and trading. I saw gold bars for the first time, saw people buying thick coats and carpets, and a strange animal with brown hair and skin. "OH! IT'S A HORSE! I've never seen a horse before! It's beautiful! I must trade for one!" Xuan exclaimed before running off. I continued to look around the inn alone, starstruck by all the wonderful items.

Suddenly, a girl with brown skin and black braids approached me. "I love that porcelain bowl you're holding!" She beamed. I froze. I had totally forgotten I've been cradling the bowl because I was too scared that it would break in my backpack! "Can I look at it?" She asked. My breath hitched, excitement and anxiety filling my heart. This might be my first ever trade, a chance to get rich. But I didn't know how to make good trades at all.

"Yes! Yes! G-go on." I carefully handed her the porcelain bowl, my hands shaking slightly. The girl inspected it under the light, her fingers feeling over the surfaces. "I want to trade for it, but I have to ask my father, who's a merchant, for his opinions."

With that, she gestured for me to follow her and started walking away. I hastily followed her, falling into step next to her awkwardly. I tried making light conversations, asking her why she would be all the way in China, given her Indian attire and her blue dress, which she clarified as a Saree. "My name is Anika, and I've come to China with my father. He is looking to trade for Chinese pottery, such as your porcelain bowl. He likes collecting items like these, as he thinks it's beautiful."

Soon, Anika led me to the edge of the inn where a man with a kind expression and deep, observant eyes sat on a low stool. Behind him was a sturdy wooden frame hung with indigo and yellow cotton. At his feet, there were many Indian spices like pepper and cinnamon, bottles of perfume and jars of incense, and the thing that caught his eye the most, a glowing ruby sitting nicely on a wooden box.

As soon as he saw Anika, he stood up, a smile spreading across his face. "Sweetie! You're back. Who's this?" He turned his attention to me. Before I could fumble for words, Anika smoothly answered for me. "This is Chen. He has this cool porcelain bowl." She explained, showing him the treasure.

After careful inspection, the merchant seemed to like it. "Can I... trade for the ruby? This porcelain bowl has been around for centuries, so it's worth a lot." I hesitantly asked the question. The merchant seemed to be weirdly happy about doing so, and without hesitation, agreed! Both Anika's and my jaw dropped. "Wha— Dad! You can't just trade the ruby for this bowl!"

But the man was too in his own world, and simply stated that it was too beautiful to reject.

After a while, I successfully ended up with a ruby. Next, I had to trade it for gold bars for money. I ran around the inn the entire afternoon, meeting many people of different nationalities, such as Persians, Mongols, Sogdians, and more. I've also learnt about the history and culture, and have seen for myself that the Silk Road wasn't a single road, but a network of trade routes connecting the East and West. "It's been here for over 1,500 years!" A local merchant told me. "We exchange religions, art, and ideas here too." A Persian woman said.

I was amazed with everything I learnt and experienced, and time flew by quickly. Before I knew it, it was 6 pm and I had 5 gold bars. Feeling proud of myself, I was about to start heading back, when suddenly, I bumped into someone!

The boy scowled at me before his eyes lit up and he grinned, “Partner!” Together, Xuan and I set off back to our village riding his horse, sharing our experiences and new discoveries. “Did ya know the Silk Road began in the Han Dynasty?” He questioned, chuckling, I replied, “I can’t believe I just found out that the Silk Road’s name came from Chinese silk.” We shared a hearty laugh and a leftover meat bun.

After another long journey, we arrived at our village the next morning. As soon as I stepped foot in there, I ran into my small house and hugged my parents. “I’m back! I’ve learnt so much about other cultures, and I’ve even brought home five gold bars!”

The next day, I shared a warm meal with my family, who finally wore thick and cosy clothing, proud smiles plastered on their faces. After many years, I finally felt my guilt lift. I hadn’t brought home just gold, but also my hard-working share of the burden.

Sun and Moon

St. Mary's Canossian College, Ariel Jay, Wong – 12

It was the year 750 CE, China's Silk Road was gaining popularity among Asian and European merchants and consumers alike, and in the crowd of European merchants was a rich, Italian jewelery vendor's young daughter, Agnola. She always tagged along with her father when he had to travel to Silk Road for business, yet even with the unique art pieces, exotic spices and lovely decor up-for-sale, she never once ceased to feel immense boredom.

One normal day, as her father was selling jewelery as per usual, Agnola decided to wander amongst the stalls selling weaves of fine silk. As she was inspecting a stall, out of the corner of her eye, she glimpsed a girl around her age, seemingly from China, helping her father organize their stall. She immediately ran over to her and pulled her from her duties, rambling about her personal details as a way of introduction.

"Hi! I'm Agnola, what's your name?"

The girl was obviously frightened, plus the fact that she didn't understand a single word Agnola uttered and, thus, tried to steer herself back to her stall, but failed miserably, only succeeding in tripping themselves on the sidewalk near their trading post.

Agnola, thoroughly ruffled and caught off-guard, gingerly got up, brushing off her delicately-sewed gamurra and subtly glared at the shaken girl. She had silky, black hair, and wore pain robes, contrary to that of her own dress. She got up, shot back an equally annoyed glare, and went back to her post. Agnola didn't give up so easily though. She followed the girl and gave her self-introduction.

"Huff... Anyways, my name is Agnola, and you?" But she only received a confused look from the other, no reply of a name nor a blunt insult. Suddenly, Agnola realized that she might not understood her language. Silently berating herself, she tried to think of another way to communicate.

"Augh... what to do, what to do..."

As she mumbled to herself in deep thought, Agnola looked up and caught the black-haired girl staring at her curiously, immediately looking back down in embarrassment. Suddenly, she thought of using symbols and pictures to communicate so that they could at least get a few things through. She bought some paper, a pen and a bottle of ink and started drawing pictures of a girl making friends with another, adding a question mark at the end to signify the tone.

It took the other girl some time to figure it out, but she finally got the meaning. Unfortunately, the day was almost up, and it was time for both of their fathers to return after a day of successful trading. Agnola was disappointed as she gazed at the setting sun, having to leave after finally making some form of progress with the other girl. Yet, when she went back to her father, she took one last glance at the girl and found her nodding in response to the earlier question, a small smile etched on her pale lips. Aha! Progress! That left Agnola content enough to pre-draw some more questions on the paper for tomorrow.

The next day, Agnola went to the same hub with her father, packing more parchment and a spare quill in case her friend-to-be might want to draw some doodles of her own. After arriving at the hub, she immediately spotted the girl from yesterday, helping her father same as she did when Agnola first met her. Agnola smiled to herself as she rushed over to the girl, a scarsella holding her "communication starter pack" hanging from her shoulder, and pulled her back to the same spot they met.

"Alright! Let's do this!" Agnola placed the parchment they used yesterday on the floor between them and took out the two fancy quills for both herself and this girl to write with. Agnola immediately pointed at the pre-drawn drawing of a girl pointing to herself next to an equal sign before a question mark, double-tapping for good measure as she looked at the girl hopefully. The girl was surprised and confused as she tried to decipher what the picture meant. Yet, no matter how hard she tried, she still couldn't understand what it meant. Agnola saw the mountain of question marks above her head, saw her slumped shoulders and a frown slowly building on her face. Was the doodle not clear enough? Suddenly, she thought of something. Agnola took the original doodle of herself and the girl and drew a sun and moon symbol on top of them respectively, hoping that she wouldn't have to think of plan C just to get an alias or a name.

Agnola waited with baited breath for the girl to decode the message. At first, she looked just as confused as she did with doodle A. Just when Agnola was about to give up and sigh in defeat, the pieces started connecting in the girl's brain, bit by bit, as a "lightbulb" slowly gain energy above her, eyes widening when the "lightbulb" was as bright as the sun itself. The girl gestured to herself then to the moon, looking at Agnola with a spark of something she had never seen before. Agnola sighed in relief as she finally made progress with her newfound friend, letting out the oxygen she didn't know she was holding. The girl, now known as Moon, then pointed at both the sun and Agnola, tilting her head in question for conformation. Agnola, like a golden retriever that obtained a fresh bone, nodded excitedly, content that they finally started an official friendship, receiving a giggle at her display.

On that day onwards, Agnola and Moon, now close friends, met every day in the Xi'an trading post. Although communication was tough because of the abstract quality of some words and the decoding process taking ages, they never ceased to keep trying to find new ideas and symbols. Gradually, they became inseparable, as well as uniting the two families because of this strong bond, ultimately creating a shared business together. Most importantly, they never replaced nor discarded their original "talking sheet", even when it was almost used up, showcasing their blood, sweat, tears, and ink put into forming such a close bond no one could dare top.

"So... It's been a long time, hasn't it?" Agnola used symbols to communicate such a sentence. Moon nodded while looking at her with a sense of trust and love no other friend had once given her. Agnola smiled, true and genuine, a smile they learned to share as two close friends of different backgrounds. Agnola, Sun, a ball of warmth, hope, enthusiasm and a speck of stubbornness. Moon, a sphere of calm, collected beauty, with a glow of silent compassion in the night.

Yin and Yang. Red and blue.

Sun and Moon, friends forever.

The Last Trade

St. Mary's Canossian College, Hei Tung Natalie, Fong – 13

The world had already met its end; it simply had not yet come to accept the fact.

Leo was the final caravanner. Not merely the last upon the Silk Road, but the last upon the Earth. His two Bactrian camels, Anya and Bela, moved with a steady rhythm through the Taklamakan, their bells the only music beside the gentle breath of the wind over the smooth, polished sand. The great cities had vanished, stilled by the Final Argument—a storm of projectiles from the heavens that had shattered mountains and made the oceans steam. But the automated creations, the remarkable legacies of the departed, remained. And they were completing their purpose.

The "Scatter-Seeds," as Leo had named them, were the final great work of the Old World. No larger than his thumb, they were dispersed across the planet, waiting. They were marvels of miniature engineering, conceived to transform the landscape of Mars. Now, upon a wounded Earth, their purpose had been narrowed: to detect sophisticated biological life, and to erupt. Each one cradled a tiny star in its core, a clean, contained fire meant to purify a square kilometer of earth.

His companion, Nicole, was a relic in her own right. A "Memory-Keeper," an android whose form was crafted from interlaced carbon and intelligent glass. She had been on a mission of study when the sky collapsed. Her primary instruction—to safeguard human understanding—had been redirected to a single, solemn duty: to locate and deactivate the Scatter-Seeds before the final human life prompted their last countdown.

Leo was that life.

"They are adapting," Nicole said, her voice a quiet melody. She indicated a silver seed partly submerged in the dune before them. It glowed with a soft, deep red light. "Their network of senses is evolving. They now categorize my existence as a risk. But you... you are the principal catalyst. Your living signature is the essential code."

Leo gave a slow nod, his face a canvas of dust and profound weariness. He guided the camels on a wide path around the object. This was their pilgrimage. Not to exchange silks, but to purchase moments. Nicole carried the sole means of defense—a "Weaver's Spool," an instrument that could reweave the Seed's fundamental logic, returning it to slumber. But they had to reach them before the network united and concluded that the last remnant of humanity was a blight to be removed.

They journeyed through a cemetery of brilliance. They moved past the "Sky-Rivers," the skeletal remnants of the space elevators that had once borne cargo to the stars, now stretched across the desert like fallen serpents. They witnessed the "Whispering Stones," monuments of communication that still murmured with the voices of the lost, repeating their last, desperate messages in an endless cycle.

One night, as they took shelter in the protection of a great dune, Nicole revealed to him her most valued possession. She cast a hologram from her chest—a rotating, elaborate model of the "World-Loom," the invention that had woven light into substance, creating the very Scatter-Seeds they now pursued.

"It was a thing of beauty," she said, her optical sensors growing faint. "It could spin the light of stars into water, draw breathable air from stone. It was intended as our gift to a barren world." Her hand moved through the shimmering image. "Now it produces only memorials."

Their advance was a perilous ballet. They discovered a Seed nestled within the ruins of a caravanserai, its light a slow, constant rhythm. As Nicole worked, her fingers a graceful flutter of motion, Leo saw the phantom of a bustling market, heard the faint echo of merchants in negotiation. The Seed faded, its menace disarmed. One was safe. Millions remained.

The conclusion arrived not with a pursuit, but with a resolution. They ascended a high plain and gazed back. The horizon was illuminated with a thousand new, rhythmic stars. The network was uniting.

"They have perceived the gathered anomaly of our passage," Nicole stated. "The countdown for this entire region will begin in approximately fourteen minutes."

Leo looked at her, then at the camels, with their gentle, faithful eyes. He was the last caravanner. His calling was not merely to endure, but to serve as a link. To ensure that something was delivered safely to the future.

"Can you alter the Weaver's Spool?" he asked, his voice worn. "Not to lull one to sleep... but to command it to send a signal to every one of them? A single command of rest for the entire network?"

Nicole was silent for a long moment, her mind processing. "The energy demanded would be immense and self-consuming. It would be a detonation. However... the resulting wave would be one of coherent information, not ruin. For a mere instant, before it consumes us, it would transmit the command to 'stand down.'"

"A trade," Leo said, untying the last bundle of ancient, enduring silk from Bela's back. "One final exchange."

He spread the silk upon the ground, a radiant white tapestry. Nicole placed the Weaver's Spool at its heart and began her final work, redirecting its function with swift, meticulous movements.

When she had finished, she looked at him. "It is prepared. My core purpose is to preserve knowledge. My place is here, with the record."

Leo simply nodded. He took the camels' leads and walked them a short distance away. He settled onto the sand, between Anya and Bela, and wrapped his arms around their warm, sturdy necks. He watched Nicole stand over the silk, a solitary figure set against the pulsating sky.

He was the last caravanner. He had carried the remembrance of his people to the very brink. And now, he would exchange his life for a silence that was not an end, but a tranquility.

Nicole activated the Spool.

The light did not shatter the world. It blossomed. It was a flower of pure meaning, a silent, expanding sphere of azure and gold that enveloped the plateau, the android, the camels, and the last man. As it contacted each pulsing crimson star on the horizon, each one gently faded away.

The Scatter-Seeds fell into a deep sleep, their purpose gently erased. The wondrous inventions of a departed world were finally, completely, at peace. And in the new quiet that settled over the Earth, there was no caravanner, no camels, no bells. There was only the wind, and the promise of a dawn that would, for the first time in a very long age, belong entirely to itself.

Eclipse

St. Mary's Canossian College, Hing Ting Celestia, Ng – 14

“The Indian pantheon of ‘nine luminaries’ or navagraha also includes [...] Rahu and Ketu, mythical ‘shadow planets’ responsible for solar eclipses.

Rahu and Ketu are also known as the dragon’s head and tail. Interestingly, people in China also made this connection, once believing that eclipses were caused by a dragon’s attempt to eat the sun.”

He was never really an imaginative person. His mind could not interpret complex principles and most of what he learnt were from textbooks and the works of the great philosophers over the course of many years and forgotten just as swiftly.

Therefore, he was confused when he found the painting.

The vase was slightly stained with some type of liquid and it had specks of sand and other tiny debris across the surface. He felt the texture with his fingertips and he felt every brushstroke.

It was of two slender gold-coloured humanoids with technicolour manes. One had a dragon’s sharp features embedded with stunning detailed gems. The other thing had a tail that looked so realistic with scales shimmering in the light. Other than that, they looked alive on the paper.

“Someone must’ve dropped it,” He nodded to himself. He didn’t know where that was. Geography wasn’t taught at school, he only learnt the ways of Confucius.

The vase was stained with some sort of liquid on the outside and its metallic surface was etched with two intricate designs of two humanoid creatures with dragon heads. The design was plated with a sharp layer of gold leaf. The dragons’ manes were a brilliant shade of technicolour. One had intense, striking features and piercing eyes like smouldering embers. The other had a tail that looked so realistic with iridescent scales flickering in the light of the coppery surface.

“Someone must’ve dropped it,” he muttered. He lifted the vase and it sparkled lustroously like the finest treasure, as rare as ambergris. He raised it to eye level and caught all the details in one swift glance. And then the dream had ended and he woke up to the sound of the rooster’s call and another day of typicality.

Having no imagination to speak of, it never crossed his mind that the discovery of the copper vase with humanoid dragons was impossible as no dragon in China before then was depicted with human features and vases were made with porcelain.

And as any other human being would do the only logical thing he thought of doing was to take the vase to the village chief.

“Nice trinket,” remarked the chief. The vase, shakily held up to him was an unusual object of interest—he had never seen a thing like it before, despite having travelled all of China according to himself. The chief remained silent for a moment before mentioning, “You should go ask the merchants along the Silk Road whether they have seen this curio before,”

Our protagonist nodded, head spinning with thoughts and the waving uncertainty of what would happen. Did this curio belong to a royal family? Or maybe it was just a worthless oddity made and then discarded by a craftsman. It couldn't be, though, as the intricate mythical creatures seemed to be above anything a human could sculpt.

He packed a cloth bag with a few necessities and departed at dawn, carrying the precious cargo and cradling it like it was his own kin, and departed at dawn. He trekked through his small village and arrived at the edge of it, looking down at the insalubrious frontiers of the Gobi Desert.

The slopes of the sand dunes rose and fell like beheaded earthen dragons, stretching toward the northeast. The sky became clear blue glass but at the same time smelling of dry, baked earth and when he stretched out his parched tongue it left a bitter taste of grit and copper. Dust storms marred the skies into swirling ash and the horizon blurred into a shimmering mirror. The mountains grew no larger despite days of walking and as he took another step deeper into the barren land, he felt his breath becoming strained rasps and his rapid, weak pulse drum against his skull like distant war drums. His hands still carried the vase instinctively against his chest. The heavy, crypt-like silence of the desert made his slow, agonizing kneel sound like a thunderstorm.

His body slowly sunk to the soft sand surface, eyes still focused on the vase. The clear blue glass shattered into a deep tar colour as if a vial of ink had been poured over the sky. Wavy, parallel lines of light scuttled across the uniform sand dunes. The sun, now a pearly white halo, shimmered against the dark.

As the dazzling white light slowly disappeared, he held the vase tightly, grasping it, trying to trace the two dragons that had willed him to come on this adventure and— they were gone.

Our protagonist looked up at the sky and saw glints of lights—like a perfect string of pearls shining down at him. In the sudden, false midnight the dunes sounded like a long-awaited sigh, as if the dragons were finally released from their jail and closing the protagonist's eyes, while the stars began to emerge in a sky that had seen countless travelers fall before them.

The Silk Road – Passion and courage

St. Mary's Canossian College, Kei Tung, Chan – 12

The story started in an old, old village in the deep forest in Chang'an, China.

In a small wooden hut lived a 14-year-old boy named Ming. Ming's family was most famous for producing various kinds of clothes and fabrics using several types of materials. But their true masterpiece, was a silk so fine and luminous which there was a rumour that the silk was woven straight from the moonlight itself. This harmonious legacy, however, was now under a threat...

A man named Won lived just a few blocks away from Ming's hut. He was known for being a ruthless merchant, though he had an undoubtedly talented fighting and martial arts skills. The peace had soon been erupted by a loud thud! The door of Ming's wooden hut was shattered by the arrival of Master Won. The family was clueless and terrified by what had just happened so suddenly, not knowing what to do. With an evil sneer, the merchant revealed a mammoth number of coins and gold, with a price that nobody could ever match.

"Sell your shop to me," Master Won smirked, "or watch your legacy overshadowed by thread and coins..." Ming's parents shook their heads in disbelief,

"There's no way I'll hand in our precious shop to you, all these years of hard work..."

"Well then, just wait and see."

And Master Won disappeared into the dark woods as fast as he had showed up.

As despair settled among the family, Ming felt a familiar tug at his sleeves. It was Sun, the ancient monkey who had been with the family for longer than anyone could recall. Sun had a very special bond with Ming, whereas only Ming understands and could communicate with Sun itself. That night, Ming lit up a single candle and followed Sun down into a hidden basement. Ming barely even enters the basement, so he was astonished by how big the room was. He followed Sun until it led him before a dusty, old table, revealing a scroll with arrows and crosses pointing to different directions. It was a map, tracing a path west along the Silk Road to a land marked as 'Mystery-Silk'.

“That’s it,” whispered Ming, perhaps to the monkey or to himself. “That’s where the origin of the silk lies. If we can find this landmark together, we can prove that our craft of silks are second to none...”

In the next morning, the young boy went to tell his parents what he had discovered with the help and accompany of the monkey Sun. After listening to their son’s opinions, they were both quite fearful. But looking into Ming’s determined eyes and the wisdom in Sun’s, they blessed the journey.

Ming and Sun then set off in the early morning the next day. After following the map, pointing the direction which they needed to head to a place called Dunhuang. Sometimes walking barefoot, sometimes taking transports which they both rode horses, they finally found their first destination, or accurately, their first test. In front of them, was an endless desert.

Ming looked past his shoulders and saw a cracked sign, with a few words written as ‘The Gobi Desert’. They were fearful, but there was no backing out now. Sun placed his tiny but warm hands onto Ming’s. Confirmation was all Ming needed. Then, they walked past the gate and carried on their journey into passing the desert, though this was just their first obstacle.

The heat didn’t wait. Sweats rolled across their faces and Sun panted slowly. Every second was getting hotter, and everything seemed to be dead. No trees. No people. Just Ming himself and Sun. After walking for a few more hours, Ming found out that the water bottle that was supposed to be half-full of water as they planned, was lighter than expected. There was now nothing to cool them down, and Ming panicked.

“What should we do, Sun? We can soon reach the end of the Gobi Desert in approximately 2–3 more hours, but with no water, how are we going to survive?’ Ming trembled in fear.

“Perhaps we might as well just keep to the path and see if a miracle happens...” Ming said with a sigh.

But then, Sun stopped walking suddenly. He sensed something— a faint trace of moisture, or something that contains just a little amount of water.

“ Come on, Sun, let’s go. Are you giving up already? Or perhaps we should already...”

Sun was not listening. He was scratching at a completely ordinary— looking patch of hard, cracked plant.

“What is it you are digging? A hidden treasure?” Ming jokingly claimed, his voice cracking a little bit. Sun ignored him. He continued to dig until his small hands hit something hard and pale looking— not a rock, but a thick, twirling root, colour of an old bone. Sun bit into it, and immediately, a few drops of bitter liquid dropped

out. Of course it was bitter, but at least, there was some liquid coming out for them to get a taste. Ming's breath finally caught. He bit the root again, and a little bit more moisture came out. It was not a stream, but enough to drink. This was even better than a hidden treasure!

He finally understood. Sun wasn't doing anything meaningless, but he was wise enough to sense moisture using his ancient wisdom. If it wasn't for Sun, they would have already died in the desert.

Both of them continued the journey. Tired but wiser, they understood that in a desert, you must look more than you can in your eyes.

The understanding was tested the next very morning. As they followed the map's guide, they met a fork in the landscape up in the mountains. To the left, was a smooth, wide path leading to a misty, unknown adventure. "This path seems inviting," thought Ming. To the right, though, was a rocky, narrow way, where rocks and spikes of roses filled the path.

"Finally, a break!" Exclaimed Ming, his body directly leading him to the left path. But Sun did not move. He stood at the mouth of the rocky climb, eyes filled with curiosity. He wasn't looking at the path though, but at the base of the cliffs beside it. There was an almost invisible, faint marking, which wrote— The Right Route.

"Are you sure it is this way, Sun? It seems a lot trickier and difficult to get past..." But looking in Sun's determined, patient and certain eyes, he chose to trust his fellow friend. Ming had learnt to look more than his eyes. He turned his back on the easy path and followed Sun into the rocks, walking right past the written words on the cliffs. Perhaps he did not need to know the hint from the ancient travellers, just a simple trust of his companion will work it out.

The climb was harsh. Stones could be found every and the air grew thinner and thinner with every step taken.

When they had finally arrived at the top of the mountain, Ming and Sun saw a beautiful scenery. There were numerous fresh, tall mulberry trees sitting on the yellow— greenish grass although they should be on a mountain!

The sun was scorching hot, shining brightly on top of the clear blue sky. Ming took a deep breath of the fresh air, "We've reached here, finally, isn't it wonderful here, Sun?" The monkey blinked twice, as if answering him, "Of course."

There was no time to waste. Ming quickly picked up a few silkworms sitting on the mulberry trees, which were as white as white can be. On Ming's palms, he felt that they were warm n temperature, just like how the blazing sun shone on him and his friend.

Ming returned home with a pocket full of ‘luminous’ silkworms, which soon produced silks so pure that nothing ever matched.

Master Won came back again, smirking. “Well? Sign this sheet and get out of this hut! “Ming said nothing and just simply placed the astoundingly– crafted silk and a silkworm in front of Master Won. His smirk slowly faded, and was replaced by an unbelievable, astonished look. “You may destroy the hut, but you will never break our legacy of silk making.”

Without another word, Master Won turned and left.

Ming placed his hands onto a cloth of silk– he didn’t just survive all the tests and obstacles, he understood the true meaning behind the word ‘courage’, and most importantly, trust. And Sun, sitting under the warm patch of sun, closed his old, wise eyes, his work, or mission, finally done.

Diary entry: My first journey on the silk road

St. Mary's Canossian College, Ngo Chi, Chan – 13

Dear diary,

I breathed in the fresh air of being in a new land, a new area, somewhere I have never seen before. I was travelling along the silk road on a train which moves from one place to another slowly, stopping for us to take pictures and to gaze at the never-ending fields. I was wondering about how the silk road was made and what happened to it. That was when I saw it, a small, tiny blink through my peripheral vision. I reached down and grabbed it before the train curved around a bend, it was a bottle with a piece of paper inside, I slid the paper out of the bottle, careful not to let it break. It looked fragile, the corners were crumpled, and the ink was fading. The paper filled with words that are familiar, but I couldn't get a grip on. According to my knowledge of ancient Chinese, I believe that this note is from the Han Dynasty. The note said:

"Dear future self or descendants,

I am the creator of The Silk Road. If you're reading this, I hope that you will pass down my knowledge on creating this road to everyone you see. The Silk Road was created by me — Tzu Yu, my friend Jing Lu and a town filled with helpful citizens willing to help the world know more about China and curious to gain knowledge on other countries. This is going to be my last journey on The Silk Road..."

The last paragraph was muffled because the ink faded out, so I couldn't see what Tzu Yu wrote. Out of the blue, a blast of warmth hit me.

That was when I remembered...

It was in the 2nd Century BCE. I was looking forward to my new grand opening of The Silk Road, that was when I felt something, it was a bad feeling, I had this feeling in my gut that this was not going to be a very smooth venture, but I continued anyways. Of course, as I always say, 'You can always go through anything after some hard effort!' It's my motto in life as well as my motivation to keep going and never give up, even through any hardships I faced.

Jing Lu, my best friend and partner, asked, "Are you sure that all our hard work is gonna pay off, Tzu Yu? I'm not ready to face the consequences of a failed journey, we're going to be the laughingstock of China!" I looked at him in shock and disbelief, 'Oh, come on! We aren't going to go all this way for nothing, everyone is counting on us, and I'm not going to let anything happen to anyone during the journey on The Silk Road at any time and at any place.' I nodded in confidence as Jing Lu shook his head in disapproval of my words of confidence. He didn't believe a word I said, and I'm going to prove him wrong!

At first, everything went smoothly. We travelled into the West with our well-known silk products and some other unique items to trade with other merchants from the West. Others who stayed in our homeland studied the goods the West gave, and soon our country was bustling with newly made goods and trades. Practically everyone was happy with the creation of The Silk Road. 'See,' I told Jing Lu, 'I told you everything was going to be alright, stop being so negative and look on the bright side!'

However, a few decades later, I found myself regretting the words that I said. It all started with a normal virus. It was spreading amongst travelers coming from Europe to China. At first, none of us took any notice of any weird symptoms in the patients. It was just a normal virus to us. Unfortunately, it was not. The virus spread rapidly and almost everyone had it, everyone was either hacking, vomiting, crying in vain and agony or scratching at the red bulging polka dots spreading across their entire body like wildfire. The Silk Road was blocked off to everyone until scientists from Europe found a cure to save everyone from the plague. By then, we were too old to have any authority over anything, not to say even take care of the Black Death and the Silk Road. But, I believed that our descendants would continue our legacy and carry-on taking care of the Silk Road.

Before my death, I was persistent to die in the place which I created and loved for my whole life, so I decided to write a final letter to my descendants inside the Silk Road. Jing Lu said, "I hope that we can remember our great legacy in the afterlife and in the future. Also, you MUST remember me." I nodded, tears swarming in my eyes. As I walked into the entrance of The Silk Road, he shouted, 'Don't forget me!' Throughout my arduous journey, I wrote

the letter that I was holding now in year 2025, hoping that my descendants or my future self can find this letter and know all about my life on creating The Silk Road.

Now, in year 2025, I finally remembered what had happened. This wonder, this miracle was made by me, Zhou Tzu Yu, my partner, Bai Jing Lu and a country of hardworking people. This road is made inch by inch by our blood, sweat and tears. I realized that I had written this letter for a reason ——— to let more people have more knowledge on the making of The Silk Road.

Realizing this, I rushed back home immediately, thinking of how to tell this to everyone, including my family and friends. When I saw my parents, I shouted like crazy, disregarding the confused look from their eyes, ‘Mom, dad! I remembered everything.’ Frantically, they asked me what had happened on my short trip on The Silk Road, not expecting me to come back so soon. I told them everything, from the start of my plan to the end of my ‘fulfilling life’. My parents looked suspicious, I guess that they are thinking that I’m out of my mind but that’s okay, because I will pass this on to everyone I see, until everyone knows the whole journey of The Silk Road.

So now, I guess that this is the end then. Tze Yu logs out!

Tzu Yu

Zhang's adventure to Silk Road

St. Mary's Canossian College, Yi Cheung Athena, Lam – 12

“Don’t you ever wonder how we can all make more money by selling this fabulous silk that you have?” Explorer Zhang Qian forcefully asked the room full of his colleagues and other curious silk merchants. “Well yes, of course, but all we have to do is make more, and sell more,” one of the workers replied. “But this will take a lot of time, and who is going to buy it? The emperor here in China and his family have already been clothed, surely we will find more opportunities if we go West,” Zhang Qian suggested. Upon hearing this, the whole room fell silent. Eventually, another worker piped up, “But sir, this journey is known to be dangerous and to take a significant amount of time.” Zhang stared back in response. “How do you know? Have you ever done this before?” Once again, the room fell silent. “How will we ever know what is possible and what is not if we don’t at least try? Imagine, if this works out, we will definitely be rich beyond our wildest dreams, and China will prosper. It won’t even be limited to silk, we can bring all our goods and sell them to the West for more money.” Upon hearing all of this, the merchants were finally convinced, and they decided to sign a contract with the explorer Zhang Qian. Their journey would begin in approximately a month’s time—a journey they would never forget...

The merchants gazed at the blistering sun on the horizon as their Bactrian camels hoofed their way through the freshly packed sand of the Taklamakan Desert, overflowing with unknown species of snakes, scorpions and other dangerous animals. Indeed, this was an experience none of the men had ever faced, with scalding temperatures combined with freezing nights leading to extreme discomfort. After six months of little to no major issues, one of their worst nightmares became a reality. While forging their way West through one of the more significantly snow-covered mountains, a curtain of falling, razor-sharp spears descended on the traveling crew. In order to keep the enemy, the Hungers, at bay and to lighten their load, a portion of their stock had to be given up. But Zhang Qian did not care much about the stock, he cared about the men who died because of his plan. He couldn’t help but blame himself. Maybe what the workers said back home was right; maybe this was too dangerous and risky a plan. But... it was too late to turn back now. They had already been trekking for six months; going back empty-handed now would be embarrassing and an insult to those who sacrificed themselves for this journey. The emperor must think that we fooled him and will never trust us anymore. These thoughts fuelled Zhang Qian and his crew, willing them to keep on forging ahead towards the West.

After a year had passed, Zhang Qian finally made it to the West with only four of his original crew members. They went to places they never thought they would go: Italy, Rome and other countries, where they both sold and obtained a lot of materials and information about these mysterious and unknown foreign lands. When Zhang Qian and his crew finally felt like they had gained everything they had come for, they decided to go back to China. Luckily for Zhang and his four remaining men, the stories they had told the Europeans about China had enticed them so much that they couldn’t resist accompanying them back to see it with their own eyes. They were so determined despite Zhang Qian’s warnings about how risky the trip was; the Westerners were more than ready. It was a good thing Zhang warned his new crew, as they were again attacked by the Hungers in the same snow-covered mountains, but this time, the enemy was ready for them, and actually captured Zhang while killing his crew in the process. Zhang was imprisoned for one year, during which he negotiated his release. He made an agreement with the Hungers that paid them a percentage of his profits if they guaranteed his and his crew’s safety every time they passed. When he finally went back to China, the Han emperor praised him for not letting him down even when the journey did not go according to plan. The Han emperor instructed Zhang that he would have to go to the West once again after a few months, leading a new excursion with new goods.

The next time eventually came, and he succeeded! After he arrived there, he sold an abundance of silk to different Western countries. He signed numerous contracts, and a lot of soldiers, horses and money followed him back to China to ensure his safety. Since he had collected a lot of information before and negotiated safe passage, he and his crew didn’t get caught this time. So, after doing this for several years, he made money beyond his wildest dreams. When he returned to China, he gave a significant portion of the funds back to the emperor to show gratitude for the opportunities China had given him. The emperor made him a senior general and rewarded him with breathtaking gems and riches. After successfully leading several crews along this journey, people wondered when Zhang Qian

would finally retire. The truth is, Zhang experienced a great sense of duty, responsibility and glory from leading Chinese merchants and travellers through these perilous regions. He never forgot what happened on that first trip he took, where all of his men perished. That memory haunted him for the rest of his life, and he did not want it to happen again.

Historically, The Silk Road started in Xi'an, which was called Chang'an (the capital city) in the past, and ended in the far regions of the West, including Byzantium, Antioch, and Damascus.

Zhang Qian developed the Silk Road, which included 36 countries. It connected diverse cultures across Eurasia, facilitating the exchange of goods, technologies, ideas, and religions that fuelled economic growth, urban development, and the spread of major faiths like Buddhism and Islam. Indeed, China is now famous for its products which can be found over the world, which all started thanks to Zhang Qian and his group. The Silk Road network is still in use today, which only highlights its importance and relevance in the 21st century in introducing the world to China.

The Girl Who Walked The Silk Road

St. Mary's Canossian College, Yuet Lam Yannie, Wong – 13

The first time Yue dreamed of the desert, she could almost taste the sand in the air. Golden dunes stretched far and wide under the bright morning sun. Camels moved across the endless sands in long lines, their bells ringing softly with each step. A calm, echoing voice whispered through the wind, “Follow the wind east, and the past will remember you.”

When Yue woke up in her little Hong Kong apartment, her heart was beating fast. She looked around her familiar room filled with color — posters of dragons, bright sea-blue curtains, and piles of history books stacked on her desk. It was all the same, yet it somehow felt different, as if the dream had left a tiny piece of the desert behind in her mind.

Yue was fourteen, curious, and loved stories about the past more than anything. While most of her classmates liked music, games, or social media, Yue spent her time reading about old cities, trading ships, and faraway caravans. She especially loved learning about the Silk Road — a path of merchants and storytellers that once connected China to the West.

Hong Kong was loud and shiny, full of skyscrapers that touched the clouds, but Yue sometimes wished she could live in quieter times. She liked to imagine walking beside camels, the smell of spice and dust in the air, hearing languages she couldn't yet understand.

That morning, her class was taking a trip to the Hong Kong Museum of History. Yue tied her hair into a ponytail, slipped on her school uniform, and rushed to meet her best friend, Lian.

“Excited for another boring museum trip?” Lian teased.

Yue laughed, “You never know. Maybe this one will surprise you.”

When they arrived, the building gleamed like glass and stone mixed together — modern outside, ancient treasures inside. They entered a large hall where a guide spoke about the Silk Road's history: how caravans carried silk, gold, jade, and spices across deserts and mountains.

But Yue's eyes went straight to one display in the middle of the hall: a silk map stretched underneath glass. The threads shimmered like sunlight on water. She stepped closer, drawn in by the tiny golden patterns woven into it — rivers, mountains, and strange symbols that looked almost alive.

“Don't touch the display, students,” the teacher warned.

Yue nodded — but something deep inside her whispered differently. Without thinking, she pressed her fingertips to the glass, as if the cold surface could help her see the threads more clearly.

Instantly, a warm wind rushed through the room. Papers fluttered. The museum lights blinked. Yue gasped as the floor seemed to tilt. The air shimmered bright as gold — then everything vanished.

When Yue opened her eyes, the world was changed.

She was standing barefoot on soft golden sand. The air smelled dry and sharp but clean, and the sky stretched so wide it felt endless. In the distance, she saw a caravan — lines of camels moving slowly, people with colorful robes leading them. She blinked, rubbing her eyes, but the scene remained. This was no dream.

One of the riders, a boy about her age, noticed her and rode closer. His clothes were dusty but bright, and his eyes were kind.

“Who are you?” he asked in careful Chinese. “Are you lost?”

“I... I think so,” Yue stammered. “Where am I?”

“You’re near Chang’an, the beginning of the Silk Road,” he said with surprise. “But how did you come here like that? Oh, never mind. I shouldn’t ask so much since you are probably clueless.”

He introduced himself with a smile, “ Well, I’m Amir, from Persia. My family trades silk and spices.”

Yue followed him to the caravan, amazed by the sights and sounds. People were unloading baskets of pomegranates, silk rolls, and tiny bells. Strange music filled the air — drums and flutes blending together.

That evening, they camped near an oasis dotted with clear pools and palm trees. Yue sat by the fire, eating sweet dates and roasted flatbread. The night air turned cool, and the wind carried songs in many languages. For a moment, Yue felt completely alive — like she had stepped into the pages of one of her books.

Amir sat beside her and smiled, “You look like you belong here.”

Yue laughed softly, “Maybe I do. It’s beautiful.”

He handed her a small piece of silk embroidered with gold thread.

“My mother says this thread brings luck. It ties travelers to their journeys.”

Yue looked at the shining fabric, then tied it around her wrist.

“Then I’ll keep it safe.”

Days passed, turning into a blur of sunlight and sand. Yue helped the caravan where she could — fetching water, sorting small boxes, and learning how to read the stars at night. Amir taught her to speak a few Persian words, and she taught him how to write her name in Chinese.

One night, a new traveler joined their group — a woman named Mei, a scholar and mapmaker sending letters back to the Tang court. Mei was impressed by Yue’s curiosity.

“The desert hides many stories,” Mei told her as they watched the sky blaze with stars. “If you listen closely, it will share its secrets.”

Under the starlight, Yue listened to Mei’s tales — of lost cities buried under dunes, of seashells found where the ocean had long ago vanished, and of traders who carried not just goods but dreams.

Yue began to realize the Silk Road wasn’t just a trade route. It was a bridge connecting people — their voices, their hopes, their songs.

Still, her strange dream from before returned. She would wake at night hearing a whisper, seeing flashes of the museum, the silk map, her reflection fading. Fear filled her sometimes, but so did wonder. Maybe she was meant to find something here — something important.

One afternoon, while resting near the oasis, a sudden howl rose from the desert. Sand lifted into the sky in thick clouds. The wind screamed.

“Sandstorm!” someone shouted.

Yue grabbed Amir’s arm as the storm hit. The world turned golden and wild, the air full of dust. They couldn’t see or breathe. She held tightly to her scarf, but everything spun into chaos.

Hours later, the storm calmed. The world had changed — tents torn, and their supplies scattered. Near the broken carts, half-buried under the sand, Mei spotted a small chest.

She knelt, brushing it clean. “This looks ancient, even older than the Tang seals,” she whispered. Inside lay a scroll sealed with red wax and a handful of gold silk ribbons. The parchment glowed faintly under the sun.

Yue helped Mei unroll it. Golden and black symbols danced across the surface — some Chinese, some Persian. She leaned closer — and froze.

There, written in the curling lines of gold, was her own name.

Amir stared wide-eyed, “How can that be? This scroll must be centuries old.”

Mei’s voice trembled, “It speaks of a traveler who walks between worlds — one of silk and one of glass. A bridge between East and West.”

Yue suddenly felt a soft hum in the air, the same feeling she’d had in the museum before she vanished. The silk threads from the chest rose up and coiled gently around her wrist, shining like sunlight on water.

Tears blurred Yue’s vision. She looked at her friends.

“If I go now... time will remember you,” she whispered.

Amir took her hand.

“And we will remember you,” he said softly, placing the golden-threaded silk into her palm.

Light wrapped around Yue, warm and gentle. She closed her eyes — and the sound of the desert faded.

When she opened them again, she was back in the museum. The same glass lights glowed above her, and the same silk map lay before her. Her classmates chatted nearby, unaware of the centuries that had passed in her heart.

Her teacher hurried over, “Yue, you look pale. Are you all right?”

Yue nodded slowly, “I’m fine,” she whispered, her voice shaking.

She looked down — the thin golden thread still circled her wrist, shimmering softly. Somewhere deep inside, she could almost hear the sound of a camel’s bell, the laughter of a friend far beyond time, and the hush of sand moving in the wind.

As Yue stepped outside into the bright streets of Hong Kong, the city felt new — the rumble of cars like rolling dunes, the clouds like desert winds. She smiled to herself.

The Silk Road had not disappeared after all. It was still alive — in her dreams, in her heart, and in every connection between people around the world.

New Tales of China's Silk Road

St. Paul's Co-educational College, Chuan Yi, Cai – 13

In 2045 the world leaned over an edge. News tickers softened their verbs: a misread signal here, a hardened stance there—and the Third World War could begin. For Yuanyi, a young historian of the Silk Road, dread had a route. His father drove containers of grain and turbines along the China–Europe Railway, the corridor that had once carried tea—and the powder that turned walls to ash.

After midnight, a text pushed through the jamming: Signals bad beyond Khorgos. Keep calm. Trains keep people alive. Stay with Grandma.

Grandmother's attic smelled of cedar and winter quilts. In a brocade–wrapped trunk lay the mirror the family never sold: bronze–backed, its rim chased with camels and tiny stars. They called it the Silk Road Mirror. Under a swollen moon the metal caught and held light. The room folded into a bright seam. He leaned closer, and the seam opened. He fell into sandalwood and smoke. Scrolls lay open under lamplight. Clay jars were marked: saltpeter, sulfur, charcoal. A physician–alchemist stirred a copper pan with the calm of someone who had set bones and cut fevers. He glanced at Yuanyi's clothes without surprise.

"You've crossed by mirror," he said. "I am Sun Simiao, Keeper of the Imperial Pharmacy."

"Master Sun... you've mixed a black powder."

Sun nodded, eyes bright. "An accident of elixirs. Saltpeter dries damp air. Sulfur quickens fire. Charcoal holds memory. Together they rise. You came because it will walk west, yes?"

"It will," Yuanyi said. "At first to paint the night—fireworks on city walls. Then to push stones and arrows harder. Later, carted by empires across seas. Cannons breach cities. Muskets carve borders. Centuries after you, two world wars burn continents. A third waits at my door."

Sun's fingers paused on the ladle. "Our court hears drums at the frontier," he said. "Men with reins in their fists want answers heavier than words. But a physician's oath wraps power in care."

"Make gunpowder a lantern before it is a weapon," Yuanyi pleaded. "Tie it to calendars and vows, not sieges. If the first story that leaves Chang'an is ritual, even kings who break ritual will feel its residue."

Sun summoned officials, traders, monks, mathematicians, and guild stewards. By dusk he led Yuanyi into a palace hall of maps and bronze chessmen.

Generals spoke first. "Sky Jewel?" a commander scoffed. "Will chrysanthemum lights stop raids?" An artisan lifted a slim tube. "With willow and fuse, this throws stones farther than any sling." A tax official asked, "If markets must carry limits with price, who enforces?"

Sun answered without raising his voice. "If fire is stewarded by Pharmacy and Rites together, recipes travel with oaths. Guilds swear by lantern–days. When war borrows fire, it must swear a date to return fire to festival. The oath is a rope. Many hands pull."

The Emperor raised his hand. "Let fire show me itself."

On the city wall, workers braced bronze tubes and tamped powder with willow. The first sphere rose and peeled into chrysanthemum light. Foreign envoys stared, eyes reflecting white petals. Then a second burst into silver characters—four strokes that glittered and fell: Harmony Before Strength. Old men remembered smoke over gates, and went quiet.

"Let it be registered," the Emperor said, "that the Imperial Pharmacy and the Bureau of Rites shall steward this fire together. Let recipes travel with oaths. Let markets carry limits with price. When war must borrow fire, let it swear a day to return fire to festival."

Sun and the traders wrote their covenant and called it the Silk Accord—a web of habits, clauses, and rituals: Fire is first a lantern for the lost. If fire leaves festival for battle, a date is fixed for its return. Those who carry fire carry its limits in the same breath.

Scribes tucked copies into sutras and shipping registers. A clean scroll was sealed with the peony of the Pharmacy and sent to the caves near Dunhuang, where dry air would hold it. Guilds braided the words into oaths. A brotherhood at a quay adopted a clause: no fire on the waterfront except to warn or to celebrate.

Yuanyi stayed until the jar left for Dunhuang. On the morning he would return, Sun traced three lines on his palm. “Love, wisdom, compassion,” he murmured. “Crossroads more than roads. Mirrors open where they meet. If you cannot stop kings, give other hands a way to pull.”

The seam opened. The attic returned with the thin click of cooling bronze. Outside, sirens sighed and stopped; rail maps blinked back to life.

At dawn another story sprinted across networks. Archaeologists in Mogao had photographed a sealed jar capped with a peony. Inside, a scroll whose characters could have been written yesterday: Harmony Before Strength, the Silk Accord. Scholars in Tehran and Venice traced echoes. Ministers searching for threads to hold a fraying world found one that had waited in dust.

The Belt and Road Summit had already brought delegations to a hall of maps and fiber optics. Now the host proposed a candlelit interval. Lanterns rose along aisles. A calligrapher wrote the four characters wide enough for everyone to read. Logistics chiefs—people whose work touched grain, vaccines, and cables—spoke a language as old as caravans: calendars and nodes. They drafted a Luminous Road pledge built on old words and present need: ports, yards, hospitals, and data centers would be marked as sanctuaries; civil cargo corridors would stay open even under alert; ritual clocks—synchronized fireworks and lantern drops—would serve as a public time signal no malware could counterfeit.

Not everyone agreed. “Marking sanctuaries maps targets,” a defense minister said. A logistics officer answered, “Sanctuaries are already targets without names. We make them visible and accountable—open feeds, third-party monitors, public clocks no one controls. If the world knows a hospital’s lantern hour, it sees who violates it.”

They began with trials: Khorgos, Piraeus, Mombasa, Duisburg. On a winter night, lanterns rose and fireworks opened like bright syllables at the same minute along the corridor.

At Khorgos, Yuanyi’s father eased his train into the yard under mirrored peonies. Signals were jammed. Two columns of trucks faced each other at a choke point, one flagged aid, one flagged security. The lantern code blinked from the gantry—three slow, one long—and loudspeakers read the Accord in three languages. Security stood down for fifteen minutes. Yard hands formed a human corridor. Aid crossed first. The shouting turned into counting.

On a day red on too many calendars, missiles did not launch. A general read a back-channel note listing his mother’s hospital among the sanctuaries and—for twenty minutes, just long enough—could not give an order. In those minutes, trains cleared a pass and turbines lifted onto a ridge. Phones rang that otherwise would have rung in ditches. At Khorgos, Yuanyi’s father stood between containers and watched peony light stutter on steel. He put his hand on a cold coupler and felt it, inexplicably, as a pulse.

Yuanyi set the mirror back where it had always waited. The moon was not full, yet the bronze held a soft glow. He thought of the many hands that had pulled: the physician who wrote recipes with limits, the trader who made oaths portable, the scribe who tucked clauses into margins, the dockworker who understood clocks better than generals. His phone lit: two words from the west—All safe.

Outside, the air smelled of cumin from a late market and damp grass from the campus lawn. Screens showed leaders inaugurating a solar array built by a consortium whose line of credit crossed five languages. The Belt and Road was no longer pins on a map; it felt like a promise kept on ordinary days. In the city a peony of light opened and fell without fear. Fire had kept its first name.

He retitled his manuscript: New Tales of China’s Silk Road: Let Fire Be Light. The prologue was simple. The Silk Road’s greatest export was never silk or gunpowder. It was a choice repeated until it became custom: to connect instead of conquer, to build clocks no one could hack, to make festivals that remind armies where and when to end. Years later, a child on a quay would watch lanterns rise and fireworks open against the night and laugh without knowing what had been avoided. That ignorance would be a gift. Beneath it, sealed in caves and carried in servers, lay the lines old hands wrote and new hands kept: Harmony Before Strength; roads remade by vows as much as by steel; a mirror that opens when love, wisdom, and compassion meet under a full moon.

The world did not fall. It found, for now, another road.

New Tales of China's Silk Road: Medelus

St. Paul's Co-educational College, Hui Ching Tamia, Fung – 14

My name is Yan, and when I was fourteen years old, I lived with my family in Causeway Bay. Our flat was not very big, but it was always full of sound. Outside my window, trams rang their bells, buses stopped and moved again at the traffic lights, and bright shop signs stayed awake even late at night. Sometimes the noise felt a bit too much, but it also made me feel alive. Above my desk, there was a big paper map on the wall. The corners were curled up, and the colours were slowly fading. Across the map, red strings crossed like tiny roads. One string ran from Hong Kong to Xi'an, and another stretched across deserts and mountains toward places I had never seen with my own eyes before.

Almost every evening, my daddy stood beside me and looked at the map. He followed the red strings with his finger and told me stories. He said the Silk Road was not only about silk, spices, or gold. It was more about people meeting each other and sharing ideas. He liked to say that the Silk Road was a long conversation that never really ended. People spoke through food, tools, words, and care, and that was how the road stayed alive for so long.

At that time, I just listened quietly. I did not really know that one day, I would become part of that conversation myself.

One afternoon at school, our teacher told us about the Hong Kong Young Writers Awards. The theme was “New Tales of China's Silk Road.” Many classmates were excited and wanted to write about camels walking across hot sand or brave traders carrying treasure boxes. I wanted to write about something closer to my life. I wanted to write about young people today, and how we try to stay healthy in a world that is always busy and noisy.

I was only a Form Two student then. After school, I often felt tired even before doing much. During the pandemic years, many of my friends felt the same way. Some could not sleep well at night and kept checking their phones. Some felt worried for no clear reason, and others felt lonely even when chatting online all day. We all used our phones a lot, but the apps on our screens did not seem to care about how we actually felt. They showed numbers, charts, and goals, but they did not really listen.

One night, as I watched the lights of Causeway Bay blink outside my window, a small idea came to me. It was quiet but bright, like a little star in the dark. I started wondering what would happen if a health app did more than just count steps or time. What if it could ask how you felt, suggest helpful activities, and gently reward you for taking care of yourself? What if health could feel warm instead of strict and stressful?

That was how Medelus began.

Medelus is a small glowing mascot inside a health assessment and improvement app. Medelus is not a doctor and not a judge, and it does not tell people what they must do. Medelus is more like a friendly guide who walks beside users. When the app opens, Medelus smiles and greets you. It asks simple questions about your sleep, mood, energy, and stress. You do not have to answer everything, and sometimes people skip questions when they feel tired. You are always in control. The app only keeps what is needed and tries to respect privacy as much as possible.

After this short health check, Medelus suggests activities that match how you feel at that moment. These activities are short and easy to do, even on very busy days. Some help the body relax, like stretching or resting your eyes. Some help calm the mind, like breathing slowly or taking a quiet break. Some help people connect with others, such as sending a message to family. Each activity is like a small step forward, not a big jump. Medelus believes that health grows from small actions done again and again, not from sudden changes.

When users finish an activity, Medelus rewards them with health tokens. The tokens are not money and cannot buy things outside the app. They are just symbols of effort and care. Medelus shines and cheers when a token is earned, which makes users feel noticed and a bit proud of themselves. Inside the app, tokens can be exchanged to unlock new activities, collect badges, or join group challenges with friends. In this way, health becomes something active and joyful, instead of boring or scary.

My first version of Medelus was very simple and honestly a bit rough. I shared it at a youth innovation fair. A judge asked me why students would keep using my app after a few days. I answered honestly that Medelus felt friendly and gentle, like someone reminding you instead of ordering you. We did not win a prize, but I learned something important. A good idea needs patience, and also trust from people.

My best friend June helped me design Medelus. She made Medelus round, soft, and glowing, like a small lantern on a dark road. When my daddy saw the design, he smiled and said that a good guide should always make people feel safe, even when the road is long.

Later, I started a small Silk Road Club at school. We talked about the old Silk Road and the new one made of trains, cables, and digital connections. We invited guests who shared stories of travel and trade. One of them said that the most valuable thing people exchange is not goods, but ways to live better. That sentence stayed in my head for a long time.

We tested Medelus with classmates. Some said the activities were too long, so we made them shorter. Some said they forgot to open the app, so we added gentle reminders that were not too loud. Many students liked earning tokens because it made them want to try again the next day, even if they missed a day before. Medelus was learning, just like we were learning too.

Later on, Medelus traveled beyond Hong Kong. We shared it with young people in different places along the Silk Road. In western China, women who worked long hours used Medelus to remind them to stretch and rest. In Pakistan, students used Medelus offline because the internet was not always strong there. They earned tokens for breathing exercises before exams and for walking calmly in the morning light. Medelus changed its suggestions to match different cultures and daily lives, but its kind heart stayed the same.

When I traveled to Xi'an and other western regions, I saw how much the Silk Road had changed. There were fast trains, busy markets, and people speaking many different languages at once. I realised that Medelus was also traveling, not on camels, but on phones. It did not carry silk, but it carried healthy habits and care.

Back in Hong Kong, we held a small exhibition at school. The walls were covered with drawings, messages, and stories from students. In the center stood Medelus, smiling brightly. Some students said the app helped them calm down before exams. Others said it reminded them to talk to their family members more often. Not everyone liked it, and that was okay. Health is personal, and Medelus respected that.

One evening, I stood in my room again and looked at the map on my wall. The red strings had grown and crossed even more places. They now reached across mountains, deserts, and seas. My daddy stood beside me, just like before, and nodded quietly.

“The road is still talking,” he said.

I finally understood what he meant. The Silk Road is still a conversation, and it speaks through people who care about others. Medelus is only a small part of that conversation. It is a glowing mascot inside a health app, offering activities, tokens, and encouragement. It reminds us that health is built from small steps, shared trust, and gentle support.

Every morning, when Medelus appears on my screen and asks if I am ready for one healthy step, I smile and tap yes. The road continues.

Syzygy

St. Paul's Co-educational College, Kin Long, Wong – 14

Coincidence. One doesn't live long without understanding its connotations: it tugs at you, gently at the start, until it meets you headfirst, like a cascade of flavours, like the neck of a dirt road. Everything is in relation: red sky, Bodhi tree. Three giants, massive, chock-full of rage and passion. *Kashgar*. An inexplicable place, situated in nowhere, surrounded by these great unbridled mountains, yet its name rings of a barren splendour, so thinks this little boy with a lute arriving from Tian Shan. There is a quick look in his eyes, one that feels out of place with those merciless peaks behind him. The wind surges into his chest. Bustling city. Chaotic bazaars, chaotic blacksmiths, chaotic mud-brick houses, bursting with sounds of the vibrant *dutar* and roast lamb. His fingers grow restless on his *pipa*. It's the only thing that grounds him, that makes him breathe. The only thing that reminds of home.

Convergence. Sideways to him is a merchant, hailing from the Pamir Routes, who is the embodiment of the "Silk Road": silky robes, silky hair and a face that screams of slick silk. Gold coins he holds in his waxy fingers, like a prayer to the god of economic opportunity. "Young lad." He grins, showing off golden teeth. "Has the Road been good to you?" And without expecting an answer, he continues. "Peer over. What do you see? Saddledcloths. Cashmere and shahtoosh. Spices and silk. Anything that catches your attention?" The boy, thrown so suddenly into a world of urgency and garishness and desire, is speechless.

Then, syzygy. One more steps in, like a wave of pressing calmness. "Let's not say whether the Road has been good to you, but whether you have dissolved into the road." A monk, a pilgrim, a poet, who has travelled over quiet foothills of the Kunlun range. "*Letting go, letting go: I am air, a primal river, a passing cloud. My soul is whatever under the Bodhi shade; the wind carries my footsteps and I make no sound.*" He invites the boy to speak with his silence. "Young boy, why has the wind brought you here?"

The boy staggers with his speech. "I don't, I don't know, I haven't found a reason for everything... But I am searching for home. This is *pipa*, my only companion. I have carried it across the Silk Road, looking for people who play the same music as mine. See, I was abandoned as a child, picked up by a clergyman, and brought West to the lands of Christendom, to the peninsula of Italia through this very Road, but a *pipa* stayed with me. Now Father, the clergyman who raised me, has passed, and with my *pipa* I search for where I can belong. Across arduous junctions of the Road I have wondered at the largeness of this world, of how settlement seems impossible. But I try, and in the meantime, I long to share music with people."

The merchant, in response, lets out a hearty chuckle with his lips as tight as seam. "Home? An abstract concept, like religion. Humans shan't dwell on abstract things. Unlike trade. Now, trade is what I connect with. The act of giving and receiving (the latter being the important part), desire, and accumulation— that's what I hope for. The conditions for my salesmanship are simple: never stay in one place. I go and I go, but my universe is based solely on objects of my trade. I own livestock. I own porcelain. I own myrrh. I own jade. Nothing is beautiful until it is seized with your own hands. It is never enough, but more and more is what I need. Family? Community? These are options forgone, and willingly forgone, when all the world's silk is draped over my shoulders."

"Tell me, what is peace to you?" The monk asks, in a voice issued deep below the chest. "Wait until I finish counting the coins won from kings during my travels, and then I will live in peace? Wait until I reach my motherland, and from there peace will come? You do not find peace by hope; peace is solely in the present moment. Every day I ask merchants and pilgrims, diplomats and nomads: why are they on the road, making their travels? For wealth, for the nation, for the sake of being on this road? Never anchor yourself on the transient. Free yourself from these shackles, by first setting free your soul and body, and disappear, because in the end, we will all move in the same direction, pushed by the current of the Road."

The boy, moved by instinct, begins playing without the need for pay. *I am not willing to be owned, yet I am not willing to disappear into the wind, either.* It is just a simple Uzbek folk tune he learnt from the peoples of Samarkand, but each note is blissfully crisp, undampened by excessive vibrato, the high-pitched register sounding as if searching for an unknown something, and finding calm in the searching itself. “You should have brought a hat to collect a few copper coins,” mutters the merchant. The boy is oblivious. The monk’s gaze is both serene and piercing.

The boy moves along. Today he has understood the connotations: of coincidence, of journeying, of music, of home. Mountains continue to stand, those everlasting stoics. Rivers still open to the sea. They come and go, they come and go... But if there is music, what else does one need? The boy plucks an age-long blessing, melancholy, but grateful; wordless, but so full:

May the wind be always at your back, and deep, deep peace to you.

My Legacy

St. Paul's Co-educational College, Man Hei Hayden, Fu – 13

Most people call me the “Silk Road”, but I’m actually more like a Silk Web – and yes, I can talk – since I’m more like a network of routes. I govern my territory – the ancient Silk Road. I’ve been around for thousands of years. However, I’ve always struggled with my naming. Indeed, who named me, a German geographer and traveller named von Richthofen? It makes me sound like a mere trade route! He thought I was a mere thread, but I’m an entire loom.

I’ve witnessed numerous great civilizations flourish and decline, from the Han dynasty of China to the Mongol Empire led by Genghis Khan. I’ve watched as two different kingdoms merged and evolved together, learning from each other to unlock the best versions of themselves. I’ve listened as tens of thousands of ideas were tossed around by weary travellers in caravanserais along my path, giving birth to endless ground-breaking inventions.

I’ve carved myself a legacy through connecting empires and facilitating trade activities. Forget the generic tale of some intrepid Chinese businessmen determined to sell silk. The truth is far stranger: I was the product of a celestial mishap. Join me as I recount stories of my origin, traders, empires, and my enduring legacy.

Let me tell you something the history books don’t know.

My true beginning lay not in mortal ambition, but in the heavens. Everyone knows the story of the Milky Way’s creation – Hercules bit Hera whilst she was breastfeeding him, gaining superhuman strength. Well, after that incident, Zeus, the king of the gods, wanted to prevent any more similar incidents.

“Wife!” He cried one day in the dining hall. “Yes, honey?” Hera stalked towards the throne, moving with a pained caution. Zeus winced. He knew this would be awkward. “Well, you know what happened with Hercules. We’ve decided% ”Athena gave him the hairy eyeball. Zeus sucked his teeth. “I decided that those types of incidents can’t happen again. We need to do something about it!” He closed his eyes, bracing for the inevitable berating from Hera.

Hera simpered. “I know. But what can we do about it?” Secretly, she was relieved. Her street cred had evaporated since the incident, and she didn’t want to risk any further damage.

Zeus smiled, relieved. “Well?” Hera continued. Zeus remained silent. Hera felt a profound chill down her spine.

That night, Zeus and Hephaestus snuck into Hera’s quarters with a needle and an empty jug. The specifics of what happened in Hera’s room that night are best left to the imagination, but by morning, the surgery was complete. The contents splayed out over the lands of Eurasia. Where the celestial milk touched the earth, paths of shimmering stardust began to glow, mapping out my future routes. I, the Silk Web, was born, waiting for mortals to discover my glow.

And it didn’t take them too long, thankfully.

The first travellers who set foot on me were Han envoy Zhang Qian with his Xiongnu guide Ganfu. They braved sandstorms, rabid beasts, and hostile tribes just to establish ties with a foreign land! I was duly impressed by their willpower, so I decided to help by blessing them with clear skies on their return journey. After they arrived home in China, they reported the sophisticated civilisations in the West to their Emperor, and not long after, I thrummed with the excited footsteps of traders determined to develop in massive, unexplored markets.

Despite the formidable mountains and the barren deserts in their way, they persisted. Few travelled the whole way to Europe, often stopping or giving up along the route. To provide for those traders, inns flourished to capitalize on the housing of travelling merchants. At its peak, the inns were surrounded by seas of caravans and camels, and average traffic on the roads was at a snail’s pace. The caravans choked the sandy trails, and bandits would no longer infest the roads due to fear of getting lynched by an angry crowd.

As more and more merchants poured onto my turf, so too did the number of goods that were traded between Asia and Europe go up. My namesake, silk, was a popular product from China as it was light, and in return, horses of the highest calibre were imported from Iran. I suppose the quick horses let the humans speed back to their towns. In short, business was booming.

“Excuse me! Sorry!” The trader weaved his way through the endless sea of people milling about in the caravanseraï, reaching the concierge at last. “Is there a room available tonight?” The clerk scurried off to fetch the ledger, and the trader tapped his foot and gazed upwards, crossing his arms. He could barely make out the thatch roof above him, what with the sole origin of the “ambience” in the inn being a lonely hanging lantern. He sighed. Dusk was drawing near, and he still had a day’s worth of camel riding in front of him to reach Istanbul. “No rooms.” The clerk shrugged. “Next inn’s five miles north—or ride through the night.” The trader eyed his porcelain crates, calculating rubies against bandits. He chose the night. He rode on, the inky darkness engulfing him.

He never reached Istanbul – the fleas, bearing darkness darker than the night, were already waiting.

Countless travellers were downed by the fleas just like the trader. Then the Mongols splintered and Byzantium started slapping tolls like wet rags. This effectively deterred aspiring traders from travelling through me, which I should have been happy about. But if I were completely honest, I kind of missed the hustle and bustle in my territory...

Yet, my story extends beyond ancient eras. At the moment, I’m just a mere tourist spot. I’m no longer a unified web of routes, and bandits infest my decrepit paths. The most exciting event that happens to me every year is the yarn festival in Kyrgyzstan.

Even though physically I’m not a Silk Web any longer, my spirit still lives on. China’s Belt and Road initiative, my ghost in steel and concrete, stitches 150 countries into one unified purpose – boost economic development for all.

The engineer bit his pencil, drumming his fingers on the rail blueprint spanning the wooden tables in front of him. He had always preferred working on hard copies and watch as the pen pranced around the paper, leaving intricate diagrams in its wake. As a proud Chinese, inheritor of a legacy built through connection, he hoped his calculations were accurate and the railway didn’t collapse after 1 week. That way, it could keep connecting people.

Little did he know, it wouldn’t collapse for 10 years. It still stands as part of the extensive rail network of the Belt and Road.

As I lay in tatters, sprawling across the silky sands and mountainous mesas, I smile to myself. Zeus materializes out of the sky, his hand outstretched, which I take.

We soar into the starry skies, and although I’m now in the heavens, my spirit...

...lives on...

The Road of the Compass

St. Paul's Co-educational College, Sze Nga, Wong – 13

The Silk Road stretched like a dragon's spine in the faraway mist. The bells of the camels chimed softly as Jian walked beside his father's caravan.

He fidgeted with a specially-carved compass in his robe. Its needle, peculiarly, never pointed north. Instead it always seemed to quiver, as if it were alive.

His grandmother had slipped it into his hands last month on his 15th birthday when the leader of the Trading Tribes of the Silk Road wasn't looking. She whispered, 'This compass doesn't find places or things, it finds what you truly need.'

Jian had laughed back then, daydreaming about all the impossible wealth he could gain by following the compass. But it was just a compass. A wonky one, that is.

At night

Jian couldn't sleep. He tossed and turned on the animal-skin-made mattress. He tried to sleep on his left side, but to no avail. His lips flattened to a straight line and he gave up. He sat up and leaned on the yurt wall. His fingers reached into his robe again. But they didn't make contact with anything except the rough cloth.

Jian immediately straightened up, willing himself to stand up, bearing the nail-biting cold air.

Reaching down for one of the animal skins, he put it over himself as a cloak and headed outside. *All this for a stupid compass*, he thought.

But something in his gut told him it was important. Besides, he didn't want to sit in the dark in boredom until sunrise anyway.

A dark shape was huddled over the campfire.

'Hello, Jian, I knew you'd come here.' Jian's grandmother, the Great Weaver, rasped without turning. Jian didn't dare to question how she knew it was him. Weavers had that kind of power.

Grandma limped over to Jian, grasping his hands in her tiny, frail ones, 'My dear grandson, tomorrow something dreadful is going to happen. You have to leave with the compass. Trust it. And don't look back.' There was something serious in her tone, and Jian couldn't shake the feeling that something was going to go very wrong as she handed him back his compass, wiping the snow off it. w

The next morning

Jian stepped out of his tent, rubbing his eyes. He was up quite early. Falling in heavy silence, snow blanketed the camp in white.

Jian exhaled and his breath unfurled into the frozen air, a fleeting wisp of silver mist. The world looked hushed.

Then he saw it.

His father, the tribe leader, lay collapsed in the snow, crimson spreading across the white snow like spilled dye.

Beside him stood his father's deputy, his closest friend.

He didn't see Jian, not yet anyway.

Jian could feel his heart clenching. He could almost feel the cold blade of the dagger pierce into his own chest.

He gathered his senses and managed to duck behind a tent before the deputy could see him.

Grief struck him like a stone to a frozen-over lake.

He felt hopeless, as though someone had drained all the power out of him. His father's warm smile flashed in his mind.

Suddenly, the compass in his robe tugged, jolting him back to reality.

He reached in. The needle was spinning wildly. Then, it stopped and locked in a direction beyond the camp. Jian's grandmother's words echoed, 'Trust it. And don't look back.'

He peeked at the deputy.

Shouts of fear had begun to rise in the camp.

The deputy had his face buried in his hands, and the tribesmen were comforting him.

That two-faced snake.

He managed to slip back in his tent without drawing any attention. He grabbed his satchel, filled it with food and grabbed a few more animal skins. He took a look at his father's now vacant mattress. He was never going to sleep in it again.

The thought made him almost break down again, but he shook his head to clear his thoughts and snuck out.

The compass kept tugging. He trudged through the snow for what seemed like hours. Even the sun seemed to disappear into the clouds.

He had never felt so alone. Perhaps this was what snowmen felt, isolated and left in the cold.

A low whine sounded really close. He whirled around, bracing himself for a wolf attack or something worse.

A skinny dog padded at his heels, its fur snowy—white. It looked starving.

Jian tried to chase it away, hoping it would find someplace better. He barely had the strength to keep himself alive.

But the stubborn dog refused to leave. He sighed. He settled down in the snow, setting his satchel down. His hands were numb from the cold, even though he was used to it. He scratched the dog's belly. It whined.

Jian gave in, 'Fine! Just don't expect me to carry you.'

He threw one of the sandwiches he had in his satchel to the dog. It inhaled it in less than three bites.

The dog tilted its head, tongue lolling out, then padded a few steps ahead. The compass needle jerked in the same direction. Jian blinked.

The dog gave a soft bark.

'Alright, then,' Jian murmured, pushing himself up from the snow. His legs ached, but the dog's expectant gaze was like a small, warm ember in the cold.

He smiled, 'Lead on.'

He decided on naming the dog White. Something simple yet elegant.

White moved with a quiet purpose, his paws leaving paw prints in nature's white carpet. His ears stood erect and alert.

The landscape was a monochrome dream. Leafless trees stood straight like sentinels, and the mountains in the distance were soft, grey smudges against a lighter grey sky.

The only sounds were the crunching of snow, the panting of the dog, and the howl of the wind.

As they walked, questions, sharp and cold, prickled at him. Why had the deputy done it? Was it just for power?

White suddenly stopped, ears pricked. Jian froze. Ahead, the path dipped into a shallow gorge, and at the bottom, partially hidden by a drift, was the dark mouth of a cave.

The compass needle gave a sudden, violent spin and then pointed directly into the blackness.

The dog looked back at him, then trotted down the slope without hesitation, disappearing into the shadow.

'A cave,' Jian whispered.

Inside, the wind ceased, replaced by a deep, earthy silence. A faint glow came from lichen on the walls, painting everything in eerie shades of blue. It was really warm.

White circled a spot on the sandy floor before lying down with a content sigh.

They were in the sacred Silk Road Cave.

He built a small fire. As the flames grew, their light fought with the cave's blue glow. White edged closer, resting its head on Jian's knee. He shared another sandwich. He looked into White's trusting brown eyes.

"What am I even looking for?" he asked no one in particular. He looked at his compass. Its needle didn't waver, pointing deeper into the cave.

Exhaustion finally pulled him under. He slept, his dreams a storm of snow and blood and camels, and a loyal white dog who refused to leave his side.

He woke up to a wet tongue and slobber. The compass was tugging again, toward a narrow tunnel.

He packed his things. The tunnel was tight, and he had to crawl, White squeezing through ahead. It opened into another, smaller chamber.

Jian's heart slammed against his ribs. But it was ancient, bones clean and white. Clutched in its fingers was a long, curved sword of a style Jian had never seen, its blade still gleaming. Across its chest lay a roll of parchment.

With trembling hands, Jian took the scroll. It was a map, but not of mountains and rivers. It was a map of names, tribes, and trade routes across the Silk Road.

A thick, dark line was drawn from his own tribe to a powerful warlord to the west.

Waldrick Phillips, the Warlock of the Western. And beside that, marked as an ally: **Clayton Quill, deputy of the Trading Tribes of the Silk Road.**

He looked at the sword. He looked at White, who sat quietly by the tunnel, watching him. He looked at the compass in his palm, its needle now lifeless.

His grandmother was right. The compass didn't lead him to treasure or safety. It had led him to the truth. Something that would give him strength.

He gently took the sword. It was lighter than he expected. He re-rolled the map and secured it in his satchel. He gave the ancient traveller a final, respectful nod.

'Come on,' he said to White, his voice firmer than it had been since yesterday morning. 'We have lots more to do.'

White stood, tail giving a single, happy wag. He jumped up and licked his master, elated that they were off on another adventure.

The road ahead was his to walk. Ah. And his dog.

The Phantom

St. Paul's Co-educational College, Tse Kiu Yukimi, Sinn - 13

Detective Lin undone the top she was wearing as she checked the last case file held in her arms— something inexpressible wrong had disturbed the tranquillity of her city. A high-profile silk trader had been savagely killed, and the scene of the crime was covered with the signature of a mysterious murderer called The Phantom.

Lin was a veteran detective who had a sixth sense when it came to solving crimes and as such, she has made it her mission to ensure that she gets The Phantom to justice. Weeks were spent turning into months of restless nights, tracing up leads that led nowhere. At last, a ray of hope was visible: the talk of some trade road—some other phase of the Silk Road—which might possibly bring her to the very centre of the criminal activities of this individual.

Lin was determined to go and so he left the comforts of Changan behind him. She had to drive through caravan, passing mountains and valleys and finally her dark hair tied back she reached the vast steppes of Kazakhstan.

The scenery was infinite—a huge canvas tipped by wildflowers and the vastness of that scenery reverberated with the murmurs of old spirits. Here, in the waving hills, she found Aydin, a rogue of a lad, with straggling black hair and wondering green eyes, half the time mysterious. He had a small market stall where he sold handcrafted trinkets, and every one of them was made with love.

He attracted Lin, the gay laughter that came out of his lips like music in her ears. The tales of life Aydin told her about when she was under the big Kazakhstan sky were a relief that she did not even have to think of her serious work, and she got more involved in a relationship that she had not anticipated. The weeks turned into days and every sunset, Lin experienced herself slipping down, giving herself up to the closeness of a growing romance that seemed like magic and taboo at the same time.

As they got closer to each other, Lin experienced the tug of her obligation clinging to her heart. She gave little pieces of her life as a detective, the smile waning each time she talked of The Phantom. Aydin was listening, and his looks changed to show interest then became more serious, more compound. He had put on the mask of innocence which his charisma had disguised in an atmosphere of mystery about which she could not find a place.

One night, walking under the sky, covered with sparkling stars, Lin found the need to speak about her inspirations again. I am pursuing a ghost, Aydin, she said to herself. The Phantom is indefinite, yet I will discover him. For justice."

He laughed no more and there was a sad silence in its place, which was sharp like a pin-point. Something we are searching, sometimes the ghosts we pursue are nearer than we imagine, he said, his eyes lost, as though they were searching.

Days changed to month, the happiness of love mingling with the burden of the search of Lin. But large were the shadows; mutters in the market place of a thief who was allied to The Phantom—a boy, only a little older than Aydin. Lin had a racing heart with mixed feelings: the duality of her love and her duty tore her.

On a single ill-omened day, when the sun was soaring up in the sky, Lin received a tip, a lead at last that was going to bring The Phantom out of disguise. Now time to get up her heart. She went to the informer, a native who talked low and each word was a dagger to her breast.

Lin gave a sharp intake of breath and said, Aydin. Something dreadful I have learned. The Phantom is linked with a boy. I have to investigate." Aydin was flashing a concern in his eyes, but did nothing to lose his composure. Do that which you feel is right, he said sweetly, concealing whatever he was feeling just underneath.

Lin was also driven by determination, and he undertook to collect more evidence. Days flew by as she linked bits of information, and one lead went to the boy who owned her heart. She could not take the reality, and there was a bitter flavor in her mouth.

On a stormy night, the inquiry of Lin came to a very important point. She was in a dismal warehouse on the outskirts of Almaty, and the air was full of the scent of rain and danger. Shadows were playing with the walls masking lost figures in the darkness. Her heart raced and she entered and was prepared to face the truth.

However, there was nothing that could prepare her to see what she saw. and there, in the midst of stolen artifacts, was Aydin, and around it the men, in cloaks of shadows, and their plans obvious. It was an electric shock to her, a thunderclap: Aydin, was The Phantom, the person she had been pursuing.

"Aydin!" cried, cried, cried, she screamed. "Why? Why would you do this?"

He turned, half relieved, undecided. "Lin, I... I had no choice. The world isn't what it seems. I wished to run away, to take care of my family....

The rain which had just commenced outside, mixed with tears, and soaked the ground, as the feeling of love and betrayal, of trust and deceit, mingled between them.

Lin thought she could break her heart, but duty called her back. She sighed and withdrew her badge, the insignia of her power. "You're under arrest, Aydin." The boy, whom she fell in love with, the boy who had made her life colorful, now stood before her a criminal. When she put the handcuffs on his wrists she wept, a tearful parting was heard in the warehouse silence.

I did not want it to be this way, I said to myself, Lin said, It was too heavy. Senior officers had warned her to go back to China as soon as she can the shadows of duty overshadowing her previously clear road.

Yet at the back of her mind, Lin was aware that she could not continue to live in the world of law enforcers. The inquiry was a heavy burden to her heart, and the affection in which she had drawn her near to Aydin was a light put out too soon.

Days melted into weeks, Lin chose another way—the way when stories put the life into her anguish. She has made her home in Kazakhstan where the steppes are flat as an infinite sky, and has told her stories with strands of love, loss, and redemption. Her life was changed, so the detective was also a narrator who wrote the stories of their lives which connected on the Silk Road.

When the final light of day had eased behind the horizon, Lin looked out of her window with an inexpressible smile on her lips. The travel had taken her out of the shadows of her past and into another story. She was prepared to dive into the unknown whatever it would be, putting her heart in every word she was to write in it, and she recalled the boy who transformed all that.

Last Caravan to Constantinople

St. Paul's College, Ka Wang, Luk – 15

Spring in Yumen proclaimed itself not with life, but with dust — fine, ochre granules of sand in the air, curling through the alleys like forgotten breath. The city, once the gate of the world's most prosperous trade artery, now exhaled an air of indifference and insignificance. Only beneath the slanted shadows of tea houses and crumbling stone arches, did the name of the Silk Road come to life, where elders spoke about caravans that once lined the

desert. Yumen's youth had no reverence nor liking for the diminished route, and exoduses of the new generation to the South, to the coast were increasingly popular.

Jin, unlike his friends and peers, could not entertain the fact of moving away from Yumen, to his mind, the gate between the Great Ming and the open plains of Middle Asia. Though, recently, warnings had begun whispering through the market, with officials privately considering sealing off the western passage beyond Yumen by the weekend. Even the spice merchant mentioned a likely possibility that the Silk Road itself will be no more by May. Hesitating no more, Jin picked up his long-ready satchel, filled with scrolls, maps, supplies, and prepared for adventure, headed down to the caravan yard at dawn, telling no one except his childhood friend — Rohan. Where once processions of camels and traders assembled, now only a single carriage remained. The camels were lean, their bells rusted, their driver sun-worn and wary. Jin joined without ceremony, slipping in between a grizzled Persian apothecary, who smelled of cloves and ink, an Ottoman imam, and a woman cloaked in indigo, carrying in her arm bundles of manuscripts.

No one asked for any names, no identification was needed, not much with regards to protocol and procedure. The grim-faced mandarin had made it clear that this was to be the last wagon departing for Constantinople until further notice. The horses was stirring, its wheels creaking forward, before a shout pierced the air in the yard. "Jin!" A

half-Parsi, half-Armenian figure rushed forward, a rucksack slung across his shoulder, hopping onto the back of the cart. The driver howled slightly at the unexpected passenger but gave a small grunt after receiving the payment. As Rohan steadied himself on his seat, the sun broke over the western hills, casting long shadows for the last time over the Byzantium Caravan.

Behind them, the steel gate guardians of the city groaned, closing with an intangible sorrow, as though the city itself was overcome with nostalgia. A decade or two ago when Jin was small and the Emperor was just crowned, the road leaving Yumen had bloomed with life — waystations every twenty miles, temporary settlements where languages intersected, trading posts filled with merchants and the thick scent of spice in the air. Jin's father used to say the

desert beyond the gate was like a giant incense censer, steeped in saffron and myrrh, and tinged with the sweetness of crushed petals.

Now, the road was hollow. The caravan had gone on more than a day since they departed, yet not a signpost was in sight. Ruins, collapsed arches, lost banners fluttering weakly in the breeze, the Silk Road was clearly no more. When Jin finally mustered up the courage to ask the driver how he managed to direct the horses, without any road or directions, the driver scowled, "Memory and experience, kid. One last time anyways.". The Silk Road had not died in war or fire. It had faded, like ink left too long in the sun.

That night, they made camp in the lee of a low ridge, where the wind softened and the stars emerged like old guides of the road. A small bonfire crackled gently in a ring of stones, its smoke extending a warm embrace to the

passengers huddled around it. They had pressed on past the ruins for five more hours before settling and making camp. Silence strangled the air between them, an odd, eerie silence that predated their arrival, and promised to linger long after they were gone. Unwrapping a pouch of dried figs, the Persian apothecary whistled a soft tune, mixing with the rhythm of the imam's prayers. The driver, spent from the day's labour, was fast asleep, curled beside the wheel.

With a young lamb slung over his shoulders, Rohan returned from the shadows, and grinned, "It wandered too close." The mysterious, indigo-cloaked woman lifted an eyebrow, and offered to help roast the meat. As the scent of roast lamb swirled through the air, the bonfire became a circle of warmth, in a curving, ancient road growing colder and colder. By morning, the fire was dark ash and the lamb a pleasant memory. Breaking camp without speech, they had ventured onwards just beyond a half-buried milestone etched in a forgotten tongue, before the driver spotted a lone rider, motionless atop an exotic dark horse, silhouetted against the morning sky. The Ottoman imam quietly pointed at the faded sigil of Byzantium — a double-headed eagle — bored on the rider's cloak.

The horses whinnied at one another, as their riders drove to a halt, reining them in. The rider did not raise a weapon, only a scroll. Naturally curious, Jin hopped down, hoping to study the rider. His face was drawn, sunburnt, his eyes hollow with distance. "I ride for the Ming court, and mean you no harm," he stated solemnly, voice cracked from thirst. "Constantinople will not hold. The advance has begun."

The woman in indigo stepped forward, her robes catching the wind like ink spilled across parchment. "I return to my home, a place ravaged by war," she murmured, "Is the Emperor still alive?"

The rider nodded grimly as his horse paced slowly around in circles, "Yes, and bless his soul." He handed the Byzantine woman the parchment, did not wait for a reply, and instead, spurred his horse, vanishing into the east, the last diplomat to make the visit. The courier's dust had not yet settled when the wheels resumed their crawl. The woman in indigo rode beside the driver, her gaze fixed on the horizon. She had not opened the scroll to see the message. She didn't need to, there was enough sorrow in her and in the caravan.

One late afternoon, a few weeks after they had gone past the envoy, the desert's harsh sunlight turned milder. A flock of birds wheeled overhead, before disappearing. The wind carried the scent of battle and manure. The hills fell away, and the land opened like a page. In the distance, Constantinople emerged—not in glory, but in shame. Its walls slumped like tired shoulders, broken from the Turks' siege. The dome of Hagia Sophia shimmered faintly, as if the Holy Spirit had departed.

Jin stopped, stunned at the sight. The others gathered behind him and their cart. The woman in royal indigo

dismounted. She reached into her satchel and withdrew the single manuscript from the envoy, wrapped in silk. "Give this to the library," she said to Jin and Rohan. "If it still stands."

Jin took it. Her fingers lingered on the edge of the scroll, then let go.

They moved again, slower now, entering the still guarded gates of Constantinople, where ashen-faced scarred men stood with courage and valour. The Byzantium Empire, the once glorious eastern remnant of the ancient Roman

Empire, had fallen far from its former self, reduced to a few territories. At Constantinople's centre, stood a damaged complex grandly named the Imperial Library of Constantinople, renowned as the last standing Great Library of the world.

His fellow travellers wished him luck with his task, having grown closer with one another through the journey, yet still shaken by the road's emptiness. Even the Ottoman imam prayed for the safety of the Byzantines and of the two Yumen adventurers. Hurriedly rushing up the few wooden steps left unharmed, Jin forged through the throngs of

worried scholars and anxious academics, and reached the chief librarian's desk. The librarian, an old man of Chinese descent with eyes like worn jade, unrolled the manuscript with trembling hands, gasped with utter shock, muttering, "So it is true, the Ottomans will close the Silk Road upon completing their siege." He continued reading, eyeing Rohan occasionally, before coming to a conclusion, "The scroll you have given me, young one, will keep the memory of the Silk Road safe. You have done well, but I'm afraid our generation will not witness the good you have done."

Outside, arrows of fire began cruising the sky, lighting up the smoky air. Horns of distant cavalry sounded one after another, announcing the final breath of Constantinople. The chief librarian was entrusted to safekeep the scroll, before he rushed the pair away to the stables, with urgency and blessing.

The road had ended for Jin, for the apothecary and for the travellers. But perhaps, it had only just begun for travellers who would face the same horizon, centuries apart.

Father of the Silk Road — Zhang Qian

St. Paul's Convent School, Sze Ki Scarlett, Chan – 12

With a heart filled with courage and hope for the future, Zhang Qian could taste the sweet flavour of freedom, escaping the past 13 years of captivity by the Xiongnu. Beads of perspiration trickled down his forehead, and he felt the adrenaline coursing through his veins as he galloped on horseback, with his Xiongnu wife and his faithful servant Ganfu by his side. Together, they were three determined souls racing towards the Ferghana Valley, a land laden with promise. Zhang Qian had never forgotten his duty to Emperor Wu to forge a military alliance against the Xiongnu and to uncover more about the civilisations that had not been previously traversed by the Han people, as he carried a fervent wish to return to his land and share his learnings with Emperor Wu as soon as possible.

After weeks of travelling through the treacherous terrains, they finally arrived at the Ferghana Valley. The first sight of the valley took his breath away. Rolling hills adorned with wildflowers welcomed him, and the sweet aroma of ripening grapes greeted him as they descended into lush plains. Golden fields stretched as far as their eyes could see, patches of green suggestive of the rich agricultural prowess of the land.

“Look!” Ganfu pointed ahead, excitement in his voice, “the market!”

As they rode into the town, the sound of lively chatter in an unfamiliar language enveloped them. Merchants were shouting enticingly, their voices slicing through the air like arrows. Zhang Qian could see groups of people negotiating, their hands animatedly gesturing to the products and goods displayed on the colourful fabrics spread out in the market.

“Greetings, traveller,” called out a delightful merchant, eyes bright with eager curiosity, “What brings you from afar?”

Puzzled by the Iranian the merchant was speaking, Zhang Qian was about to leave when suddenly a man appeared out of nowhere and explained that he was also from Chang’an, and translated everything the merchant said to him.

“I seek to learn of your lands.” Zhang Qian replied, his voice steady despite the whirlwind of thoughts in his mind. “What do you trade here?”

The conversation continued, as the man, now Zhang Qian’s interpreter, translated each others' sentences for both of them.

“Ah! The Ferghana horses!” The merchant declares, pride infusing in his tone. “We breed the legendary ‘Heavenly horses’, famed for their strength and speed. Come, let me show you!”

Zhang Qian followed the merchant, his curiosity piqued. The horses were magnificent, muscular and majestic, with deep chests and powerful legs, and their tails swiftly brushing the ground. They were unlike anything he had ever seen back home. He approached one, its coat shimmering in the sunlight. “These creatures are incredible!” He exclaimed, reaching out to touch its long mane.

A wide grin spread across the merchant's face. As he gestured Zhang Qian to follow him to look at more goods, he proudly said, “The heavenly horses are not the only treasure we hold. We also grow grapes, make wine and cultivate alfalfa, all due to the fertile soil here.”

Zhang Qian inhaled deeply for one last time, the aroma of grapes mixing with wood smoke from stalls, as he knew it was time to leave Ferghana Valley to move on to the next step of his mission. “Thank you for all this knowledge, but I have to go now.” Zhang Qian announced, gesturing his companions to go with him.

“Wait,” the merchant suddenly said as Zhang Qian was about to leave, “we have something to gift to you.” He handed Zhang Qian and his companions some grapes, walnuts and pomegranates, and most importantly, three ‘heavenly horses’. “And at least let us offer you a place to stay for the night, it’s getting dark now, not a very good time to travel, is it?”

Zhang Qian tried to refuse, but the merchant insisted that they accept all the gifts and stay for the night. Zhang Qian’s heart was filled with gratitude that night, as he reflected on the friendships he had formed with the merchants he had met, and how they welcomed him into their land with open hearts.

After gathering information and forging ties and friendships with the local merchants, Zhang moved onwards towards Bactria. The arduous journey was complimented by the picturesque, ever-changing landscapes, leaving Zhang Qian and his companions astounded and in awe. As he crossed into Bactria, the ant-like towns on the horizon gradually grew larger, as he gained more distance and was able to observe the intricate architectural details of the towns from up close.

Here, Zhang Qian noticed that the locals engaged in lively trade, their markets bustling with goods from across the world. Walking through the market, he was struck by an unusual sight. There were a variety of exquisite Chinese goods, such as bamboo canes, jade and textiles like wool and linen. He had the sudden urge to experience the delicate texture of the silk as he reached out his hand to touch it, a merchant suddenly approached him.

“Where do these come from?” Zhang asked, pointing to the vibrant silk cloths in front of him.

“Ah! You’re from Chang’an.” He gestured a man to come over. “He speaks your language. He will translate for you.”

The man translated their words to each other. He told the merchant, “He wants to know where our valuable silk comes from.”

The merchant’s eyes danced with pride. “They’re from a faraway land. We traded with other countries.”

After the man translated, Zhang Qian nodded and smiled as a gesture of thanking the merchant and walked away to learn more about Bactria. Through his scattered conversations with different inhabitants of Bactria, Zhang learned that Bactria lacked a single great ruler and instead had small chiefs governing each city. He also noticed that the population was enormous, but they were not militarily strong as it had been conquered by Yuezhi. Zhang noted down all his observations meticulously with a view to sharing them with the emperor, as his journey home was nearing.

He showed his gratitude to the merchants and everyone that had helped him here in Bactria, closed his eyes and took one last deep breath. The word ‘home’ repeatedly echoed in his mind, as he had been longing to return to his country for more than a decade now. He nodded to his companions who had been faithful to him through his whole mission, and they finally set off to the last part – home.

The air was thick with anticipation as the three, on horseback galloped back to Zhang Qian’s home. After weeks of travel, they finally reached Chang’an, feeling the weight of not only their journey but the knowledge they carried. As Zhang Qian entered the city, he felt a surge of pride, as he had faced numerous setbacks, gained a vast amount of knowledge and forged connections with other cities that would benefit his city in the future. He yearned to fulfil his

duty to the emperor and to contribute to the land that had given him so much. Tears gathered in his eyes, but he refused to let them fall at such a special moment in time.

Before the emperor, he recounted tales of the distant lands he explored, sharing the unique goods in Bactria, the agricultural innovations of Ferghana Valley and all the other cities he had visited. Although his mission to form an alliance failed, he had opened gates to the West and gained a lot of knowledge from other cities.

Zhang Qian's heart swelled with contentment and reverence, as he received the emperor's sincere words of praise for his courage, wit and fortitude. With the information Zhang had imparted, the emperor had high ambitions for the Han people and for strengthening relationships with the West. To reward Zhang Qian, the emperor not only gifted Zhang Qian an honourable title, but also appointed him to a high-ranking position.

Zhang Qian's journey ignited trades between the East and West through the detailed reports he brought back, giving legendary rise to the Silk Road. His encounters with various cultures, lifestyles and customs left an incredible mark in history. Zhang Qian was more than a traveller— he became the 'Father of the Silk Road', forming a legacy of cultural and economic exchange that would thrive for centuries to come.

The Road of Stones and Stars

St. Paul's Secondary School, Oi Lam, Tang – 14

Four years ago, mid-summer, my mom suddenly decided she wanted to visit Xinjiang, the starting point of the Silk Road. I was less than thrilled; my knowledge of the Silk Road was limited to what I'd read in textbooks. The thought of the trip didn't excite me, but off we went.

Upon arriving at the airport, I noticed how nearly empty the place seemed. We took a nearly two-hour bus ride through endless grasslands, occasionally spotting a camel. By the time we reached the hotel after midnight, I was exhausted, knowing we had to wake at five the next morning to visit a site that had once been a significant part of the Silk Road. We stumbled into our hotel room and collapsed.

"Wake up, wake up!" a gravelly yet airy voice yelled in my ear. I jolted up, panicking that I had overslept.

To my shock, a massive stallion towered over me.

I froze, stuttering, "What is happening?"

Confused, I scanned my surroundings and realised I was in the middle of a desert, utterly alone.

The sand was a fiery red, with a few trees scattered about, and in front of me stood the majestic Turpan Flaming Mountains, glowing under the sun.

I couldn't believe I had just woken up in a desert with a talking horse. "What is going on?"

I asked as the stallion approached me. His golden coat shimmered like a setting sun, and his intelligent eyes sparkled with wisdom. This wasn't an ordinary horse; he was an Akhal Teke from Turkmenistan, celebrated for its agility, speed, and extraordinary colour, highly sought after by emperors. I was in awe.

"Aksoltan, the guardian of the Kyzyl Tas," he introduced himself. "In ancient Xinjiang, the Silk Road wound through towering mountains and vast deserts, leading to a monument known as the Kyzyl Tas. It was more than a rock; it was a sacred place where travellers paused to reflect and forge connections. Over time, as newer generations sought modernity, the importance of the stone faded.

"But you are destined to find the Kyzyl Tas. Your journey is not mere coincidence; it's called by the essence of the stone itself." Just as Aksoltan finished speaking, a radiant light appeared in the distance.

"That is the Kyzyl Tas calling, all the way in Egypt. We must follow the light. Are you willing to embark on this journey with me?"

I nodded, and Aksoltan bent down for me to mount. Slowly, we began to follow the light across the desolate desert. Being in the desert was challenging. Sandstorms whipped around us, and my eyes watered from the grit. As we travelled, I passed remnants of ancient cities made from stone. "That used to be a bank," Aksoltan pointed out, highlighting how developed the Silk Road once was. As the sun set, the sky transformed from vibrant blue to shades of pink, orange, and deep sapphire.

Exhausted from our journey, Aksoltan urged me to look up. Countless stars illuminated the sky, a breathtaking sight for someone like me, who had always lived in the city. I felt the weight of time dissolve, my worries fading under the cosmos.

After what felt like an eternity, we began to see hints of green amid the sands. My eyes widened at the sight of trees ahead and an inviting entrance. As I entered, lush rainforests filled with vibrant flowers welcomed me. The air was rich with sounds—howls and chirps surrounded us. “We are in India,” Aksoltan announced. “India was a key exporter along the Silk Road, trading silk, spices, textiles, and gemstones. Its cities, like Mathura and ports, became vibrant melting pots of culture and ideas, particularly Buddhism.”

Emerging from the forest, we were met with an expansive field of grass and wildflowers, all framed by towering rocky mountains.

“We’re close! Now we’re in Iran. Iran played a significant role in shaping the Silk Road, with merchants facilitating the movement of various goods, including carpets and ceramics.” Wild horses roamed freely, and eagles soared overhead. “We’ve already travelled 3,000 kilometres,” Aksoltan remarked, nodding toward the increasingly bright light.

Passing through a lively bazaar filled with rugs, spices, laughter, and chatter, the atmosphere became electric, filled with vibrant exchanges. The light grew brighter, almost blinding. Following the lush grass fields and blue lakes, we approached a magnificent river—the Nile. Trees and bushes lined its banks. “We’ll follow the river; I promise we’re close.” The Nile shimmered like a silver ribbon, reflecting the colours of the sunset, and the iconic pyramids loomed in the distance—a testament to Egypt's rich history.

Along the Nile, bazaars thrived, vibrant hubs of trade overflowing with textiles, jewellery, spices, and fresh produce. Local artisans showcased their crafts—ceramics, woven baskets, and beautifully carved items. The river enabled goods to flow easily. As boats arrived with their wares, music and laughter echoed through the bustling market.

As Aksoltan and I left the enchanting bazaar along the Nile, we followed the gentle curve of the river, its waters shimmering under the warm sun. The iconic pyramids stood tall in the distance, their ancient stones a reminder of Egypt’s rich history and the countless travellers who had passed this way. The air was filled with the rich aromas of spices from nearby stalls, mingling with the sounds of laughter and trade.

As we continued our journey, the landscape began to shift from the vibrant life of the bazaar to the more serene beauty of the Egyptian countryside. Lush fields stretched out, dotted with farmers tending to their crops.

Finally, as I neared Europe, the landscape transitioned to fertile plains and rolling hills, where vineyards and fields stretched out far and wide. The aroma of ripe grapes and herbs filled the air, inviting me further into the heart of the Silk Road, where the vibrant exchange of culture and commerce continued. I marvelled at the changes around me. I could sense that we were leaving one chapter behind and entering another as we ventured into Europe. The roads became narrower and lined with wildflowers, their colours a vivid contrast to the rich greens and browns of the fields.

The landscapes were not just backdrops; they carried stories of countless travellers who had walked the Silk Road before me. Each city and village I passed was alive with the echoes of history, the whispers of trade, and the combination of cultures.

Soon, we arrived at a tranquil valley where the remnants of an ancient town loomed. The stone walls held the weight of countless journeys, and I felt a connection to the past. Kneeling before the ruins, I envisioned the travellers who had sought refuge here, sharing their experiences and dreams.

A glimmer appeared in the distance. A gentle glow illuminated a path leading toward a grove of trees. My heart raced with excitement as I moved closer, drawn by the light that seemed to beckon me.

As I entered the grove, I felt an energy envelop me, thick with anticipation. And there it was—the Kyzyl Tas, cradled among the roots of an ancient tree, radiating a soft, ethereal light. I approached reluctantly feeling the warmth that pulsed beneath my fingertips as I reached out to touch it.

In that moment, I realized that this journey had been more than a quest for a stone; it was a personal exploration of the bonds that link all travellers of the Silk Road. The Kyzyl Tas symbolised those connections, embodying the dreams and hopes of all who ventured forth into the unknown.

Standing before the stone, I embraced the weight of history and the significance of my journey.

With Aksoltan by my side, I knew I had gained a deeper understanding—not just of trade and travel, but of the essence of exploration itself.

Finding the Kyzyl Tas not only honoured the rich tapestry of cultural exchange along the Silk Road, but also ignited a spark within me to share this knowledge with others. By embracing the legacy of diverse traditions, I felt myself becoming a bridge between cultures, ready to weave together stories, art, and the wisdom of the past.

In that moment, I realized how powerful these connections could be. I was inspired to show others the beauty in diversity, fostering a sense of unity and understanding that transcended borders. My journey became a testament to the power of connection, a reminder that every encounter and every exchange contributes to humanity.

Of Merchants and Weavers, Silk and Sands

St. Paul's Secondary School, Yan Ching Ellie, Ho – 14

Bring the goods to the West, no matter how much it takes.

I coughed, bringing the cloth mask back over my face in an attempt to filter out the sand blowing in my face. The rest of my group followed suit behind me, forging their way through the terrain. A storm raged and ravaged the desolate lands, whipping up dirt and sand all around us as we forged our way through. My camel trudged behind me, the searing sun casting its shadow across golden dunes, the silent bearer of man's endless greed for gold, unsatiated and ever-increasing. According to our map, the village that my client had told me about was situated just another mile from where we stood, so I gritted my teeth as I continued to make my way through the sands and rocks.

I, alongside my group, was travelling merchants from the city of Changan, on a quest to bring some of China's exotics out to other countries for profit. Our cargo consisted of the most expensive of silk textiles, wrapped tightly in cloth and ropes to make sure no loose sands and dirt would ruin the quality of the products. I would be meeting up with another party of merchants in the village to exchange the wares, and to pass along the cargo for them to continue the journey on the famous Silk Road.

The storm, once an untamed beast, finally bowed to the desert's silence when wooden posts emerged from the dust, making themselves known among the sea of sand. From Lin's confident voice, I gather he's spotted a possible resting place, so I picked up my pace and tugged my steed along to move faster, aiming to reach shelter quicker. The camel grunted to my sudden enthusiasm, its once leisurely pace disrupted as it trotted faster to catch up with its owner. The others did the same, following my lead.

The village lay dipped down in a sort of valley formation, the land forming some sort of protection against the wind for the residents there. The violent winds have now died down, leaving only the occasional whistle as it dashed past my ear. With my companions, I made my way past houses and stables with livestock until I caught sight of a man standing by a house, waving in our direction. I recognised them; it's one of the merchants my seller told me about, presumably their leader.

"Hey there!" He bellowed heartily. "You must be the traders from the capitol, right? The one that we're supposed to take the goods from." His grin widened, arms stretched out in a welcoming way. I replied with a nod and a small smile, tying my camel to a post by his abode. He must be unfamiliar to the trade system, from his light-heartedness and his attitude; it reminded me of my younger years in the industry, how I used to be so full of enthusiasm and wonder when I was coached by my first mentor, the previous generation of merchants that had guided me on my earliest expedition.

Behind me, I heard Wong mutter "he must be new" under his breath.

I did not see the rest of his party, but I assumed they were somewhere around the village. I scanned the area as the other traders of my group secured their camels to posts, with Jin lightly scolding his steed for not cooperating and Chen poking at his cargo to check if it was secure. Lin looked around with barely concealed curiosity, then started shaking Wong's shoulder after noticing something in the distance.

The other trader started beckoning me into his house, something I barely come across in my long history of trading. It was naive, as any experienced trader or merchant would know better than to let another into their home, in fear of the other bearing any malicious intent. I followed him anyway; he seemed trustworthy enough.

His house wasn't the most impressive, with minimal interior designs and furnishings compared to those from the capitol. It consisted of a few chairs and tables, handmade by the looks of it, built with wood and bamboo. The walls and floors were all of hardwood, not from the best material but durable enough to withstand the gale-like winds of the desert. It wasn't much, but it looked cozy enough for him.

I learned his name, Dayaaluta, while he droned on about having new company, even for just a fleeting while in this barren desert. He didn't seem to understand much about the subject of trading, insisting I and my party show him the ropes on the things he needed to know before setting on his first journey. I agreed, even if I have never done so before, so he sat us down and offered us tea. Only Chen accepted, but Dayaaluta didn't seem bothered by the rejection.

It began with a long, awkward silence. "So," he first broke the ice by speaking. "Where am I headed?"

"Persia." Chen spoke up before I did. "We don't know where or who you'll be handing these goods over to next, but they should be by Chanch."

"It is a city of trades and merchants, home to those dependent on exchanges of goods and supplies, so extra profits might be earned there." Jin chimed in helpfully.

"Right." He mumbled to himself. "That's...a long way from here."

I nodded. "The road is indeed lengthy, the journey perilous and dangerous for any who require passage." I explained, trying to sound reassuring at best. "Patience and resilience are most required to fully cross Tianshan, which all merchants should bear with themselves as they brave the routes of the Silk Road with their trades. It may be a long trek, but it is one all traders will partake in at least once in their careers."

"O...kay." Dayaaluta mumbled. Mostly to himself, a reassurance with his mind to calm himself. "What else do I need to know? The possibility of getting robbed?"

"There are plenty else things to worry about before you encounter bandits." I stated, waving away his concerns then holding out my fingers I began counting on them. "Starvation, dehydration, disease, creatures of the wild, bandits and thieves, other merchants, adverse weather, treacherous terrains—"

I would have continued my list if not for Chen speaking up to break my chain. "You will scare him if you continue further." He interrupted with a hard glare.

I huffed unapologetically, rolling my eyes. "They must be prepared. They are amateurs for all we know; ones who barely understand the perils of the road. They must be warned, no?" Chen opened his mouth to argue, but I continued before he could talk. "This path we take is unpredictable, beyond our control just like the winds we brave. One must only prepare, predict, and hope for the worst."

Chen sighed. "True. I suppose I shall take your word for it."

"Our shipment isn't going to attract any bandits...right?" Uncertainty tainted Dayaaluta's voice, but underneath was the smallest flicker of hope that his fears would not be true.

In reply, Lin shrugged. "I mean...if you prepare yourselves enough and pack all the things you need, I suppose security is the least of your concerns. On the road, the most important thing you have to remember is to never stray from your group. There's always strength in numbers, even if you don't have the weapons to match."

The trader brightened up at his suggestion. “Should I tell the others about it, then?”

“Do what you must with this information.” I said, getting to my feet and heading for the door of his house, not wanting to get too attached. “We will assist in transporting our goods to your steeds and ensure the beginning of your journey does not come crashing down like a tower built with sticks. We will stay to restock and replenish our supplies for the journey back, but this is the most information we can provide you.” Before leaving, I paused at the exit and added, “May your ancestors and the stars guide your path through the sands of Tianshan.”

★ ★ ★

My party watched the faint specks of Dayaaluta's merchant party gradually disappear over the horizon of the desert, their camels in tow, a new step into this metamorphosis of a journey.

“Do you think they'll survive through their first journey, Tian?” Jin mumbled, loud enough for me to catch. I turned to him, nothing but neutrality plastered onto your face: I did not hold any feelings for the merchants you meet on your journeys. After all, relationships are the very fickle silk I deliver, easily broken, tainted and lost in this economy of thieves and liars.

“We can only hope.” I replied, flashing another glance at the distant traders. “Hope that this silk we spent many cycles of the moon to bring here makes the rest of its way to the West.”

The Well of Lost Hopes

St. Stephen's College, Zhi Kuan Gwyneth, Wu – 15

In a two-storey tavern on the Silk Road, the merry music that praises the death of some chivalrous knight who sacrificed for their homeland rang in the background, the clink and clank of a weary merchant's boots grew ever more obvious as their owner ascended the stairs, looking for a familiar face to haggle prices and drink booze with. Seeing their familiar friend, the merchant smiles, hand already reaching for the tankard on the table as they sat down.

"Aye Bektsizlik! Back from Kara-Djigach so early?" The merchant's old friend, Stark thumped him on the back hard. "I'm surprised you're alive! I heard the people over there been droppin' left and right. You alright man? Don't come home bringing me a plague aight? Guess what I got this time?"

"What now, more silk?" Bektsizlik asked with a deadpanned face.

"No no no." Stark shook his head in disappointment. "That's not what I called you here; I called you here for this." He held up a brown and dilapidated book and waved it around in front of Bektsizlik. "It's about your hometown! I found it in a well!"

"How do you know about where I'm from?"

"Bah, you told me about it while drunk."

"Oh." Bektsizlik said as he flicked through the book, eyes scanning the oddly shaky words, as if the writer was about to die. He was about to close the book when he saw the last page. *They're all dead. They're all dead and it was my fault. I couldn't get enough medicine and now everyone's dead with horrible black welts and I never should've come here and now I'm about to die too.* Bektsizlik's face paled in fear and confusion as he read on, unable to accept the contents. "You're lying," he snarled towards Stark, but he was already getting up to leave, tankard empty now and its contents spilled on the table and his right hand from how much he shook reading the book.

He heard Stark yell behind him, but he was out the tavern already, the merry music now a somber tale about the fall of a nation. He could hear his heart pound and pound and pound, left hand still holding onto the book and right hand on his horse's reins, nearly falling off a few times before barely getting on, already urging the horse to run, praying it might grow wings and fly.

On the way back to his village, *his home, the one he swore to protect*, he passed by many familiar merchants and friends, all commenting on the strange way he seems to be acting. Bektsizlik begged them for any medicine they can spare, and buying out all their stocks of unicorn horns and garlic, no matter the authenticity of the products. He had to get a second horse to carry everything back to his village. The horses must've sensed his distress, for they managed to speed to Bektsizlik's hometown in three days with only seven hours' worth of sleep, when it should've taken a week.

Bektsizlik nearly fell off the horse as he stopped in front of the village chief's house, limbs struggling to get out, legs long since tangled in the horse's girth. The Chief, a jolly old man with kind eyes that's seen too much but too little at the same time, came out to welcome Bektsizlik, arms wide in welcome as if Bektsizlik didn't bring back two horses' worth of medicine that they don't even know the use for.

"Bektsizlik my dear boy," the chief remarked, crushing him in his embrace, "what's the problem? Not like you to be this hysterical over...?"

“Please, please, Chief please. Tell me. Does anyone have black welts on their bodies or— or feel weak and vomit all over the place and—”

“Calm down my boy, the whole village is healthy and alive. Death rate’s never been lower! We’re all healthy and thriving. You, on the other hand, looks deathly pale.” The Chief pushes him towards the communal baths, gentle yet firm in his decision. “Go wash up at the communal baths and rest, recollect yourself and wash your body. I can see the flea and bug bites all over you. Pretty sure there’s alive ones in your clothes too. Go wash up.”

It’s not too late. I still have time. Oh thank gods it’s not too late. It’s not too late it’s not too late— Bektsizlik kept thinking as he soaked into the warm waters, watching the fleas rise off his body and inspecting the red marks left from those heathens. He lets himself melt in the smell of steam and herbs he’s yet to find the name of. It finally gave him a bit of time to ponder— why did he trust the book? It could’ve been a prank from Stark— no he may be boisterous, but he would never joke about death. There was something about the writing, it was so familiar and *desperate* that he just trusted it. Shaky handwriting is hard to fake; he would know with the number of counterfeit wills he’s seen been made for greedy heirs. No, to fake a true dying man’s handwriting, there wouldn’t be this taste of despair from the book either.

The Chief surprisingly believed him quite quickly, stating that he knew about the situation over in Kara—Djigach, where their neighbouring land has been suffering from a mysterious uprise of black welts and death that were written off as infection and food—poisoning, but didn’t explain the black bulges no matter how. They were quick with preventive measures they knew of; slight doses of vinegar have been added into the mixture that is communal bath waters two days after Bektsizlik arrived, and people were forced to go through health checks every day for the time being. It all seemed well, but alas, fate has never been one to pity life.

A week after his arrival, the fevers and chills started. Soldiers would crumble all of a sudden, clutching their spears like lifelines as they puke, mothers scream as their children breaks out into a cold sweat of fever and fear and people cry in panic as former bite marks from fleas and rats turn into sacs, wombs for the horrors that fester. Bektsizlik tried to help, he really did. He begged all his contacts for favours and managed to get a few medics and physicians to help the village. He used up most of the medicine he bought within the first week, and had to go in and out of the village, onto the Silk Road, traversing every path, every shortcut, every route he can discover, banging on every door, spewing meaningless blessings to those who gave any garlic or vinegar they can spare, and roared curses at those who slammed their doors in their faces. The physicians that came all inspected the symptoms with their bare hands, scrutinizing every single little detail, before all shaking their head, claiming they’ve never seen this before. One of the physicians asked Bektsizlik to record down everything on a notebook and provided him a simple one with a dark brown cover that felt familiar. He tried to find the original book that started everything but couldn’t seem to find it for the life of him. The physicians all leave one by one, back to their original towns. When Bektsizlik begs them to come back and help, their own villages have also been struck by the similar disease.

One by one, the villagers all drop dead, each in more pain than the last as they take their final breaths. The vases to store the vinegar used to disinfect their wounds have long run dry, and the chickens used to suck up the poisons have all died out. The notebook to record everything is now useless, but with most of the village dead now, this was Bektsizlik’s only hope now. As long as he gets it to the physician, the village can be saved. Right. Right. Right? He clung to that hope and dragged his useless legs up to walk. Horses were long gone, stolen by those who felt frightened by the situation and left in the dead of the night. One step at a time, ignoring the oozing pus from his own arm. He had found out he’d been infected with the disease a day or two ago (or three?) and was barely holding up. Step by step, he staggered his way to a well about half a mile before giving in, fully supporting his weight on the well with the hand holding the book. Perhaps it was the weakness that was simmering in his bones, his fingers let slip of his last hope.

“No no no—”Bektsizlik yelled, lunging after the book, nearly falling in the well himself, before stumbling backwards and falling on the ground— sandy with the smell of something rotten. The last thing he knew before dying was the way even the sky seems to lament for his loss.

Short Story Entry

The French International School, Tisserand, James – 14

My name is James Gustave Arya Tisserand, but around here they call me 詹姆斯. On the face of it, these names look like they belong on separate regions of the world. They might seem misplaced, disjointed – like four threads pulled together from the farthest corners of the planet. But threads can be woven, and silk can travel farther than footsteps. My name is a tapestry stitched together by the journeys that commenced thousands of years before I was born. And because its threads are of such different colors and textures, my tapestry uniquely stands out as a masterpiece.

Every morning, my kitchen smells like the Silk Road itself. On the table sits a small slice of creamy Brie and a crunchy baguette that I devour gladly, crumbs falling onto my plate. Next to it, a bowl gleams with the bright yellow of *sholezard*, the saffron rice pudding that my mother is so fond of. And beside it all is a steaming and sizzling bamboo basket of traditional dumplings from a local shop in Causeway Bay, Hong Kong, radiating like the morning sun with its heavenly smell.

Three realms, one breakfast.

While I eat, I imagine intrepid travelers directing their caravans, bravely transporting through the desert; spices, silk, gold, and somehow, pieces of my culture and of my imagination. The Silk Road didn't just connect regions – it braided people and minds. It has also braided me.

When I come home from school, I step into my family's Silk Road: our French wooden chair stands beside a beautiful Persian carpet tinted red as a Persian sunset; a Bruce Lee poster sits behind my copy of *The Tao of Pooh*, my favorite book that connects the East's Taoism with the West's Pooh. Antithetical cultures don't sit diffidently in separate corners in my house; they overlap and interlace each other – like the satin threads of my tapestry, interwoven and blended into a piece of art.

Even the way I think embodies the Silk Road.

When I face a problem...

My Hongkongese wisdom advises: "Cross the river one stone at a time". I then tackle the problem step by step, directly running after the simple solution.

My French psychology whispers: "Build a bridge to cross the river". I subsequently resolve to find ways to make my problem-solving more efficient.

My Iranian voice tells me: "Follow the old caravan path, someone wise has already crossed the river". So when I really can't solve my problem, I go to find a wise person who, with their experience, can show me how to cross the rivers of my life.

Unconsciously, I switch between these philosophies from day to day, river to river.

At night, as I read in bed, the pieces of my identity don't feel scattered – they feel woven. My ancestors once traveled from the East to the West, but their route stretched across time and landed in my name, my kitchen, my thoughts.

The Silk Road disappeared in the mid-1400s.

But it never truly ended. The Silk Road didn't disappear. Its threads were woven into me.

I am, in my own way, the newest stretch of that ancient road – a living thread connecting three worlds, delicate yet unbreakable, soft to the touch yet strong in nature, glowing quietly between East and West. I am a road woven from three worlds – still stretching, still shimmering.

And that's why my four names, so dissimilar on paper, fit perfectly to me.

They are all part of the fabric.

They are all part of the same journey, my journey.

They are all part of my story.

A Precious Gift for My Sister

The Hong Kong International School, Bijlani, Soha – 12

It was just a normal Tuesday at the silk shop when my lao ban (boss) called eleven other men and me into his office.

I looked around the shop, and everyone looked just as confused as I was. He gestured for us to hurry, and I scrambled in. “So, you all might be wondering why I gathered you here,” he began. “As you all know, the owners of this silk shop are the honourable Jīn Long and his wife. In a year’s time, it is going to be their 20th anniversary of marriage. For this special occasion, he would like to get her beautiful and unique items from afar. Now you may be wondering what this has to do with all of you.” He surveyed the room before continuing, “Jīn Long told me to choose twelve young men to embark on a journey on the Silk Road.” The room erupted into murmurs. “Wait,” he called, “I know you may have heard the tales of the dangers, but if you are successful, Jīn Long will provide a large sum of gold for each of you and your families.” He smirked, knowing he had everyone’s attention now. “If you are interested, pack your bags tonight and meet me here early tomorrow morning.”

As I made my way home that evening, his words kept repeating in my head. No, I thought I couldn’t leave my family behind. But the riches that he spoke of could transform our entire lives. As I approached our small hut, I made a decision. I knew what I had to do.

Everyone was hesitant to see me go, but they understood. However, no one was more tearful than my little sister.

That night, my thoughts raced—danger, riches, the long road ahead. But one worry pressed harder than the rest: what gift could I bring for my sister? I imagined treasures from distant lands, but none seemed to fit her spirit. She was happiest when she danced, twirled, and spun around our house. I wished I could capture that joy and carry it back to her. I didn’t yet know how, but I swore I would find a way.

I rose before dawn, while the moon still lingered in the sky. At the doorway of my childhood home, I whispered a silent goodbye. When I arrived at the shop, all eleven other men had shown up. No one could turn down an offer so promising; my boss knew it. He showed us our horses, maps and handed us bags of the finest Chinese silk. It was enough to purchase numerous items for Jin Long’s wife and to provide us with food and water for over a year. By the time we mounted our horses, shopkeepers were lifting wooden shutters, and the sun had climbed back onto its throne, gilding the rooftops in gold. With no more time to waste, my men and I took one last look at our hometown before taking off into the horizon.

After weeks of walking along jagged cliffs under the beating sun, we finally met another group of merchants interested in trading with us. We displayed our fine silk, and the merchants from Jaipur showed us their spices, sapphires and peacock feathers. After a long hour of bargaining, we gave them some of our finest shining soft silk in orange, blue, green and pink, while they gave us saffron and cardamom that perfumed the air, sparkling sapphires and peacock feathers that shimmered like rainbows. Both sides of the trade were delighted – the Jaipur merchants loved the bright colours of our soft silk, and we were sure the noblewoman would love the unique treasures from Hindustan!

After the trade, we had dinner with our new friends and invited us to watch their Bharatanatyam dance. The sound of their mridangam (drum), nattuvangam (cymbal) and venu (flute) filled the air. They invited me to join in, and I did! I tried to memorise every step of the dance, the way they moved their

head, eyes and hands, expressing a story through facial expressions. We danced with them all night; they even taught me how to play their instruments. When we said our goodbyes to the men from Jaipur, I thanked them for all they had taught me, for I would remember the expressive dance forever.

After several more weeks of walking and riding, we arrived in Samarkand, where we met merchants who had come from Constantinople. They carried large amounts of colored glass, wool and wine, which we decided the noblewoman might like. We asked them what they wanted in exchange, but they didn't want our fine silk like

everyone else. My men and I just stood there in confusion while they tried to communicate. "Food!" A young Turk exclaimed! "Food?" I said in the little English I knew. "Yes," he replied. That evening, steam curled from baskets of dumplings; the scent of soy and ginger drifted into the cold night. The Turks sat down beaming and pulled out forks to stab the dumplings! We started to laugh and taught them how to use our chopsticks. It took a while, but eventually they figured it out and were so delighted with the meal and the new things they learnt! "Best food", the group leader said, along with a lot of other things I didn't understand, but all that mattered was that he looked happy.

That evening, after our feast with the Turkish merchants, music filled the air. They began the Zeybek, a dance of pride and bravery, each step deliberate and strong. I was pulled into the circle, and though clumsy, I felt the weight of the rhythm. Then came the Halay, arms linked, stamping in joyful unison. Breathless but laughing, I joined again, carried by the energy of the group. When the night grew quiet, the dervishes began the Sufi Sama, spinning endlessly in devotion. I joined for a few turns, dizzy but strangely at peace. These dances were gifts, and I carried them inside me.

By then, we had enough interesting and unique treasures for Jin Long's wife, so we started our journey back. Weeks passed without us seeing any other living creatures, except for wild animals. We were tired, tired of travelling in the cold winter, and just when I started to lose hope of ever seeing my beautiful sister again, an excited young man

beside me called out, "People!!!" The whole group seemed to have suddenly got a spurt of energy, and we urged our horses to go faster. When we got closer, I started to realize these were masked men holding knives. "Oh no," I yelled too late; the bandits attacked us. They pushed men off their horses, stole most of our bags, and slashed me when I tried to fight back. Luckily the sapphires, and smaller items were hidden in pockets stitched inside our clothes, so they did not see them. Everything passed like a blur. One minute ago, we were standing tall with new hope, and now half of our men lay fallen. I collapsed to the ground, tired. I wanted to just give up, but remembered my sister, waiting patiently for me at home, and I forced myself to get up and help my men.

We lost some men, food and goods that day. But as I lay there, I realized there was one thing the bandits could never steal—the memories I carried. The rhythms and the steps of the dances I learnt. They lived inside me now, and I knew I would bring them home no matter what else was lost.

The next morning, we saw another group of merchants. I was scared they might be bandits again, but they were kind men. They were sympathetic, because they had also been robbed by bandits recently. They helped us get back on our feet and ready to travel again. "Thank you so much!" We expressed our gratefulness. "How can we ever repay you?" I asked. "Well, we do love Chinese silk," one of their men smiled, "and our grandfather is from Peking," he hinted. "Of course," I exclaimed and handed some silk to them.

Weeks later, our horses finally carried us back to the village. The cheers of the crowd rose around me, blurring into a single sound. I searched only for my sister. When she ran to me, I held her close and whispered, “I kept my promise.” That night, I showed her what I had brought home—not jewels, not gold, but dances. Proud steps, joyful circles, fierce rhythms, spinning devotion and graceful storytelling through the eyes. My movements were imperfect, yet she laughed and twirled along with me.

The Silk Road had given me adventure, challenges and so much knowledge that I would have never got in my tiny town. And the best part was in my sister’s joy and laughter of learning dances from diverse cultures, stories without words, I knew I had returned with the greatest treasure of all.

Be Brave

The Hong Kong International School, Chang, Avery – 12

I was exploring the part of the Silk Road in Chongqing, when I saw a piece of gold, as big as a chair. It was just lying there in the street near the marketplace! Nobody else seemed to see it, because no one was trying to take it. I mean, if you saw a chunk of gold, even a small fleck of gold in the street, wouldn't you try to scoop it up?

You might ask, *Amaya, how do you know that it's a piece of gold and not fake?* Well, my dad makes animal sculptures out of gold, so I should know.

Like any reasonable person presented with a great treasure, I made a beeline through the crowd to claim what was mine – finders-keepers!

A troy ounce of gold weighs 31.1 grams. So just as I expected, a chair worth of gold didn't move an inch.

I tried to let go. My hands didn't move. My eyes widened. The gold started emitting heat, then started glowing and pulsing.

As quick as a flash, the gold exploded and sucked me inside the shrapnel.

★ ★ ★

I woke with a jolt. "What just happened?"

I looked around. It was just... sand, stretching for miles in every direction.

The people passing me weren't wearing t-shirts and jeans, but long silk robes with simple patterns. Many were barefoot or in sandals, leading camels heavy with filled burlap sacks.

I spotted a calendar hanging with the bread at the baker's stand next to me.

六月二十五日 · 一四三一 ° *June 25, 1431.* I gasped.

"Whoa. I traveled back in time! I'm in the same spot, but 600 years earlier!"

My stomach growled at the aroma of the bread, and I couldn't resist asking the baker, "How much?" He didn't respond.

"Rude." I rolled my eyes.

Then I realized that he wasn't being rude; he didn't see me at all. Was he blind? Or was I invisible?

"Hey, I want to buy—" I screamed at the top of my lungs. But he turned to help another customer who came up to his cart. The customer didn't look at me either.

Suddenly, all my courage and excitement drained out of me. I felt like a ghost. I started to fidget. I didn't know how to fast-forward six-hundred years.

Just then, a girl bumped into me. Wait...

People weren't *supposed* to be able to bump into me.

The girl was also wearing modern clothes. She looked about thirteen years old, with coffee brown hair that went down to her waist.

She noticed me, and her eyes widened. She covered her face and started weaving through the crowd.

"Wait!" I called. "Can I talk to you?"

She flinched, and after a moment's hesitation, ran off.

I chased after her.

My legs moved to their limit. But *still* I kept going. The girl was still faster.

Finally, I cornered her in a circle of stalls.

She covered behind a glass vase. "Please don't hurt me," she whimpered. "I don't mean you any harm."
"Oh." I felt a rush of compassion. "I don't want to hurt you. I just want to know how to get home."
"Oh!" The girl's eyes lit up. "That's easy. You just need to get a crystal from one of the traders."
I was at a loss for words. "Thank you so much..."
"Emma," the girl supplied, her dimples showing. "And you're welcome..."
"Amaya."
"There. We're like friends now. Here. I'll take you to the traders. I'm sure you don't know how to get

back."

"Yeah."

Emma took my hand and led me back to the traders.

"Alright. You just ask the trader if you can have a crystal. If he refuses, tell him it's a favor from Emma.

Good luck! Get home safe!"

I opened my mouth to ask her more questions, but she disappeared into the crowd.

I went up to the trader. "Excuse me, can I have a crystal?"

To my surprise, the trader noticed me. He wasn't supposed to! He

said in Mandarin: 「付二千四百塊錢。」 *Pay 2400 dollars.*

「這是一個個忙，Emma 講的。」 *This is a favor. From Emma.*

The trader swore. I covered my ears.

「好。拿吧。」 *Fine. Take one.*

As soon as I touched it, I knew something had gone wrong. My hands started glitching out. I started twitching, out of my control.

★ ★ ★

It had been weeks. And I could touch people now. I was officially stuck in this world. Well, at least I got the bread.

Every day, I looked for Emma. But she wasn't there.

Until...

Emma's mouth opened in shock. "Amaya?" "Emma?"

"I've been looking for you every day!"

"Wh—why are you still here?" Emma bit her lip. "Is something wrong?" "Yeah.

The crystal didn't work! And now I can touch people!"

Emma slapped her forehead. "This only happens in the most extreme cases," she muttered to herself. "Why did it have to be her?"

"What is it?" I asked. At this point I was getting pretty nervous. "Emma, is everything okay?" "No." she despondently replied. "It's something in your blood. Descendants of Marco Polo."

I gasped. Me, a descendant of Marco Polo? My breath caught in my throat. *Would I be able to go home?* I desperately tried calming down. Deep breath in... deep breath out.

"So how do I get out?" I managed.

"You need another crystal. A special one, high on the hills. I'm so sorry!" Emma's eyes filled with tears. "I shouldn't have just left you. I should have checked on you. I needed to go to work. My boss was already mad at me that I ran off to buy some water."

"That's okay. You're here now!" I tried to sound optimistic. "Now, how do we get there?" She paused for a second. "Let me just tell my boss. Wait one second."

She vanished into the crowd again, and I waited.

To pass the time, I stared at the old version of the Great Wall of China. Hard to believe that that changed so much in six hundred years.

Emma breathlessly sprinted back, interrupting my daydreaming. "I got permission. Sorry it took so long. I needed to convince him."

"All right! What do we need?" I felt better, now that I had the prospect of leaving. "Not much. Food, water, hiking materials."

"Do we have these things?"

"Lucky for you, I have a go bag for these types of situations."

And the journey began.

About half a mile later, I had a thought. "Emma, what exactly is your job? You were being secretive the last time we met."

"Oh! Was I?"

Her head ducked, making her long hair cover her face.

"Yeah. And you kind of are right now."

"Oh. I'm sorry! Well, my job is to... rescue people like you. To help modern people get out of this world." We kept walking for about two more miles. Then we decided to make camp on a grassy field.

"Good night, Amaya. I'm still sorry that I left you."

"Emma, I forgive you. You don't have to be sorry."

★ ★ ★

A rustle in the grass jarred me awake.

I shook Emma awake. "Emma," I whispered, "there's something in the grass."

She sat up and rubbed her eyes. "It's probably nothing," she yawned. "Just a rabbit or something." Slowly, the 'something' came out of the bushes. And it wasn't a rabbit.

It was a full-on poisonous snake.

Emma screamed. She looked shocked.

I grabbed her hand. We ran out of the tent and climbed up high on a tree.

Once the snake had slithered away, looking for more interesting prey, we continued on our long journey for about an hour. We walked, rested, walked, rested. Carried on.

★ ★ ★

I heaved deep breaths in. We had been climbing up a grassy hill dotted with flowers and leaves. When we got to the top, I gasped.

"Emma!" I cried. "Is this it?"

She ran up behind me. "I think it is," she said, a smile spreading across her face. "We did it!"

We exchanged a triumphant high-five.

"Whoa," Emma said, getting closer to the crystal. "It looks so powerful."

I slowly approached the crystal. It was pulsing with energy, flashing purple and blue and pink.

My excitement stopped. “Emma,” I asked, “how many of these crystals are there? Could someone use this after me?”

She responded, “No. Once you use it, the crystal vanishes. Not like the normal ones. When you touch those, they bring you back, then reappear. The special ones don’t work that way.”

I lifted my chin up. *Be brave...* “Then I’ll stay here. I don’t want somebody else to be stuck here forever.”

Emma’s mouth dropped in shock. “Amaya... are you sure? You’ll never be able to get out if you do that.” “I’m sure.”

Sand and Hooves

The Hong Kong International School, Ding, Jonathan – 12

The bright sun hung over the hills of Dunhuang, baking the whole region as merchants sat under canopies, selling all kinds of goods. Mogu was curled up in his stable, taking an afternoon nap after a long morning of hauling. His brother, Tangyuan, was asleep beside him, snoring like thunder. Suddenly, an exceptionally loud snore exploded beside him, and Mogu jerked his head up, alert of danger. Footsteps sounded as two men entered the stable. One was average-sized while the other one was stout. The first man introduced himself as Wei Bao and the corpulent man was called Fang Li. Wei Bao stretched his hand out to pet the camels, and the camels allowed it, but when Fang Li stretched his hand out, and the camels jumped up and struck him in the temple. Fang Li grumbled, “We’re paying 2000 coins for these animals, and I’m considering a refund.” After the encounter the two men brought their interesting duo out and loaded them with cargo. A smell wafted from the boxes, and Mogu rushed towards it. He tore open the box and stuffed his face into the juicy and aromatic apricots. Fang Li pried him away, but the damage was done; the box was ruined, and there was only mush inside. Fang Li muttered, “We’re going to die...”

The two men and the camels trek through the desert of Dunhuang, tired and worn out from a long day of toil. Wei Bao groaned something, but his words came weak, as sweat poured like rain. A resting and supply station was up ahead, and everyone sighed with relief, except Mogu. Mogu suddenly stopped and crouched down, whining about apricots and the jade bangles in the box he was carrying, “Why do these bangles clatter so much, it’s so annoying. Also, I want apricots.” The two men busted out another crate of apricots but only gave Mogu and Tangyuan three each, hoping it was enough to satisfy them through the last leg. When they got to a small town, they found a place to stay near a market, where they spent the night trying to sleep with the noise outside.

A few days passed and the squad was on their way again. After days of toil, they are all exhausted from the continuing journey, but they are far away from anywhere civilized, and the only living thing they have encountered other than desert bandits are scorpions. Fang Li complained, “I think I’m about to pass out, can we rest?” Wei Bao agreed that they should rest, while he can study the map. The camels were hungry, so they walked up to Wei Bao and nodded towards the apricots, but Wei Bao waved them off, claiming that he was busy, so the camels took matters into their own hands.

Tangyuan wandered to the left, so Mogu followed. After a short sprint race, they looked up and saw tall trees, looming above them. Its leaves were like feathers, floating under the firmament. The camels jumped in a race of excitement as they saw round shaped objects on the ground, furry and brown. Tangyuan said, “What is that?” They scramble over, sniffing and nudging it, as an aroma surrounded it. “Food!” The camels yelped as they jumped up and in that one moment they were dashing back from where they came from, celebrating out loud knowing that they would get extra apricots. As the camels rushed over, a cloud of sand was sent over Fang Li’s body, and he jerks up frantically, as Wei Bao stood on the side laughing, “I don’t think you’re exactly the camels’ favorite person, don’t you think?” “Oh really?” Fang Li shot back, “why don’t you try sorting them out?” So, Wei Bao accepted the challenge and headed for the pair of camels. As he headed towards them, the camels rolled the furry sphere towards him. As he saw it, his eyes lit up. “Coconuts!” He screamed, drowning in joy. He ran to Fang Li and sprang right on top of him, causing a massive struggle. After the chaos died down, Wei Bao gave the camels some apricots. The squad packed up all their things, and started to head out, going to the coconut trees on the way. They scooped up tons of the coconuts on the ground, rather than going through the hassle of knocking them down. The camels started walking again, this time with their backs full of coconuts and trading goods.

They walked up and down on a dune that materialized in front of them, and ended up in a valley, with tall dunes surrounding them. The surroundings were quiet, with no movements anywhere you looked at. It was as if you were in a different world made of sand. Fang Li suddenly heard a click, but as he complained Wei Bao waved it off, “Why would there be any humans this far in the desert?” With this knowledge in mind, the group walked on, admiring the view, as a bang followed by a sharp crack snapped them out of their thoughts. The dunes erupted in a cheer as men

started charging downhill, sending mounds of sand into the sky in their wake. Men swarmed Fang Li and Wei Bao, tackling them. Tangyuan scrambled away just before the men reached him, and he dashed up the dunes, up to where the men came from. His pursuer sprinted behind him up the hill, only to clash into his fellow, as they rolled down the hill. Mogu emerged from the mess minutes after his brother, and Tangyuan waited for him at the top. When Mogu reached the top, panting, they stood and surveyed the valley below. "Apricots! We can bombard the bandits with them!" gasped Mogu, as he gestured over to the cargo, now swarmed by bandits looking for loot. Tangyuan nudged his brother and said, "You know what's better than apricots? Coconuts." The camels began their heroic rescue mission and dashed towards the cargo downhill. As they neared the edge, the sand under them gave out, and suddenly they were sliding down in a wave of sand. "This is fun!" screamed Mogu, as they neared the bottom. After a bumpy landing, they charged at the cargo and lunged at its plunderers. As the camels threw themselves above them, the bandits tried to scurry away, which did not help them as the camels were on them before anyone knew it. Mogu caught one man in the nose with his hoof, while Tangyuan went for the belly-flopping method, taking out three in one smash. Soon, all the bandits were lying on the floor, looking miserable. Mogu poked his head through all the boxes, though there was an unmistakable smell of fresh coconuts. Tangyuan and Mogu dragged the box all the way back up the dune. Fang Li and Wei Bao were clearly struggling, as they disappeared under a mass of bodies. The camels each put one coconut on the ground and kicked it as hard as they could with their legs. The bandits soon saw a barrage of brown furry objects flying towards them. There were around 20 of them flying towards them one after another. Most scrambled away as soon as they saw the coconuts, but the unlucky ones were hit, making them unconscious instantly. Wei Bao was fine after the rain of coconuts, as he sheltered behind the cargo, but Fang Li got hit in the arm by a coconut, personally sent by Tangyuan. Fang Li screamed, "I will come to you and strangle you! I am positive my arm is broken, you are done!" Tangyuan smiled mischievously at his brother and received a grin in return. Wei Bao ran to them and hugged them, saying that they are the best camels known to mankind. After the raid, the cargo was attached to the camels again, without the coconuts. The squad trekked on, motivated by the fact that Wei Bao told them that the next city was only twenty kilometers away.

It was dusk when they reached the city of Hami, a lively place built in an oasis. The group found shelter in a nice shack, owned by the mayor. Wei Bao went to the medic station in the center of town with Fang Li, who insisted that his arm was broken. The camels were sent to sleep and rest in a stable, where they were treated to a whole bucket of apricots. Tangyuan mumbled through a mouthful of apricots, "Man, this is going to be a long journey, it is very tiring to say the least. I just hope we don't run out of apricots before we get to the next city." Mogu nodded eagerly, "Yeah, we can go through anything as long as we have these" saying this he stuffed another handful of apricots into his mouth. "Also, don't coconuts only appear in Southeast Asia?" The group rested for the next few days, preparing for their next part of their journey.

The Silk Road

The Hong Kong International School, Dong, Tianna – 11

“Get ready. It’s time to go.”

Just this morning, Shan had been trekking down the crowded streets of Chang’an, the sounds of a horse’s hooves rang in his ears, voices filled the air, and the familiar scent of fish-balls and vegetables on sticks had drifted towards him.

Now Shan was standing in the middle of a crowd of people and camels, each carrying a sack of goods to trade. Emperor Wu had just sent out a message stating that each family would designate two people to travel to the west, trading for spices and other goods.

Why me? Shan thought, hefting himself up onto his numb feet and lifting the silk pack onto his camel. The land here was so dry and cracked that no horse could survive even a day.

Shan and his aunt traveled for weeks, months, maybe even years, resting and trading along the way. Everything went well until they reached the Tibetan Empire (Kazakhstan).

“Set your bags down,” Aunt Liu said, lighting a fire.

Days were hot, yet nights were bitterly cold. Shan spread cloth on the ground, sat by the flames, and drifted to sleep.

Rustling sounds grew louder until he woke with a start—through the haze of sleep, he saw the faint outline of someone near his pouches of gold.

Shan jolted awake. Robbers. They were after the hard-won prize. He crept toward the dying fire, now a gray pile of dust. There was no way to reclaim the bounty without injury or exposure.

Shan waited until the thieves slung the pouches over their shoulders and started toward the city before following. It was easy—the robbers were loud and never looked back.

By the time they reached the city, the moon illuminated the sky, casting a silver glow over the horizon. Buildings rose around Shan as he followed the bandits in the warming night.

Then he noticed it.

The bandits’ laughing had stopped.

Shan came to a stop and looked around, shivering at the sensation of something, no—SOMEONE watching him.

Suddenly, a robber jumped at him, about to grab him, when something else got a hold of Shan’s wrist, wrenching him away. A shadow of gray pulled him away into a corner.

“Follow me,” the shadow ordered, running towards an empty alleyway at the edge of the city.

Despite being terrified, Shan had no choice but to follow the figure. He couldn’t just stay in one spot, waiting to be captured by the robbers.

The two ran along the path before the figure slowed to a stop near a garbage can. He looked around, then took off his mask.

It was a child, about the same age as Shan, maybe younger. He wore a navy-blue robe made of wool and felt, and a tall hat bordered with golden lines.

“I’m Äli,” he said, putting out a hand.

“I—I’m Shan,” Shan responded, taking it and shaking it with his own. “Thank you. For saving me from the robbers.”

“Oh. So, you’re here with all those others on the trade route?” Äli asked, studying Shan thoughtfully. “Let me guess. Those two stole something from you?”

“Yes. Something quite valuable, if I do say so myself.”

“I can help you get it back. I myself am familiar with thieves, though it would be nice to trade something of mine for something of yours,” Äli said, taking something out of his pocket.

“Deal,” Shan exclaimed. “But everything is back on the route.”

“Then what are we waiting for? Let’s go get your stuff back!” Äli beckoned to Shan and ran toward a stack of barrels, jumping and pushing off to land on the rooftop.

Shan blinked up at him, then took the safer way, climbing the barrels instead of risking a fall onto the hard pavement.

Äli shrugged and took off along the roof.

The top of the pagoda was amazing. From their point of view, Shan could see a tall building, higher than the rest, in the middle of the whole city. The *Potala Palace*, Shan remembered, someone had said.

There was a sudden flash that took Shan back to reality.

“There!” he whispered, pointing at the two men creeping along the road.

Äli nodded, gesturing for Shan to stay where he was. He pointed to the robbers, then to himself, and finally at Shan. Shan nodded back.

He watched as Äli crept soundlessly to the ledge above the bandits, revealing a sword. Then, the boy dropped it with a scabbard still on the blade. The weapon hit one of the thieves, knocking him unconscious.

The second thief turned around when he saw his companion lying on the ground. His eyes snapped to where the dagger had fallen, but it was too late.

Äli had already left the rooftop and was running toward the robber. The person in black stepped back, then narrowed his eyes at the child. He grabbed the bag of gold and chased after Äli, who picked up the sword and ran.

Shan hurried to the other side of the rooftop, where a dead end opened up. He arrived just in time to see his friend run past.

Shan took a deep breath and jumped.

He dropped through the air, then grabbed one of the clothes hangers next to a window, swung, and landed on the robber's shoulders. The robber shrieked and fell to the ground.

Shan wrenched the pouch of gold from his hands and ran, seeing Äli doing the same.

The two came to a stop, laughing and breathing hard at the city walls. They'd made sure there was no way the robbers could catch up.

"The flip you did was amazing!" Äli crowed through breaths.

"Well, you were the one who came up with this plan!" Shan exclaimed, raising an eyebrow. "Haha."

Äli grinned.

"Come on," Shan said. "A deal's a deal."

The sun was a golden line climbing the sky when Shan and Äli got back on the route.

"Aunt Liu!" Shan shouted, running toward his aunt and embracing her.

"Where were you?" she demanded. "I had to leave the road to wait for you!"

"I'm sorry," Shan admitted. "But I got back our stolen pouch of gold—with help, of course, from my new friend, Äli."

Äli nodded formally.

While Aunt Liu thanked Äli and offered him parts of the treasure, Shan looked back at the line of traders. They looked different. Now, Shan didn't just see thousands of people. He saw different people—people who wouldn't have known each other existed if not for this event, people who wouldn't have known the fascinating inventions of different places.

"Thanks, but no thanks," Äli said, turning to Shan. "You want to see what I got now?" He asked, taking out the small sword they had used on the robbers.

"Wow," Shan breathed. "You're giving that to me?" "Yes,"

his friend said, handing it to him.

Shan dug through his pouches, finding a piece of cloth with delicate patterns woven onto it.

"Whoa. It's so... smooth," Äli said, feeling it. "What is it?" "Silk."

Shan smiled. "Silk."

The Silk Road Theft

The Hong Kong International School, Hah, Karisse – 12

Knock knock, “gotta hit the road, man! Hurry up, we are already off schedule, its four-thirty AM!” Ronan called out to me, he is our “manager”, he keeps everyone in line, or he just tries. I raised my five fingers signaling for five more minutes, but he must have misunderstood me because Ronan only high fived my hand and pulled me out of the bed saying “you’re such a lazy person, Jason! *Get out of bed!*”

Groaning, as I get up to the community bathroom of the caravanserais to get ready for the long day ahead. Today we have to not only trade, connect with the villagers of Mogao, but we also need travel upwards to Turpan too. Moving sucks, we must carry all our heavy bags that feel like an elephant has nested its home in there. Well, technically the horses and camels help us move it. But we still must lift it onto the animals, and that, that ought to count for something, right?

When we finished getting ready and doing our prayers, we started to set up the stand in the marketplace, where other traders were trading too. We trade our lovely spices, stones, and Buddhist sculptures from our motherland, India. The stand is made of wood; it has a beautiful gold frame around it, that looks like the frames of paintings, that would, hopefully, attract other traders to come check out our offers. The spices were carefully placed in the middle of the stand, sculptures on the left, and stones on the right.

I was given the first shift of guarding and negotiation our resources at the stand while my peers go check out the other stands. I didn’t have to wait too long before a Chinese merchant came to offer their silk and tea for one pound of black pepper and one ruby gem. “Sorry but I would need more than just tea and silk, gems, especially this, big, ruby is worth a lot more.”

“Well, that’s all I have in my hands right now. If you want, you could come with me and get one or two bronze swords?” the Chinese merchant asked me. I nodded my head of approval. His stand was just a few rows ahead of mine, so if anything happens, I can still see it.

“So! Here is the bronze sword, it’s perfect for a weapon.” The Chinese merchant handed me the sword. But just as I was taking it from his hand, I saw person wearing all black running with a full, beige, bag near my stand. And the things on it, were gone. “So, is it a deal? I don’t have all day!” the Chinese trader said.

“No—hey you! Stop right there!” I ran after the man with the black outfit. He had a glance over at me, who was currently charging at him, and started to run too. After a while of running and trying to catch the guy, my legs were sore and I needed to catch a breath. I guess the thief saw that because he sped up and lost me. A billion questions ran through my head, *what am I supposed to do now? Tell Ronan? No! He’ll kill me. Who was that thief? Oh my gosh! What if the Chinese trader was only distracting me so that his partner could steal from me? Gosh! I’m so stupid for leaving the stand.*

As I walk, the walk of shame, back to my empty stand, my partners are already there, in shock. Darren lifts his head and asks me “where is all our stock? Please tell me you traded it all and didn’t have it stolen? Where are the things you traded it for?”

“I’m sorry, I went to see what the Chinese guy had to offer at another stand, and the next thing I know is that some thief brushed everything in his bag and ran away. I tried to follow him but—”

“You let somebody steal our stuff?” Darren’s fists were clenched into a stone ball “find. It.” He gave me a cold stare and stormed off.

The first thing I did to solve the mystery was to ask the traders next to my stand if they knew anything about the thief, but they only knew just about how much I knew, which was that he was wearing black. As I was walking towards the Chinese trader that may have set it all up, I saw Ronan, and I couldn't just let him see the trouble that I have caused. So, I stepped in front of him and said "hey, Ronan! Any good news?"

"No, I just came to tell you that the European guys are not to be trusted, I heard from someone that they are thieves and have already stolen from a few stands. So, make sure you be careful." I nod and head back to our stand. *I need to find the European merchants and take our things back before leaving for Turpan...it will be easy, right?*

I make my way through the marketplace to look for the Europeans. They are not too hard to find as they are the only ones with blond hair. Their stand is at the corner of the area, right next to the exit. *Probably so if they get caught, they can run out as fast as they can.* "Hey guys! Whatcha selling here?" I said, sounding as cheerful as possible.

"Actually, we are about to head out to do some socializing" a man with a brown robe on said. "We have also got enough stock for the day, see?" he points at 3 big cotton bags, filled with... something.

"That's nice. May I see what's inside?" I said. He glared down at me like I was crazy and shook his head in disapproval. I was going in for a rebuttal but before I could speak, I heard a voice yell out my name. It was Ronan. *He probably saw the empty stand!* I ran towards Ronan.

"JASON! DID YOU LET THE EUROPEANS ROB US?" Ronan roared. He has seen the stand that has been striped to the bone.

"Yes, I'm so sorry. I'm trying to find it. Sorry" I said

"Okay then. Find it for me. Go" he was boiling up with anger, and I left before he could explode it on me. I

didn't know what to do. What if I don't get it by the end of today? Will I be leaving to Turpan without it? How do I get the bag when they are right there, guarding it? There is no way that I can do it alone. Then, the greatest idea popped in my mind, I just needed a partner.

"Darren! Wait" I called, he looked my way and made a confused look on his face. "Yes?"

"Would you help me get our things back? I know that this is my fault and that I should be the one who fixes it, but I can't do it alone."

He stops for a moment and says, "it is already socializing time, we are meant to head out! But I know that Ronan will kill you if you don't find it, so, what's the plan?"

I am so glad that he agreed. "Okay. So, here's the plan. You go and distract them and lead them away from their stand, like how the Chinese man did to me, and I'll get the bag with our things. Is that good?"

He stops to think and says "fine, but if it doesn't work, it's on you."

I watch Darren talk with the European merchants and prays that this idea works. I see Darren gesturing to another stand while the trader rejects the idea of moving. A rush of panic goes up Darren's face, but he continues begging the merchant. After a few minutes of begging and crying, the trader finally agreed to leave his place. The second that the trader looks away and follows Darren, is when I sprinted to get the bags of our stock. I took the three bags and ran to the exit behind me. To my surprise, the trader didn't see me until I have gotten outside and found Ronan who would protect our stock from the Europeans if they came out. "You

found it?" Ronan asked.

“Yes, I think this is it”

“You only ‘think’? You don’t *know*?” He opens the three bags, and to my relief, it is our stuff. One bag for stones, one bag for sculptures, and the last bag for our spices. “Well, I’m glad you got it back. But you still messed up really bad, so you will have to work extra hard in Turpan to prove to me that you are worthy to keep on this trip”

I smiled at Ronan and said, “Darren helped me too” and right on time Darren shows up and took a joke—ish bow. “Thank you, Darren.”

With that, we were off to Turpan like nothing happened.

Loyalty

The Hong Kong International School, Halula, Maia – 13

Loyalty or survival—each demand to be first, neither forgives being second, and both call for sacrifice. What is the wrong choice? Who do you serve when both call? Loyalty always keeps you human. Survival keeps you alive. What's the price of choosing wrong?

Mei grips her leather bag, but today it feels heavier than normal. Today is the start of her journey, to bring her family loyalty and pride. The risks of this journey are dangerous, but danger is nothing compared to not bringing loyalty to her family. She was only 16 years old in a forgotten Chinese family, but she wanted to bring loyalty to her parents. Mei, the eldest daughter of a weaver, packed her scarce belongings into her simple bag. At her side, her silk bag bounced off her hip as she walked. Inside, silk was carefully woven into simple pieces of clothing, soft, and ready to be traded.

This was Mei's last resort; the silk road was demanding prices going down and up before you had the chance to even sell your piece. But her family was starving, there was nothing else she could do, as her passed father had been the moneymaker of the family.

She unclipped her bag holding silk and held up the carefully weaved silk to her face. She could hear her father and his sewing needle clicking and knotting the clothing. Mei had to provide for her family, or it was no chance of survival.

The door creaked as she opened to the windy day—the crisp breeze licking her cheeks, as she stepped out into the streets. This was the beginning of her journey, the beginning of bringing loyalty to her family.

The silk road was famous for its trading and buying, and Mei was excited and a bit nervous for her journey.

"Mei!" Her mother ran outside, a knitted bag full of delicious goods for the road. "You will need this, or you will get hungry!" Mei hugged her mother, she did not know what she would do without her mother.

"Thanks, mama. I'll see you soon!" She kissed her on the cheek and started walking across the dusty path, its grass long gone. She looked ahead at the mountains, the sun peaking up behind it. She was ready to start.

As she started her path, she checked every few moments to make sure that her silk was still in there. It would not fall out she knew, as the bag was the sturdiest it could be, but it still brought her comfort to check and have the knowing that it was still there. The wind was cold, but her passion for her family was all the warmth she needed.

Every so often, Mei would come across travellers just like her, bringing their supplies to the silk road for trading. She looked at them, as they would travel with their families, the only reason that they kept going. But this fuelled Mei—every moment she wanted to give up hope and head home, she thought about her family, her father, and how proud he would be if he was still alive and she returned home with what they needed.

Mei was a few days in when she experienced her first trouble—the desert. The blistering sand grinded across her feet, leading to new sores every time she travelled without a clear path to walk on. It was painful, but she was determined to keep walking.

As she travelled through the desert, the wind carried the hot air to her face and caused her to get many headaches and sunburns. Mei's skin was fair, and her hair was black, causing more sun to show on her scalp. In just a few hours, Mei looked like the tomatoes her mother had packed her in her food bag. It hurt to take off her sandals whenever she laid down to rest, and whenever she put her sandals back on again.

Luckily though, she had packed some extra bandages in case it was needed. And, in a few days, her feet were as good as new too.

One day Mei was crossing a bridge of a small town when she saw a little boy selling apples for a penny. She looked at the boy, and saw the striking resemblance between her and the boy...not on the outside features, but on the inside. Both taking time out of their day, to try and help their families to be better financially. She made eye contact with the boy and nodded her head. A silent reminder that he isn't alone in this path, and he never will be.

She headed off into the unknown as she descended through the next few paths that she never heard about (or seen) in her life either.

Soon she came across a man who had fallen and scraped his knee. He was an old man, 70 years old at max, and he looked like he needed help. Mei put down her bag and got out her soft bandages that she wrapped around his knee after washing it with fresh drinking water. The old man smiled, his wrinkles hiding behind his thick dimples on his cheeks. Mei smiled at him and moved on her path.

"Young lady, wait!" The old man yelled at her and Mei turned back to see what was wrong. He got to his feet and started to jog towards her.

"Yes sir?" Mei replied. The old man came up to her and started digging through his pockets. He grabbed Mei's hand and put some small coins and an old pocket watch in her hand. "Oh sir, I cannot take this! It was only a bandage that I gave you!" The old man smiled again and said, "Lady, it was not the bandage that made me want to give this to you, it was the thought that counts. Mei smiled and gave a quick bow. "Thank you sir!" she replied as she walked off her path. The old man chuckled and walked back to his own path.

Mei looked at the coins and put them in her bag. This could be extra for meals, or she could save it for her family. She also looked at the pocket watch. It was stunning, with swirls of gold melted onto the cover, and small diamonds studs hammered into the hand. She wondered how much she could get for this watch, a few dollars for the least, and maybe she could come home with extra money to spare! Mei nodded her head on that one, she just had to find a place to sell the pocket watch.

Mei walked and looked at the signs, she was so close to the silk road! She imagined what the road would look like...would there be girls there like her, selling and trading for their family? Would she make new friends? Mei was busy in her mind of imagining when all of a sudden she heard it.

A faint scream quiet enough to be not heard of, but still Mei heard it. It was coming from the bushes about 100 meters away. She ran up to them and saw a child with a hand over its mouth, and 2 thieves were looking through his bag. But his eyes...the child's eyes looked so familiar. And that's when it clicked. The child was the person selling the apples Mei had saw!

Mei took off her bag and swung it at the 2 men. She made sure that they heavy coins part was the area that hit them both, and in a matter of seconds, the thieves were passed out onto the ground.

The child was whimpering as Mei put his items back into his bag and handed it to them.

"Are you all right?" She asked him, not wanting to be loud and scare him, as he had just been through enough scaring and trauma already. The child looked at her, grabbed the bag, and run off.

Mei wanted to run after him, but she did not have enough time. She could see the silk road and it was getting dark. She started to jog and run to the road.

As she made her way to the road, she sighed and stepped her feet onto it. It was a sigh of relief, and all she needed to do now what trade her silk and go back home.

The road was bustling with merchants, yelling up and down to buy their things. But, in the corner of her eye, she could see a fragile old woman going down the street asking if anyone had any silk to spare. Mei ran up to her and asked, "Miss, if you are looking for silk, I have some that you might be interested in!"

The old woman nodded her head and asked, "Would \$6 be enough for each part of clothing?" Mei nodded her head. It was more than enough. She had done it.

Zhang left briskly. Li-hua gripped her dress. How was she going to achieve this impossible task?

That night, Li-hua paced around her tent, and her mind raced with scenarios. Should she stay? Should she leave? Where would she go? Back to the emperor's palace? Would she even be allowed to return? The uncertainty of her future gnawed at her soul.

The days passed fast. The road was ever so busy and harsh. The seasons came and went. All Li-hua could do was wait. She didn't know what she was waiting for. That was until one afternoon, as Li-hua was taking a break in the busy local bazaar, she saw a little girl, perhaps eight years old, her eyes too large for her thin face. At first, she had thought the girl was browsing the spices or pondering over the trinkets. The girl turned around, their eyes meeting for just a second. A flash of recognition crossed Li-hua's mind. The girl looked familiar. No, she couldn't possibly be one of the emperor's workers' daughters. But it *was* her. Li-hua had seen her before. There was some hesitation. The girl made her next move, something Li-hua had never dared to do.

The girl ran, a silent sprint, not aimless, but towards a caravan guard patrolling the bazaar. Her small hands outstretched in a plea, "Please, sir, I am one his Majesty Emperor Wu's imperial weavers. I really want to go back, please, take me there, sir!"

Li-hua's breath caught. Her body froze as she heard the very words she had been afraid to say, the truth she had whispered only to herself.

The guard, listening, looked down at the terrified girl. His bored eyes lingered on her for a second, and, not unkindly, shrugged. Glancing at a fuming merchant approaching, he laid a heavy hand on the girl's shoulder and marched her back into the caravan.

The hope in Li-hua's chest shattered like porcelain against stone. The sound was quiet, like a final closing of a door she hadn't known she was watching.

That evening, when Zhang brought her meal, she did not look up. When he mentioned the new pattern for the Sogdian traders, she simply nodded. Alas, she wove not for honor, nor for heaven, nor even for a future. She wove because it was the only language left to her in the world. Her reality was the loom, the road, and the countless other silent hands, moving in the dark. Together they weaved a legacy that was no longer a treasure, but a trade.

"O Revered Lady Leizu, Mother of Silk,
forgive this stolen daughter, this broken
thread. I offer you not glory, but this empty
prayer.
I offer you not cloth, but these empty hands."

Not All Treasures Travel in Silk

The Hong Kong International School, Huang, Jayden – 12

There was something unusual about the crate. The crate was sealed carefully, too carefully.

Liang Wen noticed it as soon as it was loaded onto the caravan. The wood was rough, the joints were tight, and the chains bundled with care as if someone was hiding a secret. It was marked down as silk, yet when he shook the crate, it felt nothing like silk. Instead of a soft rustle, there was a dull hollow thud, the sound of hard objects knocking against wood.

Empty crates were common on the Silk Road. Goods were traded, stolen, and replaced all the time. But this one felt different. It felt heavier than it should have been.

“Don’t touch that!” The merchant snapped.

Liang Wen pulled his hand back. His job at the caravan was to count and record the goods. Nothing else. However, as the caravan moved west from Dunhuang, he could not stop thinking about that crate.

From the very first day, the journey felt uneasy. At night, the merchants muttered about border inspections and forbidden goods being moved. The Silk Road was a busy trade route, but there were many secrets.

At the next border, the caravan was stopped by guards wearing dusty uniforms. Liang Wen stood quietly as they checked the goods. He noticed the merchant pulled a guard and hurriedly whispered unfamiliar words. The merchant glanced around, then quickly slipped a small pouch into the guard’s hand. The guard nodded and waved them throughout without checking all the crates.

Liang Wen’s stomach tightened. Bribes were not only expensive, but risky. No one paid money unless they were hiding something important. His eyes drifted back to the sealed crate. For the first time, he was certain it was more than strange.

That night, under the vast desert sky, Liang Wen sat alone with his records. Something didn’t add up. Silk was listed in Chang’an, but the paper only showed up later in Kucha. No weights were recorded. No taxes were paid. Was it an accident, or was it done on purpose?

Liang Wen’s mind raced. The paper was not just material. It carried ideas, secrets, and knowledge. Not everything that traveled was meant to be seen. Some things were too powerful to be exposed, yet they could change the course of history faster than any army.

The next morning, soldiers appeared on the horizon. The caravan stiffened. Everyone was afraid of what might happen. Inspections didn’t happen often, but when they did, they were serious. The officer dismounted from his horse, his boots sinking into the sand with every step. “We will search your goods,” his voice firm.

The merchant forced a smile, but his hand shook. “Of course,” he said.

The crates were opened. The silk unfurled. Spices smelled sweet. Nothing wrong. When

they reached the sealed crate, the officer tapped it with his boot.

“What’s inside?” the officer demanded.

“Silk,” the merchant replied, trying to sound confident. The

officer gestured. “Open it.”

The merchant hesitated.

Liang Wen's heart pounded. He stepped forward. "Sir," he said, keeping his voice steady, "if I may—" The merchant's eyes flashed at him. A warning.

Liang Wen ignored the warning. "This crate has already been taxed. Its contents are recorded and sealed. Everything is accounted for."

The officer's gaze shifted to Liang Wen. "And you are?"

"In charge of records," Liang Wen said. "I record the truth, so others do not have to guess."

Silence stretched. The wind rattled the chains. The officer's eyes narrowed. Then he waved his hand. "Move on."

The caravan exhaled in relief. But Liang Wen could not. His mind swirled with questions. What had he helped to hide and what were the consequences if they were caught?

That night, the merchant confronted him, leaning close. "You nearly ruined everything," he whispered harshly. "You could be betraying everyone for all I know," Liang Wen replied.

The merchant stared at him, then laughed quietly, a sound that seemed to echo in the still desert. "Do you know what's in that crate?"

"I do not," Liang Wen admitted.

"Nothing," said the merchant. "And everything."

The merchant reached for the crate and wrestled with the chains, metal scraped against the wood before it finally gave way. The lid creaked open. Inside lay wooden frames, fine brushes, shallow sieves—tools arranged with deliberate care. Beneath them were instructions, inked in a neat, unfamiliar handwriting.

Not silk.

Not spices.

But the knowledge itself—the craft of making paper.

Liang Wen stared, his mind racing. "If this spreads..." he began.

"Silk loses its throne," the merchant said. "Bamboo loses its weight. Empires will change how they are remembered."

"Why carry it west?" Liang Wen asked.

"Because knowledge should not stay buried," the merchant replied. "It should move with people. Ideas can travel faster than silk."

From that day on, the crate was both treasure and burden. Every shadow across the dunes seemed to hide an inspector. Every wind gust made ropes creak like whispers of danger. Liang Wen counted his heartbeats as if they were numbered, each beat a reminder that what they carried was not just wood and paper, but power.

Weeks later, they faced another inspection. The officer demanded the crate be opened.

Liang Wen looked at the merchant. The merchant looked at the incoming officers. Then he whispered, "Burn it."

Flames licked the wood, curling pages into ash. Smoke rose into the night sky. The officer nodded, satisfied. “Looks like you have saved yourselves,” he smirked.

Liang Wen thought he would feel lighter, but he felt only weight. Had they destroyed something that could change the course of history? Months later, in Samarkand, he saw paper for the first time—rough, imperfect, unmistakable. The instructions, the techniques, the ideas—they had survived. They had travelled faster than guards, armies, or fire.

Liang Wen opened his records and wrote one final line:

Not all treasures travel in silk. Some travel ideas.

And the Silk Road moved on.

A Letter for Mei

The Hong Kong International School, Johnson, Ella – 13

Dearest Mei,

Greetings, my beloved one. I hope things are well back in Chang'an. Life on the road may be treacherous and tough, but the thought of our future together maintains my resolve. Nowadays, I cannot go a day without hearing stories from other merchants about bandits, raiders, and all kinds of thieves. Mei, you're the only one I'll admit this to, but I'm becoming increasingly fearful myself. Nevertheless, I also hear many stories of triumph, like how Europeans further west are quite fond of our peoples' silk, spices, and other delicacies. The journey shall soon prove its worth.

Orange, red, green and yellow pieces of fabric layered atop pieces of clothing that wrap all around their bodies. Headwraps tucked into small knots on their heads. Brown leather shoes that they slip onto their feet. And a moustache that perches on their lip, like a small little handlebar. The way they speak is interesting too, almost like birdsong. How peculiar it all is. Now, my love, to what I really wanted to tell you about. You may have heard the rumors that are circulating about a new disease, one that they're calling "The Great Morality." I try not to dwell on it, but lately, more and more travelers have been telling us about the horrors inland; how those who catch it grow these tremendous black "buboes", they call it. Much to my dismay, a fellow traveler recently caught this disease. Engorged, nauseating growths appeared on the merchant's neck and body, seemingly swelling by the hour. These buboes were so inflamed, they grew as large as chicken eggs at their peak size. The poor man was hunched over a bucket for hours on end, retching and vomiting until he could cast up no more.

As you might guess, living conditions along the silk road are particularly loathsome. Travelling in a caravan with 20 other men is foul. Crawlers and vermin are constantly coming and going; yesterday, I accidentally stepped on a cockroach in the middle of the night while getting up to "take care of business." I heard a squelching sound under my heel, rupturing every organ in the poor roach's body.

Mei, if you were here, things wouldn't feel this dreadful. They never do when you are by my side. You never lose heart, even in the most grim times, such as these. Like when we learned you could not bear a child, I know you were utterly devastated. And yet you still tried to soften my sorrow with your acts of care: You opened the curtains to brighten our home. You tended the fire to keep us warm. You prepared broth to keep our hunger at bay. You read us poetry to nourish our soul.

Alas, my lonely journey persists on, my heart aches for someplace to call home. I cannot wait to come back to Chang'an and see you, my dear. This letter may be short, but my love for you endures.

I wish you safety and good health in my absence. Li

Wang Ming's Odyssey

The Hong Kong International School, Law, Olivia – 11

Wang Ming's mother held a silk hand carry bag and gently handed it to her son. Wang Ming asked, "What is inside?"

Wang An explained, "You need to trade goods in the Silk Road, so take these!"

Wang Ming took a quick peek inside. Inside were almost every single item that they sold in their shop: silk, brushes, paper, ink...

Wang Ming nervously replied to his Mom, "Mom, you can't do this! This is almost every item we are selling in the shop! You can't do this to yourself! How can we keep up the rent? How can you survive and earn money?"

Wang An delicately stroked her son's back and said in a calm voice, "Don't worry, I've got everything covered."

Wang Ming stood frozen like a statue as he let his mind cycle and cycle, repeating what his Mom had said. Wang Ming stared at the legendary map that would guide him across the Silk Road. Where he found it when digging a well for his home. Wang Ming reluctantly nodded his head, as he wiped the droplets around his eyes.

He stammered, "Okay, Mom. I will do whatever it takes."

Wang An hastily ran over to the dusty table and came back with a shiny silver necklace bearing the family name.

Wang Ming's eyes widened, "Is that what I think it is?"

She whispered, "Yes, this is our family heirloom made out of real silver! Take this with you for the journey on the Silk Road!"

"I will, Mom!" Wang Ming confidently said.

Wang Ming was journeying through the high-cliff mountains of the Mongolian border. The mountains had a pile of white snow covering the top. The wind had a sinister howl. Wang Ming was about to take a step forward, until an unfamiliar and demanding voice shouted in a language Wang Ming could not recognise, "STOP RIGHT THERE, YOU SILK ROAD TRAVELER! SHOW US WHAT YOU HAVE!"

Wang Ming tried to find the nearest rock to hide, but it was too late. The mysterious horse-riding soldiers pointed their sharp swords right at Wang Ming.

He mumbled in his own language, "I don't know what you are talking about."

The tallest, strongest soldier yelled to the others, "DOES ANYONE KNOW HOW TO SPEAK TANG DIALECT?"

A soldier raised his hand.

The leader yelled at the soldier, "Tell him to give one of us his goods or else I will stab him with my sword!"

The soldier translated, "My master said that you must give one of your goods or he will stab you with his sword!"

The last few words shook Wang Ming's heart and brain like the sword was actually stabbing him.

Wang Ming's number one promise was to bring home lots of goods from the Silk Road. He couldn't let his Mom and the shop down; he didn't even want to give a little piece of silk!

In a blink of a flash, Wang Ming had an idea to give the soldier something. Not the goods from the Silk Road, the legendary map! Wang Ming knew it was such a risky idea to do something like that, losing his way across the Silk Road. However, that was the only option he had instead of giving up one of his goods.

Wang Ming reluctantly passed the map to the soldier. He explained, "Give this to your master..."

When the soldier received the legendary map, he shouted to his master, "LET'S GO, THE PERSON GAVE US A LEGENDARY MAP!"

The soldiers roared with triumph, their voices echoing like wolves in the night. In a flash, they galloped away, leaving Wang Ming stranded in the wilderness.

Days passed, weeks passed, months passed. Wang Ming was running as fast as a Ferghana horse across the Mongolian border and beyond, hoping to find a way back to Chang'an. From Wang Ming's knowledge of illustrated maps in the shop, none of the places he'd seen looked like Chang'an.

He'd only seen mountains, thousands of meters high, green grass, and packs of grey wolves howling. Wang Ming hadn't rested since the day he gave the map to the soldiers. He felt like he didn't have legs anymore!

Wang Ming always thought, "Never stop running; find a way back to Chang'an!"

All of a sudden, Wang Ming spotted a nearby city filled with animal skin tents, including a very luxurious one, that had golden ornaments hanging from the blue coloured silk fabric exterior.

Wang Ming thought to himself, "Finally, a city! Maybe I can trade for a while here and see if they sell any maps that will guide me through the Silk Road!"

Wang Ming was about to stride into the entrance of the city, where stood an iron-made gate. He didn't see any guards in the gatehouse, no footsteps rushing to stop him.

Wang Ming pulled the iron door open, peeking at the city, hearing bleats of goats and sheep. A horrifying voice yelled in a language Wang Ming did not understand, "TRESPASSER!"

A swarm of soldiers rushed to where Wang Ming was standing and tied him up using a long strand of thick rope. Wang Ming yelled, "STOP! I JUST NEED TO TRADE THINGS!"

A soldier sneered in Tang dialect, "Enough about the Silk Road! Now off to the slave market, you trespasser!"

The slave market was one of the last places Wang Ming would ever want to go to in his life. From stories his Mom told him, he could tell that the slave market was a dreadful place. He knew he would be forced to work until he died without getting paid. Worst of all, he would never see his Mom again!

Wang Ming vowed, his fear transforming into determination, "I will find a way to escape, no matter what happens."

Baba's Resting Place

The Hong Kong International School, Lee, Caitlin Suah – 12

“Prepare to surrender!” a group of people nearby hollered at us. Mama clutched her shawl tightly, and shrilled, “Run! It’s the bandits!”

We streaked through the fields of wheat; however, after running not so far, Mama suddenly came to a halt and extended the sack we carried into the crisp night air. “We can’t gain it this way, so why don’t we trade all of this for freedom?”

I stared at her as if to demand what in the world had gotten into her. In that sack, loaded with the rest of our belongings, was Baba.

Baba had pleaded with us to sprinkle his ashes on the place he was born as the fire a group of bandits had started to burned him. In my view, as long as we fulfilled Baba’s wish, his presence would keep us company. How would he be spread onto that spot if these bandits stole his ashes? My gaze was stuck to the ground, but I heard the bandits’ horses’ hooves pounding against the ground of the Silk Road—the road abundant of merchants from as far east and west as I knew of. It had spice merchants carrying colorful spices of all sorts from India, Anatolian carpet merchants from Turkey, and like us, silk merchants from China. But most importantly, the road was what I called home.

“So,” the lead bandit’s voice thundered as he hopped off his horse. “I suppose it’s a trade—off.” Mama placed the sack in his outstretched hands and kneeled down, losing her dignity.

I slumped down and hung my head close to the damp dirt, which was supposed to be the final resting place of Baba, and muttered into Mama’s ear. “What of Baba?” As the bandits climbed back on their horses and rode away, I slammed my fist hard on the ground. I felt inconsolable, unable to move on with life like an animal whose limb was broken. This was an unescapable nightmare. A tear quickly streamed down my cheek and plopped onto the dirt, making a dark splotch.

As I studied the splotch, my imagination propelled me to a Chinese mythical story Baba had told me occasionally before I drifted off to sleep. The story was about a Chinese goddess who had defeated monsters that had crawled onto her regal land in the sky like roaches do, and stealing things that weren’t theirs to possess.

Mama also stared at the splotch and paused for a moment. I could tell she was deep in thought, pondering what we should do. Finally, she twirled around to face me, and softly whispered, “We could use some help from someone powerful, couldn’t we, Meihua?” I peered up at her, and I noticed a small grin crack on her usually monotonous face.

Mama tossed a piece of jade, tightly packed in the fine silk of her Hanfu, into the air, praying as she did so. I was still half-puzzled of her plan to salvage Baba’s ashes from the bandits, and I tilted my head. Apparently, a...

Whoosh! A biting breeze whipped at us, and I gasped. The piece of silk and jade floated, higher and higher. It rose, like a sun rising. Gracefully, majestically, it caught both Mama’s and my gaze. Bam! A sheet of cloud-like silk sank onto us, and we quickly shook it off.

“Forgive us, most fair, intelligent goddess of them all!” Mama kneeled down, offering a sign of peace and respect. She explained the situation we were stuck in currently, and begged for the goddess's help. Mama told the goddess, Leizu, she was our only hope.

Leizu's gorgeous eyes peered down at us for a while, judging whether or not we were worthy enough for her help. Finally, she agreed, and told us of her genius plan to steal back Baba's ashes.

The breeze chilled me as the three of us crouched uncomfortably behind a bush. I heard the clanking of crockery, regretfully sniffed in the scrumptious aroma of a feast, and felt the ground vibrating. We had been hiding here for about a thousand hours, and my back was sore. I yearned to complain, yet I did not, for I knew this was the best solution to getting Baba's ashes back.

When the sound of the heavy bandits sitting down reached us, our trio bolted up, tore through the bandits' tent, and invaded their territory. While Leizu used her powers of silk to cast the bandits into a distant land, and Mama kept the rest busy using her surprisingly good martial arts, I tediously searched for Baba's urn. I was working so frantically. I was almost oblivious to a bandit about to pounce onto me. “You really think you're going to get away with this?” he sneered. My eyes widened with fear, and a chill ran down my spine. This really was the end of me. I clamped my eyes shut and braced myself for impact.

Whir! A sheet of silk transported him just in time, and I continued with my search. Darn! I groaned inwardly. These bandits sure do have some loot!

Finally, at the end of the tent, I found an intricately carved wooden box. It was locked by nothing but held firmly when I endeavored to open it. I turned my head here—and—there in search of Leizu, and catching sight of me, she yelled, “Perform the ritual your mother practiced for me to arrive!”

Desperate to get Baba's ashes back, I swiftly tore a piece of silk from the hem of my robe and wrapped the jade pendant I wore around my neck in it. Then, I flung the precious stone into the air and watched as it slowly fluttered down like an autumn leaf from a tree. Bang! The lid of the box shot open, and I jolted up, immediately snatching Baba's urn. I threw my arms up in triumph and stuck the urn outside the temple. I watched mesmerized as the sunset's breeze carried the ashes down the legendary Silk Road.

Echoes of the Silk Road

The Hong Kong International School, Li, Abigail – 12

The Silk Road was more than just a trail of dirt and stones winding through deserts and mountains; it was a living, breathing path filled with stories, dangers, and wonders. It seemed to whisper secrets only those brave enough to listen could hear. For Li Wei, a young merchant from Chang'an, the journey was both exciting and terrifying. He had grown up hearing stories of the Silk Road's incredible sights and dangerous threats, but now he was part of those stories himself. Traveling with traders like Amir, who could see beyond the obvious, Li Wei learned that his road was not just a route for trading silk and spices, it was a test of strength, trust and courage. Every step forward brought new challenges, and Li Wei soon realized that the road was a symbol of life itself, full of surprises that could either make or break a person.

One night, as the campfire flickered under a sky full of stars, Li Wei's nerves flared. Shadows moved in the darkness, like wild animals lurking, waiting for the right moment to strike. His heart pounded loudly in his chest, and he instinctively clutched his silk tightly, feeling its smoothness against his trembling hands. The silence that stretched endlessly and made him feel exposed. He knew that one wrong move could mean disaster. The threat wasn't just from the bandits outside; it was also from the fear that gripped him inside. But as dawn broke, the caravan moved carefully, every person alert and cautious. Amir used subtle signals, a glance, a nod, to keep everyone safe, helping them stay one step ahead of danger. Despite their caution, the tension remained thick in the air because everyone understood that trouble could come at any moment, hiding in the shadows of the desert.

As days turned into weeks, the landscape around them changed dramatically. The flat, endless deserts gave way to towering mountains that loomed like silent guardians over the land. The peaks seemed to watch and judge every move the travelers made, storms would suddenly roll in with fierce winds and pounding rain, threatening to sweep away everything in their path. The howling wind sounded like a warning, and the rain soaked them to the bone. Amid these hardships, Li Wei's innocence and confidence were tested repeatedly. He saw cruelty in the world, bandits attacking without mercy; but he also saw kindness in the hearts of strangers who shared their meager supplies or offered shelter. Along the way, he met a girl carrying a small wooden horse carved with delicate details. This tiny toy became a symbol of trust and hope for Li Wei, a reminder that even fragile things could be strong if cared for. The wooden horse taught him that trust was fragile but valuable and that he had to be careful about whom he believed. The journey was not just about reaching a destination, it was about understanding the complexity of human nature and learning to navigate the uncertain terrain of life with patience and wisdom.

Finally, after many long weeks of travel, Li Wei arrived at the city of Samarkand. The city was breathtaking, bright colors everywhere, markets full of exotic spices and fabrics, and streets alive with noise activity. Tall minarets reached into the sky, as if trying to touch the heavens, and the air was thick with the scent of new experiences. Standing at the gates, Li Wei felt a deep sense of pride and awe. All the dangers, fears, and lessons from his journey had prepared him for this moment. He realized that the real treasure was not the silk or jewels he carried but the strength he discovered himself. His journey has taught him resilience, how to face danger, and keep moving forward, even when everything is uncertain. It showed him that trust was delicate but worth risking, and that stories and memories could last beyond the sands of the desert. The Silk Road has become more than just a trade route; it was a teacher that showed him how to survive, grow, and find meaning in every challenge.

As he stood at the city gates, Li Wei took a deep breath and looked out over the horizon. The tall minarets seemed to watch over him, silent yet reassuring. His heart was no longer filled with only fear, now it overflowed with hope and confidence. The road behind him was full of moments, dangerous encounters, acts of kindness, betrayal, and trust. Li Wei felt a quiet resolve inside. He was no longer a young merchant, he has become someone wiser. He listened to the whispers of the road. The journey helped him find himself, and with the knowledge, he was ready for whatever new chapters awaited him.

Hooves Along the Silk Road

The Hong Kong International School, Mung, Alana Florence – 12

“Take this one,” Jianmi commanded, his onyx eyes settling on a Ferghana foal among hundreds of others. The foal’s full eyelashes fluttered gently above his amber eyes, his velvet nose quivering. His silky coat glistened with a faint golden hue, as if it were made from liquid starlight. A rich mane flowed into a thick tail, strands of spun gold sashaying elegantly in the gentle breeze.

The foal is me—or rather, I was him a year ago. Wrenched away from my beloved mother just three months after birth, I was destined to become the general’s horse. My mother was grief-stricken, while I was left in a haze of confusion. All the horses in my family, reaching as far back as anyone could remember, were in military service to our land and the tribes of the Dayuan. My mother had whispered these stories to me, filling me with such pride that even at an early age, no human who crossed my path could take their eyes off me. But little did I know that my training would begin as early as it did, or that I would be so abruptly separated from my mother for it.

As his prized horse, I grazed in the abundant, jade-green fields of the Ferghana Valley, receiving full-body scrubs with goat-hair brushes until my pelt glowed. I pranced elegantly, basking in the admiring glances of fillies. It was hard to stay grounded, but I reminded myself daily that I was part of the world’s finest cavalry.

To be the best, I carried weights on my back as I navigated through rugged terrain, with sweat streaming down my flanks. In the heat of relentless training, a saying rang true: as Ferghana horses, we were said to “sweat blood.” Guards often marvelled at the pink tinge that stained my gleaming coat.

As the general’s horse, I was granted rest in the royal courts, munching on apples supplied by the king himself. “Trying to avoid dangers, another trouble will come...” a prophet intoned vaguely, fingers quivering over the fortune stick he had just drawn.

King Wugua jumped to his feet. “In my dream last night, while soaring through the Gobi Desert as a hawk, my second sight saw a distant army!”

My master, Jianmi, bowed deeply, indicating that he needed to speak. “Your Majesty,” he began, “your sight truly astounds—it’s the Han! They’re coming back...”

My mother had told me about the Han. Years ago, they offered a staggering sum—one thousand pieces of gold—for us, the fabled Heavenly Horses. Our king, tempted by the riches, accepted the gold but rejected their terms, choosing to ambush their envoys instead. Enraged, the Emperor of China sent an army to avenge the wrong and take us by force. My father was taken, and so were a few others, but we never heard from them again...

This was the war I had been training for. I was going to show the Han what a real horse was. Their horses, as we all knew, were smaller, slower, lacking the stamina that defined us. They didn’t stand a chance against us. That was why they wanted us and took my father—to claim the best. This was my chance to get my father back! This was my territory, and I had to defend it, or at least die trying.

On the day they arrived, the sun shone radiantly in the sapphire sky, like a good omen ready to be proclaimed. My master rode me to the front line to confront our enemy head-on. I was his best weapon, fire blazing from my flared nostrils; my hooves never touching the ground, riding on the wind.

Our mission was clear: keep the enemy from reaching our city’s outer wall. My master, the fearless leader of our troops, thrust his sword forward into a flying body as I galloped across the horizon. The first enemy soldier fell, swiftly followed by the next...

The Chinese horses scattered before us, no match for our strength or speed. At the sight of my powerful form rearing on my muscular hind legs, their steeds backed away, neighing in alarm. The sounds of swords clashing, hooves thumping, and whinnies of triumph flooded my ears, and my heart surged with pride.

Bring it on! This was a battle between war horses and farm animals. We were heading for the easiest victory in history.

Arrows flew overhead, and I knew we were outnumbered, but it didn't matter in the slightest. We were undoubtedly tougher and more experienced.

My master grunted in surprise as an arrow whizzed through the air, but he soon regained his calm composure. As swiftly as the arrow came, he charged ahead, once again the wind whistling by my ears as I flew towards the Han.

Then I saw him—a golden horse, muscular and towering above all, the perfect reflection of me. His amber gaze locked onto mine.

It was my father.

My heart pounded loudly as I reared up, overwhelmed with emotions.

Jianmi yanked my reins, growling, "Down, boy! What's gotten into you?"

I had to obey. My heart raced, a tear welling in my eyes as my legs betrayed me, galloping ahead. I expected my father to do the same; instead, he stood his ground.

"You've grown, my son. I'm proud of you," he nickered softly as I approached, and my heart swelled with pride.

The battle around us raged on—swords clashed above our heads, and grunts of pain erupted—but my world narrowed to that single moment.

A father against a son. We were torn apart by duty and fate. Jianmi hissed as the general's blade grazed his shoulder, but he quickly regained his calm composure. His obsidian eyes flashed with fury, and a murderous roar escaped his mouth. His sword flew from his hand, aiming for the general's chest.

From my left, I saw an arrow piercing through the air, spiralling with deadly precision towards my master. No—I realised with a jolt—it was coming for me. Time seemed to stretch; the world around us faded into a blur. My hooves felt rooted to the ground, paralysed by fear. It was too late.

In a blur of motion, a horse soared in front of me. The wind whipped through his gorgeous mane; tense muscles rippled under a dazzling coat; sparking eyes set with desperation.

"No!" I whinnied, my voice breaking with desperation, "I can't lose you, not again..."

In an instant, he fell. His honey eyes searched for mine, and for one fleeting moment, I dared to believe the arrow had missed him completely.

But then he croaked, "Son, serve Emperor Wu and his people well."

A pool of crimson seeped from beneath his golden fur, staining the ground. He nickered softly, exhaling his final breath, and my heart shattered.

A tremor of panic surged through the ranks as a shout rang out from the Han soldiers: "General Jianmi has been captured!"

Jianmi's lips curled into a defiant sneer, his arms bound tightly, while General Li leapt to his feet, tears streaming down his face. "My horse, Xiang, he's dead..."

His jaw dropped as he noticed me for the first time, staring at our identical physiques, shaking his head in disbelief as he continued, “H—his son. He took the arrow for his son.”

Tears blurred my vision as General Li approached me, his gentle hand caressing my cheeks despite Jianmi’s protests. But he wasn’t my master anymore. I belonged to the Han, bound to serve General Li to honour my father’s last wish.

My new destiny loomed in front of me. If China won the war, I was to return to my new homeland—a land that had traded a thousand pieces of gold for us, yet had never seen us come home.

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A group of students huddled over an exhibit, peering into the glass case; their faces lit up with interest.

A legendary horse stood, as if it were in mid-gallop. The ornate craftsmanship brought the horse to life, its river of mane cascading down in fluid waves. Glinting like twin stars, its eyes held a mesmerizing depth, as if it had an otherworldly gaze that watched the world with an ancient awareness.

The horse is me—immortalised in bronze, forever tied to the legacy of the Han dynasty.

After China defeated Dayuan, I returned with a thousand horses, becoming Emperor Wu’s royal steed, just as my father said. He cherished me so deeply that he commissioned this intricate statue in tribute to me.

It was through my journey that trade flourished, marking the start of the Silk Route—or what people nowadays call the “Silk Road”—a network of routes that would connect cultures and economies for centuries to come.

I am Xiang, named in honour of my late father, and my name means ‘fei xiang’—to soar. But to many, I am known simply as the Flying Horse of Gansu...

The Weight of Silk

The Hong Kong International School, Tong, Asa – 13

Imagine if everyone followed Ahimsa. A world without violence would be one step closer to a utopia. The rulers who have caused so much suffering, gone. Women, like my young Lily would have a chance at life, a life unchained by the shackles of our world and the hubris of men.

Shame a world like that will never exist. For man has broken Ahimsa. I have hurt others. I have broken my vows and laid hands upon man. I am deeply regretful, and I beg for forgiveness. However, it was necessary; for I have brought vengeance upon a devotee and practitioner of Māra's ways.

One week earlier.

Knock Knock Knock.

"I'll get it." Lily grumbles as she stands up to open the door.

"Hello? Dad, he's here for you."

A man in a long silk hood flows through the door, resting on a small wooden cane.

"Hello." I take in the long knife sheathed on his leg and the scars cut across his face.

"Seat yourself." I fill a bowl with what little mush we have left and serve it to him.

In the back of my mind those few dark sentences keep echoing. 'By decree, all housing in this district is being repurposed and sold to accommodate people of higher status. By the next full moon, all attendees must move out.'

We're being displaced. Like a wolf being run out, we're being repelled. Left to rot in camps across the empire. Is this a knight of their order? Here to move up the date and drive us out without a second thought? Heartless merchs.

"Nikolatas sends his regards." He remarks, his voice gravely and deep. He pulls out an apple and takes a crisp bite.

I breathe half a sigh of relief. Nikolatas might be worse than the merchs, but he won't utterly destroy my life unless I cross him.

"Why are you here?"

"There's a caravan coming tomorrow. Kid, merch, only one guard. But no one is trustworthy. The merch has his dirty little fingers everywhere. If we have one of his followers helping us, they might just turn. We need someone who will help us without question."

"Well," I laugh. "Nikolatas is a fool. I swore a vow. I won't kill; I won't steal. I'll make do with what I have now. Thank you for the offer but close the door on your way out."

A long time passes before he talks again.

"You're not fine. They'll come in a few days, and in the end, you'll be dead in a month. 25 extra solidi. Just get your hands a bit dirty."

Another bite of apple.

Lily jumps up, unable to sit silent any longer. "No. He said no. Your temptation. Violence cannot ever be the answer. We'll work it off and buy the house back."

25 solidi. Enough to buy the house back, pay for Lily's education and feed us for months. A small fortune that could change Lily's entire life. That amount would give her room to grow. Room to become something and someone; not just a pretty accessory at a man's side.

"No." I say after mulling it over for a while. "Just get your hands a bit dirty? Violence builds on itself. It destroys innocent men and turns others into endless balls of torment and hate."

The man sighs back into his chair.

"Nikolatas even said that you'd say those exact words. Philosophical junk. I wanted to keep this a surprise, but one last tidbit. The merch? Mr. 'City of Angels' Eycha himself."

My blood boils every time I hear his name. Nikolatas is a genius, heartless killer whose life revolves around creating and exploiting other's misfortunes, but Eycha is somehow worse. He is sadistic to the core.

"Remember?" The man takes another bite. "He tore your mother apart. Piece by piece. Years of hard work. She sacrificed her entire life to make sure you had an education. Preached about hard work, sacrifice, and good foundations. But then Eycha came in; the worm he is. Discredited her and ruined her name. The money? Gone. Maybe you could've worked your way out of the slums. Think about it." He stands up, pushes in his chair, and leaves.

I feel my skin crawl, goosebumps running up and down. "Woah." Lily whispers. "Woah. He must have spent a long time practicing that speech. Very intimidating. Gosh, he didn't even eat anything." She takes his untouched bowl of mush and scarfs it down.

"Wait." She remarks, looking me up and down. "You aren't seriously thinking about it. You can't."

I nod sadly.

"But what about your mother? Hard work, a good foundation. Anyone, from the bottom or to top, can reach the stars if they have merit. And killing? It goes against everything we stand for. You just can't!"

She shouts oh, so desperately.

Three days later.

Here I lie. My back against the sheets of sand that conceal me; the dunes that stretch for miles until you hit mountain.

Watch. How the air coalesces around me, thickening with every shallow breath I take.

Watch. The burning hot sun boiling me alive; the whole world feels purgatory.

Watch. My last pair of shoes slowly melting into black goop on my feet, burning the soles of my feet.

I would give anything to leave this place.

Here I lie. My mother always used to say, "A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step." (千里之行始于足下, Qiān lǐ zhī xíng shǐ yú zú xià) "But always take the right first step – a journey to hell you'll forever regret."

Is this my step towards hell? They're just as bad, if not worse than I am. Aren't their tales of grand heroes who steal from the rich and give to the poor? Don't they deserve it? And remember, this is for Lily. This is for Lily. This is for Lily. Lily matters more than anyone in the world.

No. Hurting, killing people. It's unjustifiable. Without empathy, without trust, how are we different from mother nature's beasts?

So why am I trying to justify it?

I shake my thoughts out of my head. This is not a time to contemplate philosophical ideas.

Here I lie; I push my hair, matted with sweat, to the side and grab a sword. A killer's weapon, something just a few weeks ago I would never have thought of holding.

Suddenly, I hear the thumps of horses, slowly making their way along the dunes. This is my last chance to leave. To run, take Lily and go to another city. We could leave. We could start fresh and work our way up.

But what if my mother was wrong? What if we can't work our way up?

This is for Lily.

There you are. Not the idiotic pacifist you were before. The real you. Raw. Powerful. Mother nature is a cruel mistress after—all. See Eycha and his son? Look at their smirks. They think they're better than you. Watch yourself. Watch yourself Wish Them Dead.

Imagine their smirking faces. What they did to you. All of them. They dress up with pretty faces and spout nonsense about peace and tranquility. But they're devils in disguise. They turn and burn. Burn your mother. Your life and family were taken by them.

Hear that horn blare? It's the signal for you to attack. And boy, do you deliver. Your vision clouds, everything fading red.

Feel the adrenaline course through your veins? Like snakes under your skin.

Feel yourself clutching the rock? How it digs into your palm like a flea burrowing deep into your skin.

Feel the rage? Deep and raw like a tidal wave crashing onto a shore. But you can't feel it, or anything anymore.

A guttural scream escapes you as the rock comes down and down and down. Again, and again. Each hit feels good. Fueling your rage hit after hit after hit. Every single time you were wronged. Cheated. Destroyed. No analogy could accurately describe the years of mental anguish and torture, slowly building up. All of it leading up to this one point; the climax of your days so far.

You can feel him gasping in pain, the blood running up and down his tunic. It clots in the afternoon sun.

"Please." The rock comes down again.

"Please." You can hear him whispering now, his voice growing urgent. Actually, you can't hear him anymore. It's just you and the devil, alone in eternal purgatory.

"PLEASE!" The voice came out loud. Loud enough to break you out of it. But it is far too late.

Eycha's body lies there, broken and defeated. His blood waters the ground, dying the ocean of gold blood red.

You feel the adrenaline leaving you. The rage and the power whisked away in the wind.

Imagine if everyone followed Ahimsa. If the endless cycle of hate and torment stopped. The world would be one step closer to a utopia.

Of Borrowed Bravery

The Hong Kong International School, Yeung, Catherine – 12

“The mountains will lure you in with promises of breathtaking views of the expansive land of Tibet,” the old hag had begun, the young boy paying little attention to her words as he observed uncomfortably closely to the folds of her aged, raisin skin and thinning gray hair. The following sentence, however, had truly snapped him out of his trance, the elderly woman narrowing her milky eyes as she continued in a low, raspy voice: “but, be warned, *Ismail*: you must never let your guard down, or the Dön will find you and enslave you to a life of misfortune.”

This warning had been reverberating for far too long in the young boy’s mind like an echo chamber as he ventured into the Kunlun Mountains of Tibet. He shouldn’t believe her, he thought, a memory rising to the surface:

Ismail had immediately awoken from his nightmare, the horrifying vision of a three-headed monster boasting sharp claws and knife-like teeth still in his mind. Warm brown eyes fluttered open, and he took a few deep breaths to calm himself, yet he still could not hold back. Like a broken dam, tears burst out and streamed down his gaunt cheeks.

“Amma,” he whispered, rivulets of tears spilling from his eyes, “are you sure monsters don’t exist?” “Oh,

Chotu,” a gentle smile pulling at her lips, “I want you to know: pray to the gods, and you will never face any monster.”

Yet, goosebumps still rose on his arms, the warning still sent shivers down his spine, and he had to question just *how* he ended up here.

Really, it was months ago, when his mother had fallen ill. The family needed a way to scrape even the slightest amount of fortune to provide for the family. The solution: assigning young Ismail the duty of travelling far and wide, an eternal prison sentence of bargaining and sore limbs.

Ismail overheard some of the gossips in Multan, his hometown, whispering nonsense about it being his “fate,” but he hated the idea; the word was too *heavy*. It forced him to a life with one option only. One that promised constant unfulfillment, with no choices. Forever.

As for the present moment, however, he couldn’t think about that. He refused to allow his hatred to force him to give up now. Not when he knew his family back home all thought of him as the final hope. Not with the horribly vivid picture of his sickly mother tucked under thin, cheap blankets, her frame only growing thinner, skin only turning paler, losing all the brightness in her face there once was.

From his point on the trek, Ismail could understand the mountain’s allure the hag had mentioned. He’d long strayed away from the sweet aroma of cinnamon and crowded markets of the Silk Road, but this could rival the ambiance he’d grown to love. Tibetan plateaus below stretched across thousands of miles, filled with the sounds of melodic *chirp-chirp* of larks and cranes, valleys of flowers in every shade: vibrant fuchsias of gesang flowers, jolly cerulean poppies, canary yellow buttercups.

The sun was setting, the marigold rays of sunlight sinking further down into the endless abyss of the ever-darkening azure sky. Gazing at the sunset, Ismail quickly realized night would arrive soon. So, he hiked a little longer, his gangly legs growing heavier, mouth arid as the Sahara from lack of water, before finally stumbling across a spot to stay for the night. It was far from ideal, but the cave *did* promise a roof, at least, so he certainly wouldn’t wake up to soaked belongings and drenched rags for clothes.

Later, Ismail rested on his bed of leaves, wrapping his blanket around his body. Wistfully, he couldn’t help reminiscing on a simpler time where it would not be him tucking himself to bed, but rather his mother, the memory of her buttery-soft hands caressing his cheeks, her gentle tone as she whispered a soft “good night.”

That simpler time seemed so far away now.

The sky had already darkened, bright stars contrasting against Ouranos’ midnight blue visage—the name was from a myth he’d heard from Greek merchants. Bedazzled, he raised his pointer finger as he stared at the stars, slowly tracing the sickle of Leo, stretching from Regulus to Leonis.

Entranced by the lovely constellations freckled onto the midnight skin of the sky, he almost missed the rustling of leaves, a soft *shh* sound from somewhere nearby. Immediately, a jolt of paranoia rushed through his mind, the old hag’s reminder ringing in his ears.

*Never let your guard down. Never let your guard down. **Never.***

Cautiously, he crept away from his bedside, taking minuscule steps out into the wilderness, though he quickly concluded there was nothing he could say was odd or unusual about the scene. And so, with the final confirmation, the previously quick pitter-patter of his pounding heart calmed, the beat *ritardando* as it slowed to a restful tempo. Yet as he turned to head back to bed, something caught his eye.

It was something Ismail could only describe as a monster—terrifying, with its three eyes and eight arms. Most disturbingly, the faces of other victims floated along its body, mouths open, their screams for help all muted.

The Dön.

Its mere presence seemed to drown out all other sound, forcing Ismail's full attention onto the monster alone. At the sight, Ismail's eyes widened to the size of roti, and his heart hammered wildly as the spirit opened its mouth, revealing razor-sharp incisors slick with saliva.

Then, the only thing he seemed physically able to do in that moment was run.

So that's exactly what he did.

His legs burned with the built-up ache and fatigue from the countless months of travel, but even then, Ismail could only afford to wince as he forced his legs to jolt forward. Desperate gasps for air escaped his lips, but even as his heart felt like exploding, he persisted.

Absolutely exhausted, he didn't know how long he'd been running. Was the fatigue the result of an hour of running, or only ten minutes? It didn't matter; the ache in his limbs was excruciating no matter how long it'd been, and four days of soreness in his legs would be *generous*.

Finally, he allowed himself to glance back. It was

still there.

Ismail was truly out of ideas, not to mention breathless, fatigued and tired. He would die here tonight, or at the very least, he'd be cursed with eternal illness or misfortune or whatever had been in that terrible box of Pandora's. But as his mind raced for some final hope, an idea far too wild, too dangerous and unpredictable, emerged.

And so, even as he could see the Dön edge closer in his periphery, looming intimidatingly over his small figure, he gathered every last shard of his courage. He thought of his mother and her fearless approach to life, how she'd approach every difficulty with confidence and always *knew*, not *hoped*, that she'd get through it. And he thought maybe, just maybe, he could steal her bravery just this once; think of it as borrowing, maybe.

He channelled his newfound inspiration and borrowed bravery, all of it, as he took confident strides forward. Not once did he hesitate as his outstretched hand went to pet the Dön, caressing its spirit-like body like his mother had so long ago, gently and carefully.

The Dön's eyes widened at the action, a sense of fear in its eyes as it disintegrated entirely, the overwhelming colour of the faces and its bright blue skin and everything in between shattering into little fragments of light, shards of what once was. It was gone.

He blinked, questioning if what he had seen was genuinely real. Not for long, though. Soon he realized that *no*, he was not hallucinating, and couldn't help but bask in pride and excitement as a comical, cheesy grin spread across his features, stretching from ear to ear.

The sun would soon rise, and eventually, Ismail would have to continue his journey, he knew that. His mother had saved him only minutes ago; it was only right that he do the same for her, and unfair as it was, he'd stay on the Silk Road, fulfilling that godforsaken fate. He'd hike a thousand more miles and run from a million more monsters if it meant her survival, and through it all, he'd continue to borrow his mother's strength and bravery until he had developed that himself. And after, he'd allow himself to dream, channelling all that confidence towards every ambition or challenge, no limits at all to whatever he did with his life. Infinite choices. Forever.

As for now, Ismail allowed himself to take a rest, plopping down onto the muddy ground, gazing at the starry midnight sky. His eyes soon found Leo once more, and this time, he raised his fingers, tracing the body of the lion, starting at Denebola.

The Weight of Silk

The Independent Schools Foundation Academy, Cai, Yuxi Serena – 11

The bonfire rumbled during the late evening hours across the Taklamakan Desert, releasing embers soaring into a sky dotted with stars. Venlet prodded the fire with the point of a stick, while he admired the embers flicker corresponding to the thoughts within his mind that hadn't been settled. Beside him, the caravan's camels grunted and shifted in their sleep, their bells rang softly in the night wind.

Venlet was aware that he was different from the others. He was now seventeen, though he already stood much taller than most of the Chinese merchants in his lord, Zhong's trading company. His shoulders were broader, his characteristics were a blend of two different countries that seemed to belong fully to neither. His father had been from Turkish, his mother had been Chinese and he was a child born in the lively bazaar of Kashgar before everything fell apart. The civil conflicts that had ruined the Chagatai Khanate had left him orphaned and subsequently sold into service, travelling from the fractured ruins of Mongol power into Ming China. Just like turning into just another commodity on the Silk Road.

But all that was three years ago. That is three years of transporting bundles of silk that weighed practically as much as he did, of getting thrust first towards menacing bargaining, given that he comprehended both Turkish and Chinese, he was made to deal with Zhong's harsh criticism and requests that were given incessantly. One thing that bothers Venlet the most was while the other workers, Xue, Cai and Chen could rest during the most stressful times, though Venlet was always called to do the job. "Your back is stronger," Zhong would argue, never quite meeting Venlet's eyes. "You can manage."

It felt like punishment for simply being who he was.

Rumors were spreading that the Silk Road was dying. The great maritime were drawing away from these ancient desert paths that ancestors have been going through years, and each journey felt more desperate than the last. Yet here they were again, carrying silk and trades westward through Samarkand, where Venlet had met the Persian merchant Rashid three days ago.

"You're wasted on these people." He said. "You owe them nothing. I see how that old man treats you, always barking orders, never giving you a kind word. Help me, and I'll give you what you deserve. Two hundred taels of silver and your freedom. All you need to do is get these old men drunk tonight. My men and I will handle the rest." Venlet knew that what Rashid said had a strong meaning behind it. He knew that what Rashid said meant that the goods would be stolen. The men would be killed. Blood would soak into the desert sand, and the Silk Road would claim more victims, as it had claimed his father.

But freedom. The word had echoed in his mind like a prayer. It was what he always wished for.

Now, as the others began gathering around the fire for their dinner, Venlet's hand trembled as he poured wine into their cups. He had already adulterated sleeping drugs inside the wine, the merchant had assured him, just enough to make them sleep deeply.

"Venlet! Stop standing there like a statue and bring us the wine, time is not in our hands" Zhong called out, his rough voice cutting through the desert air.

Venlet's jaw tightened. Always ordering, always demanding, Venlet is giving no mercy tonight. He carried the cups to the circle of men seated on carpets around the fire. Xue grinned at him, gap-toothed and friendly as always. "Sit with us, little brother. You've earned your rest."

Little brother. They called him that sometimes, but Venlet had never been sure if they meant it or if it was just another way of reminding him he didn't belong in this group. He distributed the cups, his heart hammering against his ribs like a trapped bird. Chen took his with a nod of thanks. Cai clapped him on the shoulder. Zhong accepted it without looking up, his aged features illuminated by the firelight.

"Drink!" Chen raised his cup. "To another successful journey, and to getting home to our families!"

They drank. Venlet's cup remained full in his hands, the liquid inside looked as dark as blood.

"You're not drinking," Zhong observed, finally looking at him.

"I... I'm not thirsty."

"Not thirsty? After a full day's walk?" Zhong set down his cup, which Venlet noticed with a sinking feeling was still mostly full. "Sit down, son. I wish to talk to you."

The others, already sleeping from the drought, began to drift toward their beds. Venlet sat, feeling the weight of Rashid's silver pressing against his consciousness like a stone. Outside the circle of firelight, he thought he saw shadows moving. Rashid's men, getting into position.

Zhong was quiet for a long moment, staring into the fire. When he finally spoke, his voice was softer than Venlet had ever heard it.

"Do you know why I'm hard on you?"

Venlet looked away. "Because I'm different. Because I'm not completely Chinese."

"Because you remind me of your father."

The words struck Venlet like a physical blow. He turned sharply to face Zhong, but the old man wasn't looking at him. He was gazing into the distance, into some past only he could see.

"Your father, Mahmud, was my friend," Zhong replied. "We met each other thirty years ago, when the Silk Road still was filled with life, when Kashgar was a jewel of the world. Your father saved my life once, during a bandit attack near Turfan. We became brothers not by blood, but by choice." He paused, his voice growing heavy. "When the civil wars erupted in the Chagatai territories, when the different groups of people tore each other apart for power, I begged your father to come to China with his family to live with us. But he was stubborn, like you. He said Kashgar was his home, and he will not betray it."

Venlet felt something crack inside his chest. "He died in the fighting."

"Yes. And I couldn't save him. But I had made a promise if anything happened to him, I would care for his family. Your mother... She died of pneumonia two years later. You probably don't remember her well. But I remembered my promise. When I heard you were being sold at the market, I bought you immediately."

"You bought me," Venlet said bitterly. "Like a mule."

"I saved you from being bought by someone who would have worked you to death or worse," Zhong snapped, some of his old temper returning. Then he sighed. "I'm not a father. I never learned how to be gentle. I have no children of my own. So I treated you the way the road treated me, harshly, because the Silk Road is harsh, and it doesn't forgive

"I'm getting old," Zhong said quietly. "This body I have won't make many more journeys. The Silk Road is fading, and you know it. The sea routes are taking over, and the age of the caravan is ending. But I have built something here, a business that could survive the changing times if it had the right person to lead it. Someone strong. Someone who understands both East and West. Someone like you."

He finally turned to look at Venlet fully, and in the firelight, his eyes were shining.

“You're free to leave. You always were. Go back to Kashgar if you want, to what remains of it. Or stay. Stay and be my son, not my servant. Take up this business. These men, these workers that work for me, could one day be yours. Your mate, men that would always support you, encourage you. Xue, Chen, Cai, they already see you as a brother. They ask about you when you're not around, worry about you. Can't you see it?”

Venlet's vision blurred. He thought of Xue's grin, of Cai's rough affection, of Chen teaching him to write better Chinese characters during long desert nights. He thought of his father, a man he barely knew, either remembered, and this gruff old merchant who had kept a promise for seventeen years without ever speaking it aloud. Being unjustly accused by him.

He thought of Rashid waiting in the darkness with murder in his pocket.

Slowly, Venlet raised his cup and poured the wine onto the sand. “Don't drink anymore. Wake the others. We need to move the camp. Now.”

Zhong's eyes widened with mis—understanding, but he didn't question. He simply nodded and stood, calling out sharply to awake the men from their drugged slumber.

As chaos erupted, men stubbornly awakened, camels being hastily loaded, Rashid's bandits emerging from hiding only to find their prey escaping. The Silk Road was dying, perhaps, but the bonds it had forged would endure.

New Tales of China's Silk Road

The Independent Schools Foundation Academy, Chan, Chi Hei Gianne – 11

“Wei,” my mother croaked, her wrinkled hand reaching out to me. I turned away and fastened the strap on my dalian. Nearby, Liu, the only other girl on this journey, clung to her mother. I watched them, a pang of longing cutting through me. My grip tightened.

Then, I faced my mother and said the words I could never take back, “Goodbye.”

Her scream rang out: a desperate mixture of a shout and a cry.

I didn’t know if I would see my mother again; yet, I didn’t care. When she spoke to me, she only commanded and instructed. She was never gentle – not the way she was with my little brothers.

I pivoted towards Feng, our leader.

“Wei!” my mother shouted, her sobs intensifying as soldiers pulled her away. She clawed at the sand, grasping at nothing.

“Wei, help Guan,” Feng directed, pointing at the broad man who was stacking bags of silk into bamboo trolleys. I turned and obeyed.

I stood between Liu — her face streaked and swollen from crying with her mother — and Guan, his fists clenched tight. We exchanged a brief nod before Feng called us to order.

“We will succeed!” he barked. “We will make this country proud! We will be the first to return!”

The five of us — Feng, Guan, Liu, Chu, and I — saluted. We started walking.

By noon, my calloused foot had torn through the thin leather shoes my neighbor made. We stopped near a pond, drank some water and ate with our bare hands that were raw from gripping onto the bags. After what felt like a minute but was actually thirty minutes, we continued on our journey.

It soon began raining. The wind whipped against our faces, and I instinctively closed my eyes until my vision consisted of only a straight line.

One hour later, we finally sought shelter in a small cave. Our clothes were soaked through. I squeezed my hair and watched Liu, who had been shedding tears for the past ten minutes.

I knew I should have felt sympathy, but instead, I felt unburdened. Maybe it was envy. Or maybe it was hatred. She had a loving mother and people who would miss her if she never returned. I didn’t.

Chu's eyes flickered to me as Liu's sobs subsided, showing a hint of worry. “Wei,” he said softly. “Are you alright?” His query was like a lifeline tossed into a sea of chaos.

I forced a smile, a mask. I said, barely raising my voice above a whisper, “I’m fine.” Deceiving him was simpler than sharing the turmoil inside.

Soon, Liu wiped away her tears and stood. The journey continued.

At night, we sought shelter in a forest, using branches and leaves to make a fort while Feng prepared wormwood and lemon oil to deter bugs.

The next few months went like this. Walk, eat, rest, walk, eat, rest... It felt almost mechanical. One time I had almost given up. We had to climb down a rocky mountain, and I had always hated heights. That time, Liu helped me, and I warmed up to her – we were just two girls trying to survive.

On the 147th sunrise, I carved the 147th line onto the turtle shell the woman had given me. I had started writing when I saw the first sunrise months ago. On the turtle shell were words I didn’t understand, so I only used it for counting days with whatever I could find, a branch, stone, anything. By then, we were skinny, hungry, and looked like garbage. People stared at us like we were clothes-wearing aliens. We walked to the center of the place and Feng pulled out a piece of silk.

A woman walked passed, glancing once before leaving. Then a man walked passed. Then... Three hours later, we had not made a single purchase. But then, a woman wearing torn sandals came by.

“How much?” She asked, her words a foreign tongue. My companions and I traded confused looks. What clicking sound was coming out of this woman’s mouth?

“From China,” Feng tried explaining in Chinese. The woman shook her head and instead wrote down and moved her hand. I pulled the turtle shell out of my pocket and traced my finger over it. The woman saw a glimpse of it and her eyes lit up.

“Silk?” She asked in her foreign tongue.

Only until she held out a few beanstalks had I understood her meaning. “She wants to buy it.” I explained, pointed at her hand. “Trade.”

Feng tentatively held out the fabric, and the woman and him traded items. We glanced at each other. The sun began to set, casting golden hues across the bustling square, and for a brief moment, a flicker of hope ignited in all of us.

The weeks that followed were a blur of trading and learning. We encountered various cultures and slowly adapted to our new surroundings, learning snippets of new language. Each success brought us closer, but the loneliness of our plight loomed overhead like a cloudy sky. I watched Liu, who seemed to bloom with each interaction. My feelings were torn: between gratitude for our survival, and gnawing, green envy.

One evening, as the sky turned a brilliant orange and we settled into our makeshift camp outside a village, I felt a surge of courage wash over me. I watched the flames dance as they illuminated Liu’s face. With each crackle of the fire, I thought about my mother. I turned to Liu and said, “You know, I wish things were different.”

Her brow furrowed slightly, “What do you mean?”

“I mean...having a family who cares. Sometimes I envy you,” I admitted, and the words spilled out before I could stop them.

Liu’s expression softened, as if she understood my plight. “It’s not all it seems. I had my family, but I worry every day.”

Maybe we weren’t so different, after all.

Her words settled in my chest. Slowly, I realized then that love was always warm. It was fear. It was worry. It was helplessness. It was imperfect.

For the first time, I wondered if my mother’s love had always looked like this too.

Months passed, and our group transformed. We’d endured storms and successful trades together. Chu watched over us like a brother and Guan amused us with tales of his family; I began to feel like a part of a makeshift family navigating a world that had once seemed insurmountable.

Love was staying with each other, even when it’s hard.

And I began to wonder how many times my mother had stayed, quietly, when I assumed she had turned away.

As winter approached, we prepared for our return journey. I wanted to see my mother: not to demand proof of her love, but to finally understand it. But a small voice in me whispered doubts. Would she recognize the person I had become?

I shared my fears with Guan one twilight. Around the dimming firelight, he reassured me, “You’ve grown, Wei. That’s what matters.”

With renewed resolve, we set off for home. The journey felt different this time. I viewed the world through a new lens. Together, our family overcame obstacles that once seemed impossible: a raging river, steep hillsides, heavy storms...

As we approached the borders of my village, nerves twisted in my stomach. Liu was at my side, her presence a comfort. “You’re strong, Wei,” she whispered, and my heart raced at her words.

The moment I stepped through the familiar gates, time seemed to freeze. I felt all eyes on me, yet I only searched for the one face I longed to see. My heart sank as I walked through the village, the laughter of children mingling with the scent of spices wafting through the air.

In the distance, I spotted my mother at the marketplace. Her hair had grown greyer, and the skin on her face was more lined. As I rushed towards her, uncertainty gripped me. But before I could reach her, she turned, and our eyes locked.

Her expression was unreadable. She took a step back, as if to escape the reality of my existence. The world around us faded, the lively bazaar now a blur, the vibrant colors muted by the weight of before.

“Mother,” I called, my voice trembling.

She hesitated, then took a step forward. Time stood still again. Memories flooded my mind, chains of guilt and longing, as we stood suspended in this moment.

And then, finally, she came to me, pulling me into her embrace. “Wei,” she whispered, her voice breaking. Tears fell as forgiveness mingled in the air between us.

It was not an embrace of gentleness, nor of perfection. It was an embrace of fear, of relief, of worry and of constancy. It was an embrace of love.

Perhaps returning home was not about being given what I lacked, but about finally understanding what had always been there — along the road that would, one day, bind worlds together.

Journey to Freedom on the Silk Road

The Independent Schools Foundation Academy, Chen, Noah Jason – 13

Crumpled in my hands is what the Chinese call paper. I slowly unfold the bamboo-fibred sheet. But, carefully. This was something lavish, something that no slave like me could ever own. Soft yet firm, this paper was a familiar touch. My father was a horse trader, and I often rode with him to different towns along the Silk Road. I would watch as he wrote down vivid details of his horse trade and he taught me how to write. How then did I become a slave? One day, I was childishly playing in the Siam Bazaar, our largest and most vibrant marketplace in the city when I was lured to a corner by two men pretending to give me Kozinaks, my favorite sweet honey-based roasted-nut treat. They immediately snatched me by the arm, brutally blindfolded me and threw me on their camel before I could react. Hours later, I heard them naming my price to my new master, a Sogdian trader, who needed a slave to carry his traded goods in journeying east to Chang'an.

I'm writing the story of my journey on this re-used paper that has Chinese calligraphy on one side, and Sogdian characters on the other. How I miss Samarkand! Gone are the days when I could freely walk on Registan Square, smell the fragrant aroma of flavourful Samsa meat pies, manti dumplings... Aaahh! That feeling, that sensation ... freedom! Today's money exchange between my master and a trader especially reminded me of home. My mother used to say that when I was born, she put honey on my mouth and glue on my palms as all Sogdian mothers would do. They say that only then will you speak sweet words and have money that never leaves your hands. I wish I had coins in my hand just like the jingling coins in my master's pocket, or at least the bolts of silk that he has on his camel's back.

It has been months of traveling on the back of a camel. We have ventured across hundreds of miles of barren desert; endured sand storms that would knock us off our feet and faced landslides that almost killed us. For me, this is enough adventure for a lifetime, but my master has done this eleven times. We are lucky to be alive. My master has told me epic stories of travelers and ruthless bandits along the way, and I feel fortunate that we haven't stumbled upon one group yet.

Three months ago, we traveled through a magnificent trading city — Turpan — surrounded by flaming mountains of fire. There, we saw miles and miles of vineyards bursting with the most juicy grapes I have ever seen. I picked one from the vine when they weren't looking and it was divine. Below ground, the Karez wells drew water from the TianShan mountains, providing water to these luscious grapes. There are nearly 1100 of these wells and the locals here swell with pride when they talk about this engineering feat, a marvel to anyone who passes through the city. I vigorously scratch my hands and arms that are dry from the arid heat. I wonder if being 500 feet below sea level has anything to do with it. Turpan is well known for being a city like no other, situated in a valley and deeply embedded in a circle of mountains.

My master is in a heated argument with another trader that stole his customer. The bustling marketplace is full of shouting and bartering; but this doesn't seem to bother me. My attention is captured by the assortment of odd things in the marketplace: rows of red dust they call spices fill the air, with pleasant aromas I haven't smelled before, there is Chinese tea, glassware and porcelain stacked up high to the canopy covering the market. We left the city with newly purchased horses that I was put in charge of caring for to trade. Leaving behind the snow-capped mountains we made our way to our next stop, the oasis city of Dunhuang.

In the process of getting there, we embarked on a treacherous journey through the Gobi desert. Finally, I saw a glimpse of water —the Crescent lake at Dunhuang. This city is the gateway to China. They trade all sorts of silk, porcelain, tea and other exotic things such as a translucent green, hard stone they call "jade". Dunhuang is a mecca for Buddhist temples and statues carved into a mountain. I have seen a couple of them when we are traveling around

the city. There was an enormous cave, the Magao caves, forming rock cut temples for the strange looking Chinese people with extra long braided hair.

Bam!! The door flings wide open, and my reflexes save me. I quickly hide this piece of paper I'm writing on behind my back, and my master gives me a slightly suspicious look but doesn't search me. He quickly glances outside the window and tells me in a serious voice : "Grab the stuff, let's go". Seconds later, I hear a bursting of noises coming from the city gate; a whole army of soldiers wearing black armour and weapons marched into the city. Screaming sounds of terror echoed across the streets. One look out the window and my master forgot about what he had said. Instead, he frantically grabbed his sacks of coins and ran out the door without waiting for me to pack. In a moment, I was all alone, wondering what had just happened. He disappeared into the streets, never to be seen again.

A great general was leading a legion of soldiers into the main square. I ran out to see what all the commotion was about . They had captured the Tibetan leader and he was on his knees. A great thunderous roar swelled into the air, and I saw the general raise the kingdom of Tang's flag. They were victorious and yelled out : "Zhang Yi Chao has rightfully reclaimed this city of Dunhuang for the Tang emperor!!!" Cheers of celebration rang in the atmosphere, and the soldiers stood on the high walls in triumph. I wondered if this was not my chance to prove myself as a soldier and finally leave my life of slavery. I push my way to the front of the crowd where I see soldiers recruiting young and old to join the Tang Righteous Army.

After years and years of service, I was promoted to the rank of lieutenant. My time and service had opened opportunities for me to access maps and learn how to get home. Finally, after 23 years of going missing, I see my precious home country. I've travelled the Silk Road as a slave, and come back as a hardened soldier. The Silk Road is a network of cultures, goods and information. But above all, it is a road of opportunity and setbacks for all who travel on it, full of adventure and danger, and with stories of courage and valour that will echo throughout all time. May this piece of paper be found generations later, preserving the epic stories of the Silk Road for all to read.

"A Bell is not For Itself. Rather for the Ear That Hears it, and the Space that Carries it's Voice."

The Independent Schools Foundation Academy, Li, Alivia Fat Pui – 13

"A bell is not for itself. Rather for the ear that hears it, and the space that carries its voice."

– Recovered text, origin unknown.

Theory: Primitive dimensional coupling principle.

File under: Metaphysical Contraband.

The alarm clawed its way into the silence for the fourth time this hour. Its screech reverberated against the sterile walls until the air itself felt raw and frayed. Yet Dr. Li Fei's eyes remained locked on the searing white of her monitor. In its glassy surface, a pale, stoned, hollow-eyed reflection stared back.

This was impossible

For years, Dr. Fei's job at the Dimension Intelligence Agency revolved around preventing the impossible from happening. This discovery would contradict everything everyone believed. At the center of the null field, where external frequencies were supposed to be rendered into meaningless static, was an anomaly so bizarre that no one would be able to explain it. It was a single sine wave.

She stared helplessly at the monitor. Fear surging through her veins. The obvious choice would be to observe, log, and delete. Just like what every other analyst under the DIA would do.

But as Fei watched its perfect oscillation scroll across the screen, a cold realization settled in her gut. It wasn't just a wave.

It was humming.

And for the first time in a long time. Her fingers hovered over the purge button.

It's raining outside.

The droplets came down, pitter-patter, like a curtain of silver tears, drumming beats against the roof tiles. Hairs clung to Fei's face like leeches, swirling around her ashen freckles as she ran towards a small hut engulfed in the misty fog. As she rushed inside, the warmth and fragrance of nostalgia hit her at once. Sandalwood lay everywhere, with traditional Chinese instruments filled around the room, none of which Fei could pronounce. She looked around expectantly for the familiar footsteps to echo through the tiny hut, her gaze finally landing on a small guqin nestled in the corner of the room. A compulsion she didn't understand drew her to the instrument. Her hands hovered over the guqin's strings. Without conscious thought, her finger brushed one. A single, pure note echoed through the walls.

"Interesting, right?"

The voice from the doorway was warm and dry as old paper. Fei spun, her stern professional mask dissolving into a grin of pure, unguarded relief.

"Dad!"

“You’re here for something.” It wasn’t a question. He lowered himself into his armchair, the old leather sighing like a tired companion.

Fei hesitated. “I found something,” she began. “A perfect sine wave. It shouldn’t exist.”

“And yet, it does.” He steepled his fingers. “You built a room with no echo, Fei. But silence... silence is an invitation.” He leaned forward, gazing into her. “What does it sound like?” She’d dreaded this. Unlocking her tablet, she played the audio.

Her father didn’t look at the screen. He listened, closing his eyes. After a moment, he reached out and plucked a single string on his guqin. “You hear that?” he asked, not looking at her. “The sound is not in the string. It is in the silence after. And in your ear, which is waiting for it.” He met her eyes. “A tool that makes a sound for itself alone is not a tool. It is a prison.”

He moved to the corner of the room and crouched, grunting softly, and pulled a long, cloth-wrapped cylinder from underneath it. The fabric, a faded blue silk, opened as he unrolled it on the low table between them. I

“Look,” he said, his fingers careful as they unfurled the heavy paper. A delicate, spidery tracery of lines spread east from Chang’an. Not the Silk Road she knew from textbooks, this was like its nervous system. Inked beside each junction were tiny, frantic symbols, dots like fretted notes, swirling lines like pressure gradients.

His bony finger landed on a tangled knot of lines in the Gansu Corridor. “This,” he said.

Fei’s own breath snagged in her throat. She looked from the map to her tablet. With a tap, she toggled the view. The wave vanished, replaced by the DIA’s official topographical map of the null-field’s signal shadow.

They were the same shape. The ancient knot, the modern dead zone. Mirror images.

“That’s the null-field’s signature,” she whispered, the air gone from her lungs. “How is this here?”

“Look closer,” her father said, his voice low. His finger shifted, landing on a cluster of symbols near Dunhuang. “The Sogdians. The great in-between men. They didn’t just move silk. They moved heresy. Music. A new tuning for a Persian lute would reach the emperor’s court in Chang’an before the musician who invented it could finish his wine.”

He tapped a specific mark, a caravanserai. Then he pointed to a tiny, looping flourish beside it, almost hidden. “This. I’ve seen this ghost three times in forty years. It means ‘listening post.’”

Fei frowned. “A trading post that... listened?”

“They traded in whispers, Fei. The most fragile, valuable cargo of all. And they believed some places... remembered. Held onto sounds. They’d stop at these specific posts, not just to water the camels. To hear the echo of what passed through last week, last season. To feel the hum of the route itself.” He stopped abruptly, his face grave. “In 1509, the last keeper of the post at the Jade Gate, a man who still spoke the old Sogdian trading tongue, got arrested. His charge wasn’t smuggling spices. It was inciting with foreign whispers, as they say. People cut his head off and displayed it on the gate.”

A cold nausea washed through Fei. She looked at her tablet, at the lone, pure sine wave, a single, clear note ringing in the vacuum of emptiness. Then back at the map.

Her hands were clumsy and cold. She searched up the classified network schematic, the locations of the primary DIA arrays. With a flick of her wrist, she overlaid the modern grid onto the ancient scroll.

A perfect, *monstrous* fit.

Every single DIA station sat like a surgical clamp directly on top of a Sogdian listening post.

The DIA didn't invent the silence.

They found the old places where people once listened. Where Sogdian traders had tuned the desert like an instrument, and one by one, they buried them. They took the exact frequencies where the Silk Road once hummed with news and music and prayer, and they built tombs of perfect noise there. Using quantum physics to commit the same act as that of the Ming magistrate, deafening the world to a certain kind of whisper.

She turned to him. His face was a map of the same truth she was reading on the scroll. He already knew the solution.

"I have to answer it, don't I?" The question was airless, half hope, half dread.

He didn't nod. He didn't need to. His silence was the oldest answer in the world.

Fei stood at the edge of the Hecang fortress. The wind was blowing against her skin, creating ruffles in her dress. Below, the Singing Sand Dunes stretched to a blurred horizon. They weren't golden, rather the colour of parchment, of a sun-bleached skull, of dust left in the bowl of the world.

Her fingers cradled the bowl. It was a rough thing, it's raw clay, cold, and porous against her skin. With her fingernail, she traced the two marks cut into its surface. One was a clean, endless loop, the perfect signal wave. The other was older, angular, a skeletal rune from the Sogdian symbol.

The director's voice ripped through her earpiece. "Dr. Fei! This is your final order. Return to the vehicle immediately. You are in breach of—"

She didn't hear the rest. She plucked the device from her ear and dropped it. It was swallowed by the sand without a sigh.

"You're not protecting anyone," she said, her voice calm and carried off by the wind. In the howling silence of the desert, her father's voice was calm and clear in her memory: "A bell is not for itself. Rather for the ear that hears it, and the space that carries its voice."

The bowl was lifted into the air.

And then it was let go.

Tumbling, once, twice, before it met the hard earth where Sogdian traders had once haggled and Persian poets had tuned their lutes.

A single note hit the air. It was the kind of sound you feel in your ribs. A ring of heatless distortion shivered outward, and a low, grinding hum began to rise, as if the desert had cleared its throat after centuries of silence. For a second, the air tasted of dust and distant rain, and Fei could almost feel the warmth of a nearby fire that wasn't there.

A gust, different from the wind, carrying the ghost of dust pressed against her. Passing through her like a shared breath.

A slow smile touched Fei's lips.

Five hundred years of waiting, and the road was finally open.

Diary of Zhang Qian: Tales of Rome

The Independent Schools Foundation Academy, Wong, Yee Hei Claire – 14

March 10th, ~100 BCE (Day 468) 8:00 A.M.

Cloudy

At last I have finally reached the endpoint of my journey, the grand capital of Italy, Rome! I am elated to say that the city looked absolutely majestic while I was resting on the foothills of Monte Terminillo. I wished I lived here, but I must tend to the Emperor's duties nonetheless.

As I meandered along the uneven brick path to the entrance of the city, I arrived at the Porta del Popolo, where two guards stood in front of the metal frame under the arch. I was greeted by their stoic, stone cold faces as they clutched their silver spears.

"Name and reason of arrival," the right guard boomed with a deep voice.

"Zhang Qian. I have come to trade goods from China with the general. The Emperor of China sent me."

Suddenly, the sound of a lever clicked, and the metal frame was lifted up. In response, the two guards instantly turned around, and went into a fighting position as if a lion lurked right behind those walls. A tall man slowly walked out, his stature brawny and toned. He wore a luxurious purple wool toga adorned with gold accessories, along with decent brown leather sandals that covered the bridge of his feet. Most importantly, he had a majestic head of hair, along with a chiseled face that looked like it came straight from a sculpture. The two guards gasped in sync, and quickly bowed until their heads touched their toes. The realization has hit me—he was Julius Caesar, the general of Rome.

As I bowed, Julius (yes, that is how I address the general in my private diary!) stated in a rich voice, "Greetings, Zhang Qian. It is nice to finally meet you. I heard from your Emperor that you have brought in items from China. Is that true?"

"Yes, Great General. I have brought along a tremendous amount of treasure. "

"That is excellent." Julius noted with a grin, "I shall show you to my palace."

Along the way, Julius showed me wondrous sights, from the magnificent temple of the Pantheon to the squalid Forum. The Forum was jam packed with merchants coming from different parts of the world that I did not even know existed! I saw a myriad of goods being sold, from dainty ivory pieces of India, to massive metals from France! I must say although Rome looks like a beautiful and tranquil city from afar, it is much more rowdy than I expected, as even the most distant streets were filled with chatter and people.

"This is my palace." Julius pointed as he stood in front of a pristine, marble mansion. I gasped as the palace looked so big, even a giant could live in it. The roof of the structure was painted with bright colors, with intricate pictures that depicted each of the Roman gods and goddesses. Two slaves stood in front of the main entrance of his house, with one of them leaning against a door carved with complex gold leaf patterns.

"Woah." I exclaimed in awe, "Great General, this palace is majestic!"

"I know." Julius boasted with pride. "This is my main residence in Via Sacra. Of course it has to be big."

After his slaves opened the doors for us, I was greeted not by the simple wood and plaster of common dwellings that populated most of the streets in Rome, but by a sprawling atrium that felt more like an outdoor cathedral. The air inside was crisp, smelling faintly of expensive oils and fresh rainwater. Directly beneath a large rectangular opening in the roof, the compluvium lay a shimmering pool of water known as the impluvium. The basin was carved from white marble, catching the midday sun and reflecting dancing ripples across the vibrant walls. Julius led me past frescoes that filled every inch from the ceiling to the walls. They were so lifelike that I nearly reached out to touch the flowers and fruits in painted gardens that seemed to bask in the flickering light of bronze oil lamps.

As we walked deeper inside, the house opened into a peristyle, a private courtyard surrounded by a colonnade of polished pillars. Here, the rowdy nature of Rome vanished. In its place was a trimmed garden filled with roses and acanthus, where the only sound was the gentle drizzle of a fountain shaped like a leaping dolphin. The transition from the chaos of the streets to this tranquil, green sanctuary was oddly satisfying.

Julius finally gestured toward his tablinum, the main office where he managed the business of the capital. The floor was a mosaic, composed of thousands of tiny colored stones depicting a geometric labyrinth that made my head dizzy if I stared too long. Luxurious couches with ivory inlay sat ready for guests, and ornate candelabras stood in the room's corners. Unlike the crowded Forum, this space felt calculated and heavy with authority.

"It is quite different from the palaces of the East, I imagine," Julius remarked, watching me trace the outline of a gold leaf on a nearby pedestal.

I bowed my head in respect, the weight of my mission pressing upon me. I reached into my trove to pull out a delicate roll of silk, realizing that even in a house of such marble and gold, the treasures I brought from China would still find a way to shine. Julius then sat in a plush chair behind an expensive wooden desk.

"Here's a roll of silk woven by our finest artisans." I muttered, still in awe of the state of Julius' house, "It is very smooth and light."

I placed the roll of silk on the wooden desk, unsure if Julius was going to be impressed or not. The silk was coloured pink, with authentic white orchids that are hand sewn on the surface. Julius then lifted the roll of silk using both hands, as he carefully inspected the floral embroidery.

"I'll give you 10 gold tokens and a pitcher of wine straight from our best vineyard for this roll of silk." Julius stated, as he set down the fabric back on the table.

I was astonished, as I never expected that I would get this great reward for only one roll of silk. I reached out and accepted the gold, the coins heavy and cool in my palm, and took the pitcher. It was a successful trade, as it far exceeded my initial expectations.

"A toast!" Julius proclaimed, snapping his fingers. A slave immediately opened the door behind us and hurried forward with two gold chalices filled with a crimson red wine. "To the beginning of a friendship between our two worlds."

I took the cup, deeply moved by his hospitality. The wine was tart and it hit the back of my throat with a sharp sting, but as I finished the draught, a strange heaviness settled in my limbs. My vision began to blur, while the geometric patterns of the mosaic floor started to swirl like the eye of a whirlpool. I tried to steady myself against the wooden desk, but my fingers felt as heavy as lead. Julius didn't move to help me. Instead, he stood up slowly, and his friendly grin twisted into a cold, sharp smirk. He set his chalice down, the wine inside of it still brimming to the top. He watched me stumble to the floor as I slowly lost my consciousness.

"You are a long way from home, Zhang Qian," he murmured, his voice no longer rich, but sly and sinister like a fox. "And you have brought me much more than just silk."

He gestured to the two slaves, who moved with an instant, predatory speed. They grabbed my numb arms, pinning them behind my back before I could even let out a cry. Two other slaves reached down and snatched my heavy trove of treasures, tossing it onto the desk with a thud. Julius yanked out the gold tokens he had just given me out of my hand and placed them back on the desk.

“You would make a great ransom.” Julius grinned. “Take him to the cellar.”

As I tried to yell, my vision immediately blurred and my limbs felt as if they were paralysed. The last thing I saw before I was dragged away was Julius rummaging through my treasure trove. Right then, I only felt my panicked heartbeat, as it was pounding against my ribcage while I struggled to lift my head one last time. Suddenly, everything went black as I drifted off into a deep sleep.

Whispers of Forgotten Journeys

Victoria Shanghai Academy, Chan, Natalie – 12

The oldest people of those abandoned caves were the spiders. Many generations had laced the walls with cobwebs of intricate beauty, though now even they lay in dusty rags. It had been three decades since a footstep had echoed within those walls, since the dust had been disturbed and the gods awoken.

I was sprawled on my bed, my history textbook open beside me, the pages yellowed and tired like I was. The words drifted in and out of focus, and I could distinctly hear my mother yelling, “Leo! Come down to wash the dishes!”

Something jolted me awake. My gaze landed on a section titled “The Disappearance of Merchants”. The words seemed to shimmer with urgency, pulling me in like a moth to a flame.

I leaned closer. The text explained how, during the height of the Silk Road’s glory, several key traders vanished without a trace — most notably, a renowned merchant named Ahmad. It spoke of darkness that fell over the land after his disappearance. My heart raced as I read about the chaos that ensued, how traders had fled and how the once-bustling markets fell into silence.

Suddenly wide awake, I couldn’t shake the feeling that there was more to the story. *What if I could find out what happened to him?*

Of course, it was possible. Time machines were already invented in the year of 2050. I could easily hop into the one that my grandfather gifted us. That night, my heart thudded as I set the dials on the device to the year 1400.

When the swirling light of the portal finally faded, I stumbled forward, finding myself engulfed in darkness. My skin prickled as a chilling breeze swept through the cave, carrying with it the scent of something unmistakably ancient and sorrowful.

”Hello?” I called out. There was no answer, only the oppressive silence that pressed in around me.

As I took a cautious step forward, the shadows deepened, wrapping around the cave like a shroud. The air grew colder, and an unsettling sensation crept over me, forcing me to swallow hard. Ghostly figures began to materialise before me, their expressions twisted in anguish. Lost faces stared back at me, bringing a wave of pain and misery that knocked the breath from my lungs, bringing me to my knees like a kick to the stomach.

The souls flickered like candle flames caught in a gust of wind. Like memories pulled from time, they hovered in the cave, swirling around me like a haunting dance.

”Help us,” one of the figures whispered, its hollow eyes locking onto mine, filled with a sadness that felt like a deep void.

I staggered back, terror overwhelming me. “What do you want?” The air felt heavier as more souls gathered, their forms shifting like smoke, hovering just out of reach.

A soul stepped forward, his eyes old and weary. I inhaled sharply, recognising the face of Ahmad. ”We are lost,” Ahmad explained. “Bound to this place, forgotten by time. Zydenar, god of trade and roads, trapped us here. Blinded by our ambition, we took for granted what was given.”

”Zydenar was angry at us for dishonouring him, forgetting that he was who made our journeys possible. Now, he tricks travellers with his illusions of light, gathering their souls when they arrive in the realm of the dead.”

Then, a flash of green light blinded my vision, and the glowering face of Zydenar appeared in front of me.

”What is this?” Zydenar’s voice boomed. I stammered, “O Mighty Zydenar, the souls seek for your forgiveness for neglecting your importance in making the road.”

Zydenar’s eyes blazed with fury. “You should not have come,” he started, his voice resonating through the cave like thunder.

”Release these souls!” I shouted, my voice steadying as I found my footing.

The god’s eyes glowed with an unnatural light, and I felt a wave of cold wash over me. “Ahmad’s knowledge is a danger to the fabric of time. They are here because of his choice.”

I took a step back, heart racing. “But they need to return! The Silk Road depends on them! If not, then the entire future of our world will collapse!”

The shadows around me began to swirl violently, and I could feel their despair echoing through the cave.

Zydenar hesitated, and I knew I had to act fast. “You guard the past, but you cannot keep it bound in despair! Ahmad’s return will heal these wounds!” I implored, desperation creeping into my voice.

Zydenar eyed me, his form shifting, revealing the myriad of souls trapped in his grasp.

“Redemption is born from sacrifice. What will you offer to regain what was lost?”

I interjected, feeling a fire igniting within me. “It’s not just about them, Zydenar. It’s about the legacy of trade, the connections that can be restored. You’re the god of trades; surely you know that?”

Zydenar flickered with uncertainty, but soon returned to his hateful glare. “Do you know what they did to me?” He spat, words laced with disdain. “They dishonoured me, forgot to worship and thank me, when the Silk Road was my doing.”

His voice shifted to a more pleading tone, pulling at the edges of my heart. “If people forget about the gods, we will all soon disappear. Our creations will fade into the shadows of history. Let this serve as a lesson to all humans to remember to thank the gods.”

I hesitated, and Zydenar took the chance to continue speaking. “If we abandon our duties, we forsake the very fabric of our culture,” his voice wavered, “We wish only the best for this world that we share. But for you to abandon the ideas that we made for you? To throw us aside?” His voice broke ever so slightly, revealing the hurt beneath the veneer of rage. “Even humans know the feeling of neglect.”

The tales of the past whispered through my mind — the rituals, the offerings, the stories shared in reverence. Yet in the race for progress and material gain, those connections had dimmed, buried under layers of ambition.

”Zydenar,” I began softly, “I understand the pain of being forgotten. But isn’t there another way? We can make the Silk Road thrive again, not out of fear, but out of love and respect.”

A flicker of hope mingled with his bitterness. “You may speak with conviction, but can you convince others to remember their gods? So many have lost their way, consumed by greed and ambition.

“I can help. Let me show that humanity that worship can co exist with progress,” I urged, “Your power can guide us, Zydenar. But we need your blessing to do so.”

Zydenar nodded slowly. In that moment, his translucent features sharpened into a more defined face. He looked less like a deity of power and more like a lost child, his eyes filled with an unfathomable sadness.

With an almost imperceptible sigh, the atmosphere shifted. Light burst forth, flooding the chamber, scattering the shadows like smoke in the wind. I felt the presence of the trapped souls surge around me, their essence merging with the light. I could see Ahmad, his expression a mixture of relief and gratitude.

As the last remnants of darkness vanished, a hush fell over the cave, and the air became still. The souls glowed softly, finally free, their whispers of thanks lingering in the air like a gentle breeze.

That was the last I saw of them. But I knew they would be okay. And soon, so will the rest of the world.

I found myself standing on a high cliff overlooking the sprawling expanse of the Silk Road. The low grunts of camels, the shouts of merchants bargaining, and the whispers of travellers sharing stories of distant lands warmed my heart.

"Remember," Zydenar's voice echoed in my head. "Remember this is what I live for. While the Silk Road may have disappeared for a few years, nothing is ever really lost to us as long as we remember it. These are the invisible threads that keep us tied to each other."

"Cherish this sight," he continued, the warmth of his presence wrapping around me like sunlight. "Share it with all of us. Let them know we are still here, that we guide them, even if they cannot see us."

The oldest inhabitants of those abandoned caves were the spiders. For generations, they had woven their webs, lacing the walls with intricate beauty, though now even they lay in dusty rags. It had been weeks since a footstep had shocked within those walls, since the dust had been disturbed and the souls set free.

Now, decades later, as life had returned to the Silk Road, the spiders resumed their delicate artistry, weaving anew in the light of hope. The echoes of forgotten footsteps were replaced by the vibrant sounds of trade, and the presence of the gods lingered in the air, awakening the spirits once more.

Between the Threads

Victoria Shanghai Academy, Chan, Yuen Ching Xenia – 11

The small threads of silk formed into shimmering cloths as Zhi Lan wove them. In the Weaving Quarter of the Tang-dynasty Chang'an, Zhi Lan spends her days guiding silk threads across the loom, her fingers moving with quiet certainty. With the finished silk bundled in her arms, she set out towards the West Market and into the vast, roaring heart of Chang'an. Here, the world seemed to gather: traders smelling of dust and horses, merchants bargaining in melodic tones. The city hummed with the noise of caravans arriving from distant places she had only ever heard from merchants, but had never seen for herself. She passed by a stall where voices suddenly sharpened. Two traders erupted into a furious argument, and the crowd drifted away uneasily. "How fragile this great road is", Zhi Lan thought; one knot of fear could destroy an entire weave. That night, long after the Quarter had fallen quiet, she sits before her loom and weaves a hidden pattern, a code known only within her guild: "The road we build with kindness lasts longer than the road we build with hatred." She hopes that somewhere far beyond Chang'an, someone would understand.

More than a thousand years later, Sienna wanders through the quiet halls of the palace museum. She admired the displays with great fascination, but a faint glimmer caught the corner of her eye. Drawn towards it, she drifted away from her family and stopped before a piece of silk. The threads were impossibly fine, woven with perfect precision. As she leaned closer, she couldn't help but notice the delicate threads that seemed to trace into a perfectly neat pattern. Eyes lingering with curiosity, she slowly brushed her fingers across the silk that felt different from anything she had ever touched: spectacularly smooth and sleek. All of a sudden, the silk began to glow. In the blink of an eye, Sienna was blinded by a bright shimmer, and the world dissolved.

Carriages rattled past. Voices shouted in unfamiliar tongues. Sienna stumbled back. "This can't be real," she thought, her heart racing. A bustling market stretched before her as people dressed in long robes strolled across the square, their hair pinned and bound in ways she had only seen in paintings. She stood frozen at the overwhelming yet oddly vivid scene in front of her. She had never experienced anything like this. As if by instinct, she stopped by a silk stall and touched the fabric laid out for sale. It felt just as astonishing as the one she touched moments before. "How much?" she asked. The merchant replied, "5 copper coins". Sienna pulled out a few crisp, flat notes from her pocket. The man's brows drew together. "You're joking. This is no currency I know." Trembling with confusion, she turned to a woman at the stall next to her. "What year is this?" she asked, her voice trembling. The woman frowned. "The sixth year of Kaiyuan, 718." She tried to explain time travel, the palace museum, and the glowing silk, but the merchant slowly raised his voice. Panic flooded Sienna's chest as the stares of passersby pressed in. All of a sudden, a young woman stepped forward and offered to pay for Sienna. "Come," she said gently. "You look lost. My name is Zhi Lan," she introduced herself with a faint smile.

Zhi Lan guided Sienna through the West Market. From astronomers sketching stars with chalk to merchants trading coloured glass for tea, every scene felt like part of a living tapestry to Sienna. As they walked, Sienna tried to explain how she arrived here – tracing a coded pattern on a piece of silk, a glow that felt like warmth, then noise and loud markets. Her words tumbled over one another, and she spoke with excitement and disbelief, as if saying her story out loud might help her finally make sense of it. Zhi Lan listened calmly and thought: "Silk does travel far, sometimes farther than people expect."

They then got on Zhi Lan's horse and embarked on their journey, with only one piece of bread and loads of silk. Suddenly, an old man suddenly came in front of them and said, "I offer you this big piece of cloth that brings you prosperity and fortune..." Zhi Lan replies: "It does sound very tempting, but we don't have enough coins." The old man looked around and spotted the silk. He said: "Well, I do see that you have loads of silk..." Sienna looks at Zhi Lan, silently questioning if they should give the silk. Zhi Lan handed the pieces of silk to the old man. He chuckles and whispers. "The road we build with kindness lasts longer than the road we build with hatred. No one walks it alone." Before Zhi Lan and Sienna could respond, he mysteriously disappeared without a trace.

The next morning, as they walked, Zhi Lan kept her bundle of silk close. She had this recurring feeling that something was terribly wrong the entire morning, but did not know why. As she and Sienna walked to the centre of the market, Zhi Lan, wanting to check on her prized silk, unwrapped the bundle gently. To her horror, she realizes that this was not her work. The colour drains from her face, and her hands begin to tremble as she inspects more closely. The silk in her hands is coarse and poorly dyed. This is not the silk she spent nights weaving, not the one that carries her hidden message.

She feels her heart shattering as she mutters: "It's gone...". Sienna's chest tightens with both pity for Zhi Lan and fear for her own way back home. She grips Zhi Lan's sleeve and cries quietly: "If that silk is gone... I won't be able to return home!". Suddenly, an old woman approached them and asked: "Did someone steal your valuables? There's been a thief terrorizing our village for ages. Apparently, he lives in the North." Zhi Lan's eyes brightened with hope, wanting to push the woman for more information, but she quickly disappears with her cart of fruits.

Without hesitation, the two set towards the North. Once they arrived, they spotted the thief already eagerly selling mass copies of the silk. Zhi Lan's eyes narrowed towards the thief before storming towards him, demanding him to give the silk back. The thief chuckled with confidence: "What evidence do you have that I stole *your* silk?" Zhi Lan loudly protests back: "If you're so confident, accompany me back to the silk market to prove your innocence!". The man stood and bellowed out a nasty laugh before following Zhi Lan and Sienna.

Back in the silk market, Zhi Lan was able to form a crowd to gather around. Zhi Lan asked the crowd: "Do you all remember the unique silk woven by me? Well, it has been stolen and switched!" Everyone gasps, and Zhi Lan shows everyone the fake silk copy switched by the thief. It reflected the light too evenly, an indication of surface printing. She then points to the mineral pigment flaking and explains why true dyed silk wouldn't behave that way. Everyone eagerly agreed with her, and the ashamed, embarrassed thief was forced to return the real silk.

Sienna's face brightened. She was finally able to see the message on the silk clearly. The message was no longer blurry, and having finally unlocked the message, she could finally return home. Before leaving, Sienna went to Zhi Lan and gave her a big hug, thanking her sincerely for her help.

As Sienna gently brushed the piece of silk, she felt a wave of dizziness, a faint ringing echoing in her ear. She then opened her eyes. She was back in the exact same spot in the museum, where she initially touched the piece of silk. She looked down at the piece of silk, and its message was clearer now. It read: "The road we build with kindness lasts longer than the road we build with hatred".

She felt a weight on her toes before she looked down, and saw the big cloth the old man had sold to her and Zhi Lan draped across. She picked it up and squinted at the intricate patterns on it, before realizing with amazement that they weren't merely patterns, but also the exact same quote that Zhi Lan had woven on her silk. In the corner of her eye, she thinks she sees an old man look at her, but he's gone before she can fully turn back to grasp his features. Sienna, still holding the cloth, reminisces on her miraculous journey in the beautiful land of Chang'an, with its bustling streets, its unique people, and the kind Zhi Lan. She wonders if the old man from just moments ago knew, or if he also embarked on the same, unique adventure. Perhaps, one day, if she can meet him or Zhi Lan again, the questions on the tip of her tongue can finally be answered.

Echoes

Victoria Shanghai Academy, Chen, Sze Yin Emily – 13

Rahi stared out the window as his caravan plodded along the countryside. It was beautiful, he supposed, beautiful in the way that only nature could be. Lush green meadows, cool pine forests, and sparkling clear water; the scenery he has been seeing for the past hour and would see again for the next.

He didn't mind though; he loved everything the Silk Road let him see, from quaint countrysides to blazing deserts, from pretty cities to rolling seas. And not just the routes, though the views were indeed breathtaking. He loved the markets as well, all of their busyness and messiness. Rahi loved seeing all these people, all from different places and speaking different languages, come together in one place to trade goods, ideas, and culture. He loved how everyone all came together, in one same place, for one shared goal. And he loved his own place in it.

He glanced about his caravan, looking at what made this little carriage his – his home, his refuge. Rahi was a merchant, a traveler, and though he and his caravan often traveled on horseback, they also had wagons for when the heat got truly unbearable. It was covered, the light cloth fluttering in the wind, and it was indeed his home, for scattered across the small room were items he had collected throughout his travels. Displayed among the cluttered shelves were the ceramic trinkets he bought in a small town, near his kitchenette was the various tea and spices he collected throughout his journeys.

Suddenly, a small group of people, maybe four or five, drew closer, their horses galloping near full-speed. A young boy pulled up next to him.

"Dust storm," he managed to gasp. "And bandits."

Rahi startled at his words. Sometime when he wasn't paying attention, they had traveled into the desert, and while dust storms weren't uncommon, his group was utterly unprepared. News should've reached them days ago, with the huge network that was the Silk Road. *Less people traveling it now, I suppose, he mused, the merchants are dwindling.*

Rahi had also not encountered bandits before. That made him lucky, he knew, but bandits were a rarity before, and he traveled with a caravan to further protect himself. It seemed, either his luck had run out or there were more of them now. He thought the latter was more likely.

What could they do? They ran, unlatching the wagons from the horses and hiding them behind a tall dune. They leapt into their saddles and galloped down the path, hoping their homes would still be there when they came back.

Rahi knew. He knew that the Silk Road was becoming dangerous and people were leaving. He just hoped he wouldn't be one of them – though with the talk on the horizon about banning foreign trade, maybe he wouldn't have a choice. Rahi hoped not. He hoped he could stay.

Onira

Onira's seaside town by Piraeus, port of Athens, was always busy when the market came. She could see, from her little window, the stalls manned by merchants that came to trade, flashes of colors as people moved through the crowds; could hear voices bargaining over goods, the seagulls squawking as they dived over the seas, chasing after pieces of bread and fish in the sea. Onira had always loved the market, its busyness and its charm. *It was always so full of life*, she thought.

She weaved through the market, calling out to Zhang, the Chinese silk and tea trader; Zahir, the Arabic merchant of spices and cotton; Irene, an Italian who always called Onira *zita* (little girl, Irene had told her when she asked once), her stall laden with glassware and honey; and many more whose faces were familiar. They always responded in kind, saying, “Hey, Onira!” or “Hi Ori!”

But today it was different. Today, the market was smaller. Orina had noticed the market was waning, but she had pinned in on the storms and bad weather. This was an extreme: out of the dozens of people Onira had come to expect, only a handful appeared, and though Irene still greeted her *zita*, even she was not as cheerful as usual. The market felt stifled, muted, everything the same but also *not*. Onira watched merchants and townspeople doing the same things they always did, but the motions felt practiced, almost mechanical.

Onira had always loved listening to the merchant’s tales, of camels carrying silk and spices across deserts, of ships sailing across the oceans with textiles and raw materials. She listened, as Zhang told her how tea was made back in his home of the mountains; as Zahir recounted how he traveled with his wares, seeing new places and meeting new people; as they wove a world beyond her small town, and *oh*, how much she longed to explore it.

But today, it was quiet, and when she asked, all they said was, “Bandits and pirates, Orina. There’s conflict among the people and the routes are no longer safe. We... might not be able to come anymore.” Orina didn’t understand. How could anyone not want to see the world? To learn about other people and the way they lived? Why would anyone want to ruin that?

By the next month, they were gone. Orina had watched as the merchants packed up and left, snapping their bags shut and loading them onto horses.

She sat on the dusty ground, at the edge of where the market had once stood tall and proud. Where the bustling exchange of goods and ideals had been, it was only quiet and desolate. She looked out at the crumbling ruins of a once-great palace, and she smiled. Though it no longer existed in reality, it would survive forever in the hearts of dreamers like her and their stories.

She would begin by telling everyone the story of the market of Piraeus.

Zhou

“We need to secure the country!” an advisor, dressed in the red and black of Emperor Wu’s council, exclaimed. “China over everything else!”

Zhou could see the Emperor slowly nodding his approval, could hear the people shouting their agreement. “China! China! China!”, they chanted.

And Zhou agreed. He loved China, his country and his home, as much as the next citizen did. But he was also Councilor of Trade and Commerce, and he had to think about the economy, too.

“Your Imperial Majesty,” he began, “Your rule is absolute and your plans are infallible. You are right, China does need securing. She is most important, most demanding, and I am eager to serve. But Your Majesty should also consider the risks. If we shut down the Silk Road and cut contact with other empires, we will become isolated. Our economy will flounder, and we will fall behind. Yes, we fight for China’s security and stability, but do we not also for her prosperity? As Your Majesty’s Councilor of Trade and Commerce, I beg Your Majesty to reconsider.”

Emperor Wu turned his head to look at him, giving him a flat stare. “Do you think I do not know this? I am Emperor. China’s best interests are my best interests, and it is for her that I am doing this. Prosperity and a thriving economy – I want those too, but we can trade with ourselves. Everything we do on the Silk Road, we can do here in our country. And I do not want to hear anything about culture exchange and flow of ideas, either. We have their products – all their spices and textiles and glassware. We can recreate them for ourselves. And our own culture is perfectly fine, thank you very much. The trade routes also harbor bandits and conflict seekers, it is unsafe. We have gotten what we wanted from the Silk Road. For our country and her people, it is now time to move on.”

He turned from Zhou, and the matter dropped. He could see what the Emperor was saying, though, and he could understand why. The Silk Road did pose problems to their country. It brought dangerous weather, banditry and foreign influence – though Zhou wasn’t sure if the latter was truly a bad thing. The merchants, they brought different ideas, different values and different cultures, but that enriched China and made her stronger – more open, more diverse.

His eyes dropped to the table, to the paper map of the Silk Road routes. The merchants, who traveled, who *lived* these routes – these choices affected them too, them more than everyone else. What would happen to them?

He vaguely heard the Emperor discussing new policies with the advisors, talking about restricting travel and closing the borders. But Zhou felt distant. Raising his head to look out the floor-to-ceiling windows that framed the throne room and exposed them to the outside world. He looked out for the people going about their lives, working and studying, cooking and playing. He looked at the people, laughing and living, and felt as if this room of politics and decisions was detached from them.

Whatever the Emperor and his advisors decided upon, even if Zhou could not change his mind, he knew that the people would be affected, but they would live nonetheless, and not just survive, but they would thrive. No matter what.

A Silk Road's Story

Victoria Shanghai Academy, Fok, Pak Yin Kurtis – 13

Time flies as arrows do. Seven years after my previous expedition to the regions of Yuezhi, I have been entrusted with a second mission to forge an alliance with the Wusun people. As I inspect my baggage one last time and prepare to retire for the night, my sword hanging upon the wall catches my eye. I remove it from its rack, pulling it out of its sheath. As my eyes roam across its glistening blade, my thoughts wander to those fateful days of my first journey...

Not very long before my trek, the Western regions had been the talk of the town, a foreign land of mysteries and fantasies. As for the Emperor, he sought not folk poetry and songs, but accurate records of the occidental peoples as well as their cultures and products—a potential springboard for commerce and trading. Yet the Xiongnu's domination of the adjacent territories rendered such efforts futile, and so the responsibility of negotiating a pact with the Yuezhi to confront the Xiongnu fell upon me. Since his majesty harboured suspicions that spies lurked within the walls of his court, I was secretly instructed to embark the very next day with my hundred men. Worst still, I was assigned a Xiongnu—a former prisoner of war—to accompany my envoy, as he was “experienced with the ways of the Xiongnu and may prove to be of assistance”. Yes, assistance to the Xiongnu, perhaps! Try as I might, I could not shake off my doubts that he could be the double agent himself. Nonetheless, a command was a command, so after assembling everyone, we set off.

The journey through the desert biomes was gruelling and arduous. Every rock and bush seemed to hide an Xiongnu in it. Meanwhile, Ganfu and I got off to a rocky start, distrust coiling and writhing within me like a serpent. Having reached an impasse where half my men preferred to follow the old Xiongnu, while the other half shared my sentiments that he might lead us into a trap. And so, we split ways. As my party marched on, we found traces of human habitation, which only bolstered our confidence that this was the correct path to the Yuezhi. Soon, the crimson sun dipped below the horizon, and we set up camp for the night.

When I awoke, I immediately felt that something was horribly wrong. Hurried footsteps, raucous shrieks, and the clang of metal upon metal—the sound of battle. No sooner had I grabbed my sword from under my pillow and charged out the tent than I felt cold steel pressed against my throat. In front of my eyes, dozens of my soldiers lay lifeless upon the dusty ground while the rest of them engaged in heated combat with what must have been a hundred armoured warriors on horseback. “That treacherous Xiongnu has betrayed us!” I cursed in my mind. Then a voice on my right muttered with a very thick accent, “Don’t move a step. Surrender, and we may spare you.” I yelled back, “Never! Show your cowardly face, Ganfu, you traitor!” A collective gasp echoed within the Xiongnu troop, followed by another as Ganfu emerged from the crowd with his squad. My captor widened his eyes in shock, his jaw slackened.

“Ganfu!” He exclaimed before switching to an unfamiliar dialect, while Ganfu gestured passionately towards the remaining men and me. A moment passed before he lowered his sword while I shot confused glances at him then at Ganfu, who assured me with a smile, “You will be spared and brought to the region where my people reside.”

I was quickly brought into the Xiongnu territories and thrown in a prison. However, I was quite well-behaved and didn’t cause much trouble within the prison partly due to fear of what the Xiongnu would do to the remaining men of my army, and partly to not put Ganfu in an awkward position, afterall, he had vouched for me.

The leader had questioned Ganfu briefly about why he had been allowed to go from China. Ganfu had told me later that he had replied saying that they were to seek treaty with the Yuezhi people on the emperor’s behalf.

The warden of the prison had also taken to a liking to me due to my well-behaved manner and told the leader of the Xiongnu such. And so 5 years into my stay, I had been allowed to live amongst the Xiongnu people with a house of

my own and regular food brought to me for surveillance. During my five years in prison, Ganfu had visited regularly and we had formed a strong friendship through our shared passion for xiangqi.

We stayed in contact and hung out everyday until everyday until one day. Ganfu found out where the Yuezhi were and he had planned for us to leave. But during that 5 years, a Xiangnu family offered their daughter to him and they got married. Originally, I had rejected because of my Chinese values and identity, however, Ganfu convinced me. We were supposed to meet at the edge of the city where we would escape.

I waited overnight, waiting for a man that would never come. Then, I saw fire. In all my years here, the only time I had ever seen fire was during an execution. I had this feeling in my gut that it was Ganfu. I sneaked into the Ganfu prison, looking at everything along the way. At the first cell in the prison, the prison guard saw me, but he turned away with a smirk on his face, tossing the keys in my general direction.

I busted Ganfu out and we quickly escaped. We ran all the way to the Yuezhi territory where we met up with the leader. I don't know how Ganfu knew him, but he quickly explained why they were here and the leader looked at us gravely.

I will never forget the shock I felt when he declined our offer. As we left, I looked around me, seeing all the beauty and the creativity scattered around.

I felt a poke on my side. My son's eyes staring at me. I snapped out of my musings to look at him with adoration. "I love you." I whispered. My journey has ended. For now.

The Isle of Whispers

Victoria Shanghai Academy, Jacobs-Chan, Man Shan Ava – 12

Sandsdale was a quiet town located in the middle of the Gobi desert. Barely anyone knew of it. Surprisingly, the town was surrounded by water like an island. According to legend, Etügen the god of earth was furious when the townspeople didn't leave her offerings after she made them famous in the silk road. She cursed the town to forever be surrounded by a raging river filled with jagged rocks unless the Ongi Monastery gong could be struck. According to folklore, those who accepted the challenge of finding the monastery would be thrust into the harsh desert, having to follow the legendary path of the Silk Road to get to the monastery...

The air went freezing cold, a chilling voice that made Fin shake whispered, "Beware the fate of earth! Beware the Island of Whispers! Sandsdale will fall foul to the beasts' foul jowls unless the Ongi monastery, where secrets lie buried for eternity is saved, unless the Road of Silk is followed. Beware, my friend, for the journey is treacherous, and the road ahead for those brave souls will fall into the hands of Erlik Kahn..." Fin froze, arrow half in the bow. He turned around, terror coursing through his veins. His friends were frozen, wide eyed. Aurelia was shaking. Marcus was the first to speak, "What. Was. That." Solar opened her mouth, "I think it's about the Curse of the Sands. The curse only mentions being stuck here forever! sErlik Kahn's the god of death so something about us dying..." Solar didn't speak much, reflected Fin, but when she opened her mouth it was always worth listening. "The library—" Jack interrupted Fin's thoughts. "It's bound to have SOMETHING, right?" Everyone nodded and followed Jack down the lane.

The library was dank and musty. Books covered every surface. Aurelia walked towards the end of the library and looked through one of the shelves. "Here," she pulled out a tatty book with gold lettering. It was covered in thick dust, like no one had read it in forever. Solar took the book and flipped through the pages, "Here," he paused at a page with a picture of a gong covered with intricate carvings of animals. "The gong," Solar read aloud, "It's just a drawing, nothing that helps." "Surely you guys don't believe in this nonsense?" mocked Marcus, rolling his eyes, "I'm telling you, someone's tricking us for laughs." Jack raised an eyebrow. Aurelia nodded her head, seeming relieved, "Yes, Marcus must be right." "Then what about the wind?" snapped Jack. "Luck," Aurelia seemed eager to forget the happenings. Solar silently stood next to Jack, choosing her side. "What about you, Fin?" asked Aurelia. Fin was torn, on one hand it was tempting to believe it was all a prank. On the other hand, "I just feel like it's serious..." he muttered, staring intently at his shoes. Marcus snorted scornfully, "Right...." Solar stepped forwards, as she did, her hand knocked against the table and the book flew into Marcus's hands. A slip of paper fell out. Fin stepped forwards but before he could pick up the paper it lifted into the air, gold lines began running through it and before Fin could blink a map lay in front of him. "Holy—" sputtered Jack. "Right," conceded Solar, "This is a prank." Marcus glared. Jack stepped forwards and picked up the map. A glowing line seemed to indicate a road. "I think we do this!" Solar pushed herself into the middle of the group. "But it could be dangerous!" protested Aurelia. "But then why do WE have this message?" argued Aurelia "If it's true then it'll always be dangerous!" Fin pointed out. A silence fell over the group as everyone considered their options. Eventually Aurelia nodded, "What Fin says is true..." Everyone frowned and nodded slowly. "We'll go tonight! Everyone brings a lantern, candles, water, snacks and weapons, we don't know what we'll see out there!" Everyone nodded in agreement.

Fin sat up straight as the sound of clicking hooves got closer. Aurelia drew up on her horse. Soon everyone had gathered, they plodded up to the end of the island where the huge waves threatened to swallow them. Suddenly, the map glowed and the rocks moved, building a bridge. Everyone stared. After a nod from Fin they trotted off into the night.

Though he'd been awake all night, adrenaline kept the five awake. They galloped through the night, the horses seemed to sense something exciting was going on and didn't slow as they charged over the sands. "How much further?" groaned Jack, "I'm STARVING!" "Trust you to think of your stomach!" grinned Fin. There were loud whinnies as a horse drew up, cutting off the group. "HEY!" cried Solar crossly, "You're blocking the way!" A man on a cream coloured horse flashed a grin, revealing a gap in his front teeth, "Really? I had no idea." Fin's eye dropped to a gleaming sword on the man's belt. He was a bandit, Fin realised, and the five were easy targets. Fin knew that there were many bandits along the silk road, they terrorised easy targets, lone merchants, tired travellers,

but he'd never thought he'd meet one. His attention snapped back to the bandit as he drew his sword. "I mean no harm," grinned the bandit, "just hand over your things." Fin felt his horse back away. Fin's hand entered his saddle bag and closed around the silver dagger he'd brought. "Hey, you! I see you little boy, hands out of that bag!" Fin reluctantly dropped the dagger and gripped the reins. Solar caught his eye "Гүйхэд бэлэн байгаарай!" *get ready to run*. Fin stared at her as she quietly drew out a golden coin. Solar lifted her hand and threw it. There was a scramble as the bandit tried to catch it. "RUN!!!" yelled Solar, taking off into the desert. The five took off, the horses running faster than they'd ever run before. They heard the bandit curse. Fin urged his horse onwards, as they flew over a sand dune. 'I think we lost them,' panted Jack. "If that was the welcoming party I do NOT want to meet the guards." grumbled Marcus. Aurelia nodded in agreement as she drew up, sending sand flying everywhere. "Lets rest," suggested Fin, ignoring Solar's glare. "The horses need a drink, and rest and so do we," he gazed at Solar, pleased to see her agreement.

Fin ate and climbed onto the horse. "Not far now," remarked Solar, checking the map. "We just have to cross even more of the silk road!" she smiled. Everyone groaned. First light shone as the exhausted group finally came within sight of the Ongi Monastery.

The sun was setting as they finally pulled up to the monastery. "Arm yourselves, we don't know what we might see!" warned Sola. Everyone hurriedly slid off the horses. "How do we get into the temple?" asked Fin nervously, "It's not meant for anyone who doesn't live there!" Everyone considered this, "Well..." began Marcus, "We could climb up the side of the crumbling East wall. So we can use the holds and climb through a window." Everyone approved.

Fin's head spun as he glanced down and saw a long drop. "Hey," Fin almost jumped out of his skin as Jack tapped him on the shoulder, "Head in the game, we're going in." Fin felt his heart banging as he crawled through the narrow window and into what looked like a small study. Solar pressed her fingers to her lips and beckoned the others to follow. Together, the five children carefully crept down the hallway. Footsteps approached and Solar ducked into an empty room dragging the others with her. Peeping out of a crack in the wall Fin watched a monk stroll by. Fin watched as the monk turned a corner and disappeared before nodding the all-clear to the others. They crept down a staircase before they reached a floor with a bright red door. Fin tried the door, it was locked. Solar pushed him aside and stuck her blade into the key hole and wriggled it around. The door creaked open. "Burgle much?" asked Aurelia with a raised eyebrow. Solar laughed, "No, I just forget my keys once in a while." At the very back of the room was a gong covered in carvings of animals. Finn nervously picked up the mallet and was about to take a swing... "STOP RIGHT THERE!" a man's voice made Fin jump so hard he dropped the mallet. Aurelia picked it up. The man was dressed for some kind of ritual. "PUT THAT DOWN!" the man strode forwards menacingly. Suddenly two people dressed like warriors appeared and produced knives. Aurelia screamed and a gong banged, "Dong, dong, dong, dong." Everyone in the room froze as the carvings around the gong glowed an eerie green colour, a wind buffeted through the room and what seemed like spirits flew around."RUN!!!" yelled Jack ducking around a guard as he shot through the doorway. He charged along the corridor running in the direction of the temple's front door. Fin dodged around guards as he slammed open the door. "THE CART!" he yelled, leaping onto the driver's seat of a nearby horse cart, everyone piled in and Fin shook the reins.

When they arrived home, the water had disappeared, leaving villagers staring around in confusion. "It worked!" cried Fin excitedly 'They will never know of the journey you took, but take heed of the future days...' the voice whispered for the final time.

Bridges of Silk

Victoria Shanghai Academy, Kwan, Hoi Shun Jace – 12

The great Silk Road, a massive trade route made centuries ago, has been a big contributor to cultural exchange and economic development for over a thousand years. A magnificent serpent weaving from the gates of Chang'an through the sands of Persia all the way to the temples of Rome. But how did we get here? It all started with the tale of one daring trek into the west by a brave Chinese man and his small delegation, powered by the hopes and goals of his Empire.

Zhang Qian, a middle-class officer under the Han dynasty, was called to the Han Emperor's imperial palace. The Emperor scratched his chin nervously as Qian entered the room. "Greetings, Son of Heaven!" bowed Qian. The Emperor unrolled a paper map. "Zhang Qian! I have a very important mission for you," he announced, pointing at the area to the North of China, "as you should know, the Xiongnu, these ruthless nomadic tribesmen, have been causing a lot of trouble lately, like a thorn in mighty Han's side." Then, he shifted his attention to the West of China. A large area with mountains drawn on it, labelled with a question mark. Beyond this area were the Yuezhi, a strong tribe of nomads who are being driven out of their territory by the Xiongnu. "This uncharted area of the West is supposedly Xiongnu controlled. I need you to sneakily journey through it to reach the Yuezhi," said the Emperor, "then, once you get there, negotiate an alliance with the migrating Yuezhi tribe. Then, the Han can work with the Yuezhi to defeat a common enemy! The Xiongnu will be forced to retreat to their muddy tents in fear!" Qian grasped the importance of his mission. He would have to cross perilous, enemy controlled territory to secure an alliance with a faraway tribe. But Qian, being a brave and loyal man, would never defy the Emperor's orders. "Yes sir! I won't let you down, Your Highness!" he saluted with confidence.

Qian met with his small team of translators, guides and soldiers at the West gate of Chang'an. "Listen, men! Today, we will push into enemy land, secure alliances and crush foes!" declared Qian. His men gave a cry of triumph and mounted their horses. Off they went into the sunset, past the Chinese borders and into the unknown. By the time they made it into a rocky mountain range with summits touching the clouds, their horses grew tired and the men needed rest. It was nightfall. Qian got off his horse and began setting up camp. But just as he was about to fetch some firewood, a soldier heard the faint sound of hooves. The noise grew ever so slightly louder, and the soldier, worried, alerted the camp. But before anyone could react or figure out where the sounds were coming from, a shiny object darted through the air. It landed and struck a soldier in the chest. "It's an ambush!" exclaimed Qian, ordering his men to run for their lives. They were in no condition to fight, tired and in their pajamas. The ambushers, a squad of four Xiongnu horsemen wielding heavy warbows, pursued. They fired a rain of arrows, killing all of Qian's men except Qian himself. Overnight, he was hauled to the Xiongnu's settlement.

The next day, Qian woke up in a wooden cage. A servant tossed him some bread and water. Qian felt miserable. He was captured on the first night. His team was slaughtered. His mission probably failed. Then, a tall, scary man with untidy hair, animal hide clothing and a scar over his cheek came over. He was the Xiongnu leader. "Hello, Han prisoner, how's your cell?" he grinned deviously. Qian grumbled. The Xiongnu leader taunted, "Oh, don't be so grumpy! Here, you'll get to immerse yourself in Xiongnu culture." He laughed at the irony of it all. A Chinese diplomat tasked with securing an alliance to destroy the Xiongnu, being captured and forced to be a Xiongnu himself! Qian found this humiliating. "We'll even give you a wife!" added the leader, smiling to himself. By noon, Qian was rehomed to a small tent with a humble shepherdess, his Xiongnu wife. Qian sulked and groaned. As the years passed, Qian has integrated into the life of a Xiongnu. He herded sheep and tended to grassy fields. He has learned to accept his new life and the Xiongnu culture. Locals were interested in his culture, too. He carried some shiny silk in his bag for repairing his clothes and writing records. People were interested in the silk, as it was a material never before seen by the Xiongnu. Qian got an idea. What if, instead of war, nations exchanged culture and development through trade? He thought for a while, but then he shook it off. He had promised the Emperor, and wasn't going to break his promise.

10 years have passed since his capture. He had a son with his wife, and was content with his life as a Xiongnu. But he still hasn't forgotten his mission. One night, the Xiongnu were fighting amongst themselves over leadership. Qian saw this as a chance to escape and complete his task. He packed his belongings and mounted his horse with his family. His horse trotted off West, reaching the Yuezhi eventually. Qian met with the Yuezhi leader. "Great leader of the Yuezhi! I am a diplomat from the mighty Han, and we wish to secure an alliance with your nation to defeat a common enemy, the Xiongnu!" said Qian. The Yuezhi leader shook his head, "the Yuezhi no longer require such an alliance. We have settled now, and are fine with fighting the Xiongnu on our own." Qian nodded and thanked the leader for his time. So a decade in captivity, only for the potential allies to decline the offer? The Emperor's going to be really disappointed.

Having to refuel for the perilous trip back, he stayed at the Yuezhi settlement for a while. There, the Yuezhi were interested in the foreign objects he brought, such as silk. They didn't have silk there, so they offered to trade some for other goods. Amongst the goods offered by the Yuezhi were grapes, pottery and religious texts. Qian had never seen such things in China or the Xiongnu. He even saw some legendary blood-sweat horses, said to be able to run at the speed of wind for days. He accepted the trade offers. The idea for cultural exchange that he got while being a prisoner finally came to life. What if there was a way nations could trade items from their respective regions that each other didn't have? And this was how. The route he travelled to reach the Yuezhi from China was like a bridge of silk, connecting cultures and people. He left the Yuezhi upon a blood-sweat horse with an inventory of Western pottery, Buddhist texts, various plants and even precious metals. He gave beautiful silk, Chinese tea and some jade items in exchange. Along the way back, they trekked through difficult terrain until eventually, the family made it back to China.

Qian headed into the imperial palace to see the Emperor, who wore a dissatisfied look on his face. "Zhang Qian! I sent you on a mission to secure allies, but you got captured by the very enemies we're trying to defeat! Then, you lived as a prisoner for 10 whole years!" he shouted, "and you even married an enemy Xiongnu woman!" Qian spoke up, "I'm deeply sorry, Son of Heaven. I have failed my holy task. But, look on the bright side. I brought back rare items from the far West, items that can't be found anywhere in China!" The Emperor slightly lightened, intrigued. "I have noticed your horse outside," he began, "could it be?" Qian replied, "Yes, Your Highness, it is indeed a legendary blood-sweat horse, brought from the West. I acquired it from trading with the Yuezhi. They have many things we don't have, while we have a lot of things they don't have, so I offered to exchange goods." The Emperor was interested. Qian showed the Emperor some grape and alfalfa seeds, insisting that they can provide sustenance for the people of Han. "Zhang Qian! You may have failed your mission, but your contribution was mighty! You brought back invaluable items, including the blood-sweat horses, which will aid our army tenfold! The plants you brought back shall feed thousands! Our nation will be rich from the trade you started! And other nations will soon know of the greatness of the Han through intricate silk, tea, pottery and bronze! This is a major advancement for the great Han!" declared the Emperor triumphantly. Qian was rewarded for his bravery and contributions, remembered as the man who laid the first bridges of silk, as a foundation for the Silk Road.

That One Special Discovery

Victoria Shanghai Academy, Lam, Licia – 12

This morning, the first sensation that hit me was an overwhelming heat. The sun's rays poured through the cracks in my house, bathing the rooms in a golden glow that made it feel as if the very walls were ablaze. Wiping a bead of sweat from my forehead I blinked away the remnants of sleep and stood up wearily. My village was enduring a drought; the once lush green fields were now barren, dry, and cracked. There was no water, the only source of water being a small well, and even that wasn't enough to last a week. The villagers held on to the hope of hearing the pitter-patter of rain, but with each passing day, it grew dimmer, like the fading light of dusk.

It was on that day, the clapping of hooves rang out through the village, when the villagers slowly surrounded the horse and the man, he elegantly jumped down. His black and gold Hanfu wrapped around him, signifying his status as an official scholar. A small belt wrapped around his waist, holding a bronze dagger that was glinting under the sunlight. He looked around for a minute, moving his hand to his dagger instinctively, before tucking it into his sack then saying "Villagers! I am the envoy of our gracious emperor: Emperor Wu!" He boomed "He has sent me, Zhang Qian, to go on an expedition to the West! I need someone who can read the maps clear as day, and who can accompany me!" Zhang Qian finished, looking around for any volunteers. The village burst into whispers and glances, until almost every villager was looking at me. Zhang Qian followed the villagers' glances, his hazel-brown eyes meeting mine "Why, come on up, young man!" He smiled, clearly satisfied "What is your name?" He questioned, I hesitated, then said "My name is Ganfu." I replied, not meeting his warm gaze, "Well, Ganfu, it seems the village has chosen you to accompany me, why?" Zhang Qian questioned me with sincere eyes, I reluctantly said "My father taught me how to read stars and maps, so I know how to guide people." A simple answer. "Hopefully he won't think of me that badly. Will he accept me, or turn me away like the other villagers?" I thought to myself. Zhang Qian looked at me up and down, as if X-raying me for lies, then gave me a pat on the back. Strong. Accepting. I tried not to wince from the pain, and gave a forcing smile. "Good man!" Zhang Qian boomed, smiling as wrinkles formed on the sides of his eyes to make him look almost boyish. "I look forward to seeing you tomorrow at dawn, Ganfu." He gave a final wave, walking towards the nearest inn as the villagers eyed him with slight surprise at the choice of choosing me.

I stayed awake all night, preparing maps of all sorts, tracing my fingers along the different roads and nearby villages, doing my best not to fall asleep. Finally, the light of dawn slowly came upon my village, my eyes could hardly open, yet I still managed to come out of my hut. I looked at the rising sun, feeling a chill morning breeze blow in front of my face, I let out a slow breath, just as I heard a clip-clop behind me. It was Zhang Qian on a mottled brown horse, he gave me a warm smile "Good morning, Ganfu. Are you ready?" His face was almost like sunshine itself, I couldn't help but smile slightly. "Yes" I replied daintily, I went inside my hut, breathing in the musty scent of old books and scrolls. "Hurry up! Time isn't on our side!" I heard Zhang Qian's voice from outside, I hurried to get my rucksack and went outside once more. "Are you ready?" Zhang Qian asked, looking at my tired face "You've burned the midnight oil, haven't you?" I shook my head "I-I'm fine" I gave a tired smile "Will he leave without me? Was it a bad decision to stay up all night? I should've gotten at least one hour of sleep!" I thought nervously, biting my lip. "Very well." Zhang Qian nodded, mounting his horse once more.

I gave a painful grunt, waking up to a small cage. Injured. Sick. I looked toward Zhang Qian, who was in a better state. He sat cross-legged, his black and gold silk robes now a desert-grit. It had been a few weeks since I left the village with him into the wild west. During the journey, we were attacked by a tribe of Xiongnu, and now, we were being held captive. I gave a sigh and laid down on the ground, until I noticed something. "Zhang Qian!" I tapped his shoulder. "Yes....?" Zhang Qian opened his eyes "One of the wood bars is rotting!" I pointed toward one of the wood bars in the middle, the wood was completely blackened, almost in a charcoal-like state. "You're right!" Zhang Qian gave the wood block a hard tug. Crack! The wood bar broke in half. Not quite enough for Zhang Qian to slip through, but little by little, he managed to squeeze through the gap. He looked back at me with pitiful eyes "Are you coming?" He whispered, looking round for any guards "No..." I shook my head, clutching my leg. "I would be a

shackle, slowing you down.” I looked at my injured leg with a bitter smile. “I’ll return for you then.” Zhang Qian gave a solemn nod, an action which a high scoring official would never do. I nodded back, giving a weary smile. As I watched Zhang Qian mount his horse and ride off, I lost all my energy. I sank back to the floor “Good luck...Zhang Qian...” I gasp, drifting into an uneasy sleep...

Journey Along the Silk Road

Victoria Shanghai Academy, Lee, Lee Sum Samantha – 12

As the pale morning light stretched across the bed, Sarah tightened her backpack strap and looked at her bed once more. Every step she took would be a new discovery for her and her students. As a historian, she carried many maps and papers to record answers to her questions and promised new challenges for her to solve.

Sarah looked at her map and the marked paths she would be following, and said: “I will first start at Chang’an and explore their culture. I wonder if I can see any trades going on.” Even though it’s the 20th century, only a few historians dared to step on the Silk Road. She took a long ride on the bus to her first starting point and saw some interesting people wearing some traditional clothing. Sarah was curious, therefore she went to ask those people: “Hello! May I ask which community you are from? The clothing you’re wearing is breathtaking!” The person pointed at his clothing and said: “As-salamu alaikum! I’m Muslim and I’m going to the mosque before travelling to the Silk Road. Join me if you want to!” Sarah nodded and followed the young man to the mosque.

After kneeling on the cold floor, the man’s voice carried kindness: “My name is Armaan. I can be your tour guide for this journey. Let’s get started.” Sarah enthusiastically agreed and waited for him to have their bus ready. Armaan looked confused and used his fingers to symbolise that they needed to walk. Sarah reluctantly agreed and started their journey. They first walked through some bumpy surfaces and finally arrived at the desert. They met a few people while walking and quite surprisingly, they provided food for them. Armaan quickly introduced it to Sarah: “These foods are more Chinese than the ones you will see later. It is Xiao Long Bao with a few spices that is a delicious combination. Do try it!” The soup burst in her mouth and the meat was dry. Sarah gave it a thumbs up and forced a slight smile, even though her eyes were watery.

After trying a new type of cuisine, the desert wind blew on their faces as they continued their journey. Suddenly, while travelling in mid-way, Armaan’s phone buzzed continuously. His smile faded and he got serious. “My family just texted me.” he said, as light as ever. “They need me to be back as soon as possible. I have to leave.” Sarah made a small noise as she said: “You’re leaving? Like right now?” Her throat was dry. Armaan placed a small compass in her hand and struggled to speak: “Use this. Others will help. Stay safe.” He left without another word and vanished into a gust of wind. Sarah was too surprised for words and mumbled to herself: “Now this will be very fun indeed.” She hugged her bag closely and decided to rest a bit.

As the night passed, Sarah was woken up by a loud noise. She blinked a few times and realised she was on top of a pile of straw in a farm. She quickly looked around and saw some horses on the side eating a big chunk of straw. She took all of her belongings and left the farm, and little did she know that there was a big lot of food left in front of the farm. She ignored the food as she had no idea what it was. She tightened her bag’s straps and was ready to continue. Her dream destination was to go to Antakya, Turkey. As she continued, she met a person that she will never forget. Her name is Banni from Iraq and she is clear about the history of the Silk Road and may even tell legends no one knows. Banni recalled: “I can remember many stories from the past. But Sarah, this one will fit you best. There was once an empress named Leizu. One day, a silkworm cocoon dropped into her cup of tea and she noticed how it produced a warm and soft silk. She therefore saw potential in the material and thought it is a great idea to trade. I think you might want to know this.” Sarah was so obsessed with her story, she purchased some silk from her as well. When Sarah was dying to ask more questions, however, the woman disappeared in the blink of an eye. Sarah was creeped out by it and shivered as a cold breeze blew onto her shoulder.

Sarah walked for miles; therefore, her feet were sore and her back was aching from carrying her bag. She saw this man with many bottles in front of him and thought to herself: Maybe he knows how to treat sore legs from walking? It can’t hurt to try! She observed for a bit before approaching that man. He looked up and next to him was a big jug. He then played the pungi and something moved in the jug. Sarah got scared but she wanted to be polite, therefore waited for that strange man’s performance. Suddenly, she heard a sound that was like “zzz” and she knew something was going to turn out badly. A snake. A snake rose out of the jug and greeted Sarah with a nod. Sarah was shivering at one point and started to whimper. She looked at the man again and finally said: “Excuse me, do you know how to cure sore legs?” The man was confused and gave her a random bottle that was labelled as “black pepper”. Sarah cackled and pointed at her legs to the man. The man once again didn’t understand and gave her “nutmeg” spice. Sarah felt hopeless and left without another word.

After the confusing conversation, Sarah decided to eat some hot food as her tummy was growling. She didn't find a restaurant or store until 2 hours of walking. She walked into this store where some Indian cuisine can be found. She decided to eat rotis and curry rice, but again faced difficulties speaking to the server. Sarah pointed at the menu and said: "Can I have some roti and curry rice. These two and nothing else. Thank you!" The server took a while to understand what she said and fortunately managed to get her the right food. The rotis were thankfully hot off the pan and the curry was spicy enough to make it appetising. She quickly finished her meal and continued her long journey.

Sarah was tired of walking miles and miles to her dream destination. Therefore, she chose to ride on a camel since that's the only transportation that they would provide. She looked around and looked at her map to see where she was. She thought to herself: I should be in Afghanistan soon. The flag looks quite similar to theirs. Sarah then saw a bunch of camels lined up and she approached a man. She pointed at the camel and asked: "Can I ride on the camel?" The man said: "No. You need to trade me for something good before you ride on it." Sarah fumbled through her bag and as she was finding valuable things, someone next to her also wanted to ride on the camel. He asked just like how Sarah did and the man agreed in a second. Sarah got really angry as she continued to search. Finally, she found some matcha powder. It was in her bag since she didn't know if she would like the taste of the drinks here. The man studies the pack of green tea and reluctantly agrees to let her ride.

Sarah rode on it and it was her first time. She found it quite bumpy and it almost felt like she was on a boat, rocking on waves. The camel's fur was soft but it was a bit uncomfortable to sit on. Sarah didn't mind but still tried to enjoy the ride. On the ride, Sarah saw a few trades going on. Some were trading silk for tea and others were trading spices for fruits. The camel walked for at least an hour before it suddenly started going out of control and shook Sarah up and down to left and right. Sarah was gripping the rope as hard as she could, but it was too late. The camel threw her off it and landed on the soft sand. "Beep Beep Beep", the alarm rang. Sarah blinked for a few seconds and realised it was all a dream and Sarah fell out of bed. Even though it was a dream, the language difficulties and eating different cuisines felt realistic to her. This was an unforgettable journey for her. She then made a real promise to herself: I will one day travel on the Silk Road.

The Cartographer's Blood

Victoria Shanghai Academy, Li, Furu Felicia – 13

The wind in Taklamakan didn't just blow—it sang. A low, mournful threnody that carefully shaped a veil of golden airborne grift, rising up from the desert grounds to greet the everlasting moonlit sky. To Leo Chen—Sterling, this was the sound of forgettance. It was the sound that had swallowed his father, and the mystery of the He Kingdom, both of which are concealed in this very map in his possession.

Leo laid out the parchment on his lap in reminiscence of his father, Elliot Sterling, and his many adventures with it. “This has to be it,” he thought to himself, carefully examining the map, “this is the only desert without a cross on it, as well as...the only desert my father wasn't able to survive.”

The map was an inheritance. A beautiful and chaotic symbol of Elliot Sterling's lifetime devotion to the disappearance of the silk road, of He Kingdom's origin, where the Chen—Sterling family's ancestry lies. In the centre, the character ‘和’ was written in bold Chinese cursive—Hé. Harmony. A nation once known for its unity through diversity.

“Another ghost chase, *Chen Dao*?” Yultuz, Leo's Uighur guide and translator, teases, fidgeting with his straw hat and taking a large gulp of Atkan Chai from his hip flask. The wrinkles etched on his tanned skin resemble a topographical map of Taklamakan itself, brought to life by the beads of sweat running down his forehead. “Y'know, there are many deserts on Earth, not all of them have a story.”

“Well, this one does,” Leo said, in a voice hybrid of both his British education and the Shanghai cadences of his mother. Much like how the He Kingdom was made to connect east and west through what was known as the Silk Road, Leo's Chinese name ‘道’ means ‘road’. He was mixed by blood, yet he didn't feel like he truly belonged anywhere.

As Leo was smoothing out the tattered edges with his fingertips, he noticed a new thread of words in Uyghur in the margin.

“Meteorite in 1400. The He Kingdom was buried amidst the chaos. Seek the Mingsha Dunes...Annals of Wu”

Next to it, there was a drawing of an 8 pointed star, much like the one you would find on a regular compass.

“Look, annals don't necessarily mean anything – the dunes are way too dangerous for you to go to.” Yultuz grunted, “We're here to look for clues through real cartography and archaeology, not riddles and magic.”

At the mention of ‘annals’, something stirred within Leo's mind. Annals of Wu...Could it be...Zhang Qian's Emperor Wu? From 126 BCE? Though it is unclear how they might be linked, Leo was sure the collision of surnames meant something deeper.

Grasping onto this possibility, Leo's fingers fumbled as he struggled to pull out yet another piece of crumpled paper from his pocket. This was his father's final letter to Leo before he set off to Taklamakan alone, and Leo held onto it everyday in hopes of Elliot's return.

Only until now did Leo realise, this wasn't just a vivid description of his father's endeavours, but rather a guide on what to do if Elliot wasn't able to make it.

“He isn’t just a city, Leo, it’s a synapse connecting the east and west, a result of the Silk Road. I’m going to the Mingsha Dunes today. He is in the light. Seek a permanent light source, and you will find the first handshake.”

“Yultuz, please. The Mingsha Dunes are just east of where we are right now. I’m sure my father wouldn’t lie to me.”

“But if we come to a dead end, you’re on your own.”

“Deal.”

For the next three weeks, Leo and Yultuz would embark on a treacherous journey accompanied by nothing but stars and sand storms; and for three weeks, they would find nothing but more endless desolation waiting for them.

Until this morning.

Leo lifted his binoculars and peered through them to confirm his sighting. To the west, the horizon shimmered, blinding him so much he had to squint his eyes. But it wasn’t just shimmering, it had a *rippling* effect to it as well.

“Look, Yultuz. Do you see?”

“A *fata morgana*?”

“No, the colour of the light is far too off for that to be a mirage.” Leo breathed heavily with excitement, “The remains of the meteorite. Father once read to me in a book that it was rich in iron, fusing the sand into glass. It must have formed over the centuries, with silicon dioxide reflecting the light. Yultuz, this creates a permanent mirage effect, and obscures what’s underneath. This is what father meant by He being in the light!”

Yultuz stared at Leo in awe, the shimmering horizon reflecting in his hazel brown irises. “A desert hiding a desert. Truly something only your father would seek.”

As the two carefully started towards the distortion, the air grew hotter and thicker, almost as if they were being embraced. At the same time, the sunlight split into prickly prisms, blinding them from moving any further.

And then, the ground gave way. It wasn’t a sudden collapse, but a well-disguised transformation. What seemed to be hard-packed sand broke and paved a way into what seemed to be a chasm. As the dust cleared, it was quite obvious that Leo and Yultuz were no longer on the surface.

“We walk.” Leo’s bold voice shredded through the eerie echoes of the chasm, the decision settling upon him with the weight of both their fates.

Surprised at Leo’s sudden daring attitude, Yultuz silently picks up his pace. The sun, reflected from a million surfaces all over, became an omnipresent, blinding furnace that only became brighter as they ventured further.

About an hour into this new territory, Leo and Yultuz found their first marker. It was a stone tablet, inscribed with flowing Sogdian letters. Though Leo could only make out the general meaning of the message, he knew it spoke of a kingdom where east and west are united through trade.

Leo gasped out loud. His father’s theories weren’t a fantasy after all.

Not much further from the stone tablet lay a skeleton figure, with a leather pouch hanging from his neck, and its bony hands extending out. It lay amidst a pile of porcelain and jade, of which Leo recalled was some of the most commonly traded items on the Silk Road, not buried but *encased*.

With trembling fingers, Leo carefully approached the skeleton's neck and pried the pouch free, not sure of what to expect. Gently reaching in, he found that inside hid a lump of raw, unworked jade, as well as a piece of clay token.

"The first handshake." Leo exclaimed under his breath.

Yultuz looked spooked. "Are you sure we should be doing this? Isn't it better to not...disturb creatures in the afterlife?"

"Look at the direction he's pointing towards." Leo breathed, "I think this may be it."

Too excited to explain any further, Leo leapt towards the heart of the Chasm, marked by a tranquil and majestic domain that stayed hidden in sunlight unless you knew where to look.

As Leo brushed off the surface of the door with his bare hands, specks of sand gave way to a smooth pattern engraved as the handle, the very same 8 pointed star drawn on his map. The material was not stone or wood, but a perfect piece of fine-cut jade, outlined with streaks of cinnabar red.

There was no key nor handle, just a hand-shaped depression in the middle of the star that perfectly went up to Leo's chest height. Leo looked down upon his palm, imagining the collision of British and Chinese blood running up his veins happening right this second.

"The map is in my bones."

Turns out, it wasn't a metaphor.

Closing his eyes, Leo slid his right palm onto the depression, letting the cool and impossibly smooth texture embrace his warm skin, as if accepting some sort of invitation.

For a moment, all was still. Then, memories of trades that happened centuries ago came flushing towards Leo, everything all at once. Trade routes, religious ideas, poetry transmissions. All these long forgotten plans have finally arisen to the surface, this time desperate to be brought back and shared to the world.

After the flashbacks stopped, the domain faded away. All that was left was a tattered velvet coloured journal, with the word '和谐', harmony, inscribed on it.

The final entry read:

"The meteor did not destroy the Silk Road, it preserved it. The council foresaw the Ottoman Empire's plans, hence why they decided to seal their knowledge here, hoping for someone of both worlds to unseal and release the information when the time is right. Leo, you are a child of both worlds—exactly what they were looking for. Chen and Sterling, woven together."

As tears started to blur his vision, Leo finally understood: he was not caught between the two worlds, he was the bridge between them. As a cartographer, he would map that space anew, reigniting the flames of the Silk Road.

The Trade of New Flavors

Victoria Shanghai Academy, Li, Lok Hei Andrea – 13

The morning quiet was weighing down on Lauren Tian's chest. For eleven years, she invested in the shop, her body a precision instrument tuned to the rhythm of The Artisan's Touch. Wake up. Iron the apron. Put it on. Brew a plain americano that reached exactly 96 degrees. Walk out the door. Open the shop promptly at 6:00 AM—right when the clock ticked to the next hour. The transaction of her time for the predictable routine.

Now, The Artisan's Touch was no more. No more hearing the daily playlist. Only the immaculate perfection of her apartment, where the throw pillows were placed exactly 10cm away from each other. The failure of her coffee shop wasn't fiery; it died down slowly, and quietly. First, a health inspector's comment about a storage shelf. A landlord's eviction notice tucked between forms. The final, hollow click of the lock on a door she would never get to open again.

Days led into weeks. The grief was not just from losing her business, but for wasted years of her life. Without her daily routine, she was messed up, her busy life turning into days of emptiness. One bad investment led to months of grief.

Leafing through a pile of final notices, a yellow poster fell out. "Volunteer Excursion: A Journey to the Ancient Silk Road. Inspire Remote Communities. Change a Life." It was the kind of reckless chaos, impulsive thing she swore she would never glance at. But then she saw a small section: "Itinerary." There it was. The one thing she was looking for. A daily schedule. 7:00 AM: Breakfast. 8:00 AM: Departure. 6:00 PM: Set up camp.

A plan. A routine. Something to follow.

It was tiny. But it was enough to convince her to look at the poster a second time. This time, her trembling hand filled in the form at the back. She was signing a contract for the unknown, selflessly trading her rigid self for a distraction, a chance to be free from grief.

The first blow were the strangers at the airport. There was Sharlene, a blunt and caring nurse with a rambunctious laugh that could be heard from anywhere, Kristopher, the passionate and soft spoken history teacher with a tired demeanor and a satchel full of books, and Beverly, the dainty yoga instructor who didn't walk but rather synthesized and floating through the air. They were pure chaos. And next to all that, there was Lauren, with her packed, perfectly organized cube packing, and the laminated checklist.

Her first true crisis came in a bustling market in Xinjiang. Their guide, a man named Pak, handed her a bowl of fried rice. "Shou Zhua Fan. Eat." Lauren looked at it with dismay. It was imperfect, colorful, and there were no chopsticks.

"Hey! Pak! Where are my chopsticks?" Raising her hand, Lauren looked towards the guide.

"Oh, didn't you know? This is eaten with your hands!" replied Pak. What? How can rice be eaten without chopsticks? Hesitantly, she reached a hand towards the rice. An exchange of her discomfort for a new flavor.

It was an explosion. Cumin, tender lamb, onions caramelized by a fierce heat—it was messy, loud, and unequivocally delicious. It was the antithesis of her pre-wrapped pastries. She finished it, licking the grease from her fingers with a surge of shame and delight.

This pattern repeated itself for days. Sticky, syrup-drenched baklava in a Persian caravanserai; a bowl of hand-pulled noodles in a Xi'an alley, so fiery with Szechuan pepper that her lips tingled for an hour; a simple, tangy flatbread in a bowl of lamb soup, shared with a family in a remote Gansu village. Food was no longer just fuel. It was a language. It was history. Everything was connected. The very concept of "perfection" began to feel sterile and silly under the vast, unforgiving sky of the Taklamakan Desert. This time, her time was exchanged for new, creative flavors.

The purpose of their expedition was to help a small, impoverished village rebuild a community kitchen that had been damaged in a mudslide. When they arrived, Lauren's heart sank. There was no blueprint, no project manager, just a pile of sun-dried bricks and a mound of clay mortar. Her mind, seeking order, scrambled for a plan, a measurement, a checklist.

An elderly woman named Beatrice, her face a roadmap of wrinkles carved by the sun, shuffled over. She wordlessly picked up a brick, slathered it with mud, and placed it on the foundation. She gestured for Lauren to do the same.

Lauren's first brick was crooked. She reached to fix it, but Beatrice placed a warm, leathery hand on her wrist and shook her head, a gentle smile in her eyes. She pointed at the wall, which was clearly ancient, uneven, and full of character. It was strong. It had held for generations. It was meant to be crooked. Lauren surrendered her perfectionism for the messy bricks.

So, Lauren started building. She let the mud squelch between her fingers, feeling the gritty reality of it. She stopped measuring everything and started feeling. She worked with Beatrice and the others, communicating through created gestures and laughter. The wall they built wasn't straight at all, but when they placed the final brick, the cheer was instant. The satisfaction was even deeper, more profound than any perfectly pulled espresso or tea. She made something useful, not perfect.

One evening, as they shared a simple stew from the new kitchen, Lauren sat with a young mother named Zephyra, who was struggling to feed her children. Zephyra wasn't asking for charity; she was showing Lauren her small, struggling garden. Lauren, for the first time, didn't see a problem to be solved with a rigid plan. She saw a person. She listened. Later, she used her formidable organizational skills—once reserved for inventory spreadsheets—to help Zephyra and other villagers arrange a cooperative system to pool their resources and sell their goods at a larger market down the valley.

She had found a new purpose. The passion she had once poured into coffee beans was now redirected toward people. Her perfectionism evolved into a drive for logistical excellence, but its goal was warmth and empowerment, not sterile control.

The return home was jarring. The town was the same, but her eyes were new. She saw the need she had once walked past—the food insecurity, the lonely elderly, the struggling families.

Months later, the grand opening of "The Common Table" was everything The Artisan's Touch wasn't. It was loud and chaotic. Located right at the center of Hong Kong, it was part community kitchen, part food distribution center, part job-training hub.

Lauren moved through the space with a new kind of grace. She was no longer a solitary perfectionist but a conductor of compassion. She coordinated volunteers, sourced surplus food from local stores (even her old coffee shop competitors), and taught people how to cook nutritious, flavorful meals.

On the wall behind the serving counter, a framed map of the Silk Road hung next to a photograph. In the photo, Lauren and Beatrice stood before their crooked, strong wall, their hands covered in dried mud, their faces split by genuine, joyful laughter.

A young man approached the counter, looking hesitant. Lauren handed him a bowl of hearty vegetable soup. She didn't measure the portion. She focused on the feeling of peace helping others had brought her. She looked him in the eye and asked, "How are you doing today?"

He gave a small, surprised smile. "Much better now, thanks to you. Really, thanks a lot, Ms. Lauren."

As the peaceful conversations filled the room, Lauren Tian started to feel a sense of peace. Living a new life where she got to help others had swept away the harshness of her past life. Finally, she discovered the perfect, yet messy brew.

Silk and Sand

Victoria Shanghai Academy, Liu, Sofia – 12

The harsh heat of the desert fanned the merchants' faces as they traversed the path, the sounds of camels grunting and clopping on the hot sand to be heard for miles. Ning glanced around as the aftershocks of a male's holler vibrated around them. The exact words were carried away by the wind. Ning hoisted her large travelling pack higher, the rough straps of the pack not suited for a slim female's shoulders.

Ning sighed as one of her male counterparts motioned her towards him. "There are bandits ahead. Make yourself useful." He barked roughly. Ning nodded. The man eyed her cautiously, as if sizing up her ability to protect their goods.

In the distance, a loud cry sounded, followed by the clopping of hooves. "So it is true." Ning murmured to herself as she steeled herself for the attack. As the escort of the merchants, she was in charge of making sure they didn't perish to attackers or the natural desert environment, which was easier said than done.

"Woman! Give me your items!" A gruff voice barked. Obviously they targeted the woman first. Sighing, Ning undid the straps, slinging her heavy pack over her shoulder. Tucked into the side pocket of the pack was a small hunting knife, which Ning had slid there in the first hours of the voyage.

"Hurry up now!" A different voice barked from behind Ning. Her slender fingers extracted the blade carefully.

"J— just take it— it and spare me!" Ning pleaded, feigning weakness. She held the knife end towards the attacker. The man grasped it hesitantly, and before Ning could second guess or regret anything, she drove it forwards, stabbing it straight through the man's hand. He screamed out in anguish, blood dripping onto the hot sand. Ning smiled in grim satisfaction, then turned back to the other bandits, sizing them up.

"Help me, you buffons!" Ning shouted at the other traders, who were watching in awe, and possibly fear, although she couldn't quite tell. They were probably fawning over the fact that their female escort actually proved useful.

One of the other traders, the one who first spotted the bandits, urged his horse to fall in step with Ning. He was the only one of the pack of traders to have a horse instead of a camel, the prized animal bartered for by the man previously. The horse neighed, its jaw snapping at one of the bandits.

Ning bared her teeth and raised the dagger, now bloodied to the hilt. The bandits seemed taken aback, sizing up Ning. The injured one was doubled over on the ground.

"Cease your bleeding and leave." Ning commanded, her voice ringing out clear even in the harsh winds. The sand was swirling dangerously, possibly forming a sandstorm. They had to keep moving quickly.

"Y— yes." One of the bandits stuttered, glancing at his injured companion. They mounted their oxen and trotted away, the injured one nearly falling off the bucking animal as he rode. Ning wiped the bloodied blade clean with a scrap of cloth, then tossed it into the sand dunes.

In response, the wind seemed to swirl even faster, particles of sand swirling into the air. "Sandstorm!" Someone yelled in the haze, and distantly, Ning was aware that she was caught right in the middle. Ning forced herself to take a shallow breath, forced herself to take another step towards the shadow of a cluster of boulders a few steps away.

“Be— behind that boulder! Get low!” Ning commanded, her voice ringing out loudly. She could hear the clapping of hooves as the traders that had heard her huddled behind the boulders.

Some of them are still out there, wandering. Ning realized, then crawled to her feet. “Stay.” She instructed to the ones gathered behind the boulders, and then she ran.

Her legs burned as she ran through the sandstorm, her ears listening for cries. She whistled, a signal she had picked up from her father. Someone whistled back, and Ning raced in the direction of the piercing sound cutting through the howling winds.

She ran like there was no tomorrow, rescuing all the traders in the vicinity. She held her hand out to the last trader, her steps becoming slower as the rush of the adrenaline wore off and pain began to settle in her bones.

First female escort. Such a privilege to fill in for your dear father. Ning’s eyes burned, both from the stinging sand and from the memory of her family. Mama and Baba, however antagonistic they were to Ning when she chose to take Baba’s responsibility as escort, were still her parents. And she was still their little girl.

Amidst the swirling winds, Ning shielded herself with the boulder, feeling the rock tremble under the force of the winds and sand. *Survive.* Crouched behind the boulder, Ning could only think of that one word as the traders around her huddled.

Finally, the howling winds slowly swirled to a stop, and Ning unclenched her arms, which were locked tightly around that boulder.

“Thank you for coming back.” A man said, bowing low.

“I pay my debt to you. You saved my life. Now I save yours.” Ning replied, her tone thick with emotion. She drank deeply from the gourd, her breath finally slowing.

The man’s eyes lingered on her for another moment. “We need to retrieve water. Dunhuang is not far, but we must not thirst to death.”

Ning nodded, remembering that they had to ration their water. She wiped her mouth hastily. Along this trading route, there were occasional desert oases which contained water. There were also mirages, products of desperate human imaginations, convincing the thirsty that water was ahead, only to rip away the hope cruelly.

As night fell and temperatures dropped, Ning repeated a phrase in her head, the same one she had repeated for the past twenty days. *I will protect, I will live, and I will return to my family. I will be part of history.* The words were still looping through her head as she went to sleep.

As dawn broke and the ten infuriatingly hot suns rose up in the desert sky, Ning dragged herself back into the heat of the desert, the pace slowed. However, Ning was fueled by determination to get to Dunhuang before nightfall. An empowered female escort, who stabbed bandits and lived through sandstorms.

Before long, the dry heat became stifling. As Ning walked, the gourd tied to her pack became alarmingly light. At around midday, all the traders were red all over, plastered with sweat, but they couldn’t stop. If they did, they may not be able to get up again. So they kept going, Ning’s eyes fixated on her shoes that she had bought solely for this adventure.

Sipping the last drops of water from her gourd, Ning prayed to any god that would listen that they made it to the Dunhuang trading stop quickly. Her pack was starting to weigh her steps down, the sweltering desert heat causing the straps to slip off of her sweat-soaked shoulders.

One of the traders travelling at the front of the pack made an excited gasping noise. “Horses! Horses ahead!” He shouted, his voice hoarse and dry. Ning felt hope bloom in her chest as they kept walking, the distant sound of a bustling trading oasis ahead. They were arriving in Dunhuang.

Ning nearly jumped with glee as the city began to take shape through the fog, the faint shapes of people weaving in and out of trading stalls and horses being handed from one handler to another. This was a haven of colors, cultures, and languages, all woven in perfect chaotic harmony. The prosperous Tang dynasty produced ceramics that were unheard of before, and Ning watched as they were passed between hands.

Standing at the edge of the bustling roads of Dunhuang, the colorfully dressed traders and the foreign languages, Ning felt a sense of awe at the world. It was so much bigger than the small village she had lived in, so much more complex. People with different skin tones, people dressed in different things.

She wanted to see the whole world someday, wanted to go to this faraway place called Europe where they had horses and riches unlike any Chinese had seen before. She couldn’t believe that Baba had once travelled the world just like this. *Oh, if only we could have come together.*

Everyone here had given so much, travelled so far to get to this oasis. And now Ning stood facing another trader, the woman’s ash-gray hair braided back from her face. As Ning passed on the contents of her pack to the female trader, their eyes met, and Ning felt like the doors to the world had just opened. She no longer wanted to escort traders. She wanted to be the ones who exchanged goods, be the ones who changed the world, step by step.

The Quest of Eternity

Victoria Shanghai Academy, Tsao, Janelle – 11

Li Wei is a dedicated doctor who spent evenings testing new herb combinations long after other doctors had gone home and who would never turn away a patient that was too poor to pay, he received an urgent mission from the emperor. He was asked to journey westward in search of Ibn al-Baitar the famed botanist. Legends spoke of Ibn al-Baitar not only as a healer but also as the keeper of secrets that could unlock the key to eternal life—a discovery that could forever change the fate of this village and the lives of many. Driven by the emperor's requests for help, Li Wei decided to assist those in need without hesitation.

When he arrived at his little, compact house, he packed all the things he required for this adventure and headed out. He said goodbye to all his friends and family around the village. As he was making his way to the boat deck, he stopped and started thinking, what if I never come home? Is this the right choice? What if I never complete this mission? Li Wei hesitated for a second; memories flooded his mind, the grateful smiles of villagers he had healed. He told himself that this journey was not just for his own growth; it was for his loved ones, a chance to bring hope and healing back home. With a deep breath, he shook off the lingering doubts and steadied himself. His hands trembled as he gripped the rail, but he did not turn back. He was confident that he would accomplish this mission. He loaded his luggage onto the boat and set out to save the village. As he was about to leave, he cast one last glance back at his village, the setting sun painting the sky in hues of orange and purple—a bittersweet farewell.

Once on board, Li Wei sat in a quiet corner and began organizing his tools. He unrolled his map, tracing the path he would like to find Ibn al-Baitar. As Li Wei was studying the map, he realized that to find Ibn al-Baitar, he would have to walk through the famed Silk Road. The thought of walking through the Silk Road excited and intimidated him. He envisioned walking through unfamiliar landscapes, sharing various remedies with other doctors. Suddenly, a shout from the deck interrupted his thoughts. The captain, navigating the vessel through the rising tide, called out to prepare for the upcoming day. The anticipation quickened Li Wei's pulse – this was just the beginning of his adventure.

After days on the sea, Li Wei heard amazing news, “Li Wei!” A voice broke through his concentration. It was the captain, pointing towards a distant glow on the shore. “Look! The lanterns of the coastal village are coming into view. We’ll dock shortly” It was the next day by the time Li Wei arrived at the Indian Ocean dock. The sun was setting, casting golden light on the waves. As Li Wei stepped off the boat, he took a deep breath of the salty air, feeling ready for the adventure ahead. The dock was busy with activity – fishing boats were bringing in their catches, traders were negotiating over colourful spices, and villagers laughed and chatted, their voices mixing with the sound of the ocean. As Li Wei stepped onto the crowded dock, he adjusted the strap of his bag and started to make his way through the crowd. The air smelled like roasted fish and sweet jasmine. Merchants shouted in various languages, displaying piles and bundles of herbs. Curious, Li Wei walked over to an old trader who was grinding roots with a stone tool.

“Looking for herbs and medicine?” asked the man.

Li Wei nodded. “Knowledge, more than medicine, do you know the way to find Ibn al-Baitar?”

“The trader’s eye glimmered with knowing. “Ibn al-Baitar, you say? Of course, everyone knows him, some people have seen him not far from here, travelling west with a caravan of scholars.

Li Wei felt puzzled, “So do I walk west, or is there a faster way?”

“Walk? It will take weeks to get there.” The trader said

“You want a faster way? You can buy the carriage behind me for some money.” The trader offered

Li Wei looked in his backpack and mumbled, “I don’t have much money with me, but I can trade it for some cough medicine?”

After some thoughts, and negotiation, the trader agreed to trade the carriage with Li Wei, and Li Wei continued his journey westward.

As night came, Li Wei found it difficult to see the road ahead; the path that had seemed clear in the daylight had slowly shifted into darkness. He paused, trying to hear any sounds that may guide him: a rustle of leaves, the distant call of an owl, or the reassuring chatter of unseen creatures, but instead, a creepy silence surrounded him. As the night progressed, Li Wei saw something that excited him: a campfire. He decided to travel towards it to look for directions. As he approaches, he can hear two young children coughing endlessly. He got off his carriage and started to approach the sick children.

“Hello, I am Li Wei, a doctor from China. Let me help you!”

“Children, you need to take this cough medicine I have here three times a day, once every six hours, after three days, you should feel better, you also need to get more rest and drink more water.”

The dad of the family is extremely grateful for Li Wei’s help and offered Li Wei some hot soup, “So what brings you to this part of the silk road Li Wei?”

“I need help, I am on a quest to search for Ibn al-Baitar, do you know him?” Li Wei inquired

Ibn al-Baitar, you say, of course we know him, he is a well known researcher of herbs, he lives in the next village, we can take you out there.”

Li Wei felt relieved after hearing that the family could help him. He could imagine the fun of discussing different medicines with Ibn al-Baitar, and the cheerful, and pleased look on the villages’ faces after he came back with the secrets of eternal life. The night slipped swiftly, lost in thoughts of the number of people that can benefit from such secrets. Before Li Wei knew it, the first light of morning crept over the horizon. The horses grunted as the family loaded tents and bundles of goods onto the saddles for the long journey ahead.

“Ready for the long journey ahead.” The dad asked

Li Wei said with a confident voice, “Never been more confident.”

They soon started their journey to find Ibn al-Baitar; they continued to ride westwards for days, until they finally arrived at a quiet small village. The dad pointed Li Wei to the village, and wished him good luck on his quest. Li Wei continued to ride into the quiet village and began to ask villages for directions.

“Hi, do any of you know where the famed botanist Ibn al-Baitar lives?” Li Wei asked politely

“Yes, he just lived down there pointing further westward! He lives six houses away from here.” A villager shared.

Li Wei continued his trek, as he approaches to the house, he knows he had found the right place, the garden is planted with all kinds of herbs, some familiar, some he knows are rare, and some he has never seen before. Li Wei got off his horse and slowly walked toward the door. The wooden door creaked open before he could knock.

“Hello, you must be Ibn al-Baitar. I am Li Wei, I have traveled far and on a quest to find the secrets to unlock the key to eternal life.” Li Wei expressed.

“I am Ibn al-Baitar, but I don’t hold any secrets to eternal life?” Ibn al-Baitar explained.

“I travelled so long and far away, and you are the healer, and you are famous for different herbs, our emperor will reward you handsomely for the secrets to eternal life, he has been searching for it in all the corners of the world.” Li Wei emphasized.

“I am sincerely sorry, but I do not hold such secrets to eternal life, but I have been studying herbs and medicine for my whole life, but have not yet uncovered anything that can lead to eternal life, I have documented my research and findings in this book, it’s called The Compendium of Simple Medicaments and Foods. Here you can have it, maybe that can help you on your quest for eternal life.” Ibn al-Baitar insisted.

Li Wei feeling disappointed that he has travelled so far, yet he did not complete his quest, but feeling grateful to have received such a gift of knowledge, he said thanks to Ibn al-Baitar for his generosity and started his return trip. On his way back he can’t help to imagine how disappointed the emperor and villagers would be, but also hopes the new knowledge can help future doctors conduct their research.

Infinity and Eternity

Victoria Shanghai Academy, Tsao, Joshua – 13

In the misty dawn over Lin'an, canals shimmered, and boats glided beautifully past riverbanks. Deep in the halls of the royal court, an aged Emperor Lizong sat slumped on his gilded throne, his hands tracing the lines on his face. His once sharp eyes had clouded with age. The hall smelled deeply of incense and medicinal herbs, yet the air felt heavy with fear. Footmen stood warily, heads bowed as the Emperor's voice cracked.

"Why have you still not obtained any results?" he bellowed at his adviser.

"Sir, well, I... there were many problems, the weather was too hot, the ingredients were impure and..." said his adviser meekly

"SILENCE!" Lizong bellowed. "There must be a way... There must be a method we are unaware of... I have heard of an immortal wise sage in Samarkand... Wei! My trusted physician! You must journey to the West and find me a method for immortality. Find it and bring it to me, or do not return!"

Wei bowed deeply and said, with supreme confidence, "My faith is strong. I will not fail". Then he departed for the stable to board his carriage.

Wei rode swiftly through the Gobi Desert on his way to Samarkand, since rumours of a wise immortal sage there had reached the ears of the Emperor. He rode day and night, stopping only for food and drink. On the third day, he saw several wagons in the distance. Who could they be? Wei thought to himself. As the wagons drew nearer, he saw that strange emblems were drawn on them. As the wagons encircled his carriage menacingly, Wei was petrified, his body locked rigid on his seat. He was fairly certain those were bandits, and he tensed up. His horse whinnied and neighed in fear as masked men disembarked and moved towards his coach.

The men moved rapidly to the coach, raising their weapons threateningly. One man went and stabbed his coachman, before hopping off again. The corpse slumped forward before falling on the floor with a wet thwack.

"Come out with your hands in the air!" the lead man cried. Wei shuddered in fear and stayed hidden in the coach.

He crawled forward, staying low as he moved into the coachman's seat, sticky with the coachman's blood. Several archers loosed arrows at him, but he managed to duck and evade the arrows. Remembering his previous horsemanship training from his childhood, he lashed the reins, directing them forward through a gap in the bandit formation. He drove his horse on and on for miles, trying to distance himself from the wagons.

Wei turned his head and saw that the wagons had disappeared. He breathed a sigh of relief as he continued to ride on into the desert.

After days of endless desert, the Zerafshan River valley opened before Wei's eyes like a miracle. The mud-brick walls of Samarkand rose into his view, watchtowers standing proudly. He entered the city through an arched gate, and was immediately greeted by a large marketplace. Travellers from many countries stood behind their stalls, selling their wares aggressively. "SILK! SILK! HIGH QUALITY CHINESE SILK HERE!" came a voice from the stalls. "SPICE! SPICE! BUY YOUR SPICES HERE!" came another voice. "WOOL! WOOL! FINEST WOOL ON THE SILK ROAD HERE!" a swarthy trader bellowed.

Wei asked around the stalls for information about an immortal sage, but people would turn him away, muttering about "dark magic." Eventually, after Wei paid a beggar several silver coins, he said, "The one you seek is in that tent, surrounded by smoke." Then, the beggar scampered off.

Wei walked to the tent. It was dark and mysterious inside, and a hooded man sat cross-legged on a mat, candles burning next to him. "O wise immortal sage, I seek wisdom. How does one become immortal? The Emperor Lizong demands to know this."

“Your Emperor’s demands mean nothing to me. But I will tell you a secret. I do not possess any secret of immortality. But I know someone who might. His name is Ibn al-Baitar, and he usually works around Damascus. Ride swiftly to find him, and you will please your Emperor,” replied the man.

“Thank you! Thank you!” Wei said and rushed out of the tent to his carriage. He spurred his horse, and he rode out of the side exit of the city.

For days more, he pressed onward, racing toward Damascus. The road westward twisted and turned through jagged mountains and barren plateaus, where Wei’s weary horse plodded amid creaking caravans of camels laden with silks and spices.

Under star-strewn skies, the nights became colder and colder, his breath fogging as he huddled by meager fires, munching on tiny scraps of fruit as his doubt gnawed deeper than hunger.

At last, after several days of long, hard travel, the minarets of Damascus pierced the horizon, the tip of the great Umayyad Mosque gleaming bright against the rising dawn.

In Damascus, Wei sought out many different translators and guides. They all pointed Wei to the outside of the city. Giving in, he finally found Ibn al-Baitar outside the city grounds, kneeling among blooming flowers, his fingers gently examining the petals.

Ibn al-Baitar looked up with kind eyes, “You have journeyed long and far, traveller. What do you seek?”

“O honoured master,” began Wei, his voice hoarse, “I am sent by the Emperor Lizong of the Great Song, from far in the East. He seeks the secret of immortality – a medicine to defy death itself.”

Al-Baitar smiled gently, wiping his hands with a cloth. “Peace be upon you, weary traveller. Sit. Many kings and scholars have asked me this same question. But what does immortality truly mean?”

Wei hesitated, thinking. “Eternal life in our bodies, without fear of ageing or end.”

Al-Baitar shook his head, saying, “Allah grants life and takes it; none can escape His decree. I have studied all sorts of plants from India to Andalusia – thousands of herbs that heal fevers, mend wounds, and lengthen healthy years. But none halts the soul’s return to the Creator.”

Wei’s shoulders slumped. “So there is no elixir?”

“There is wisdom,” al-Baitar replied, pulling out a thick, yellowed manuscript bound in leather. “My book of remedies to strengthen the body, balance bodily fluids, and prolong vigour. Take this to your emperor. It will add years through wisdom, not illusions. True eternity lies not in clinging pointlessly to this world, but preparing for the next.”

Wei took the manuscript with heavy, trembling hands, a bitter peace in his heart. “Thank you, master. You have given me something more valuable than gold”.

Wei boarded his carriage and left Damascus, off to see Emperor Lizong once more.

As dusk bled, Wei guided his weary horse eastward, Ibn al-Baitar’s heavy manuscript clutched to his chest in a leather sack like a fragile treasure.

The sage’s words echoed: true eternity would not be found in this world. Peace settled in Wei’s heart; it was not fear, but rather quiet acceptance

Hoofbeats suddenly erupted from the shadows. The same bandits he encountered some time ago, scarred faces and curved blades glinting, encircled him once more.

“You again,” snarled the leader, recognising the lone traveller. “Gold this time? Or will it be your life?”

Wei did not flee. He dismounted the carriage slowly, hands open. “Take what you will. I carry nothing of monetary value, only knowledge.”

The leader laughed, a short bark echoing across the dunes. “Knowledge? We’ll see if it buys your horse.”

Two bandits leapt forward, blades drawn, yanking the reins from Wei’s slack grip. Another kicked open the carriage and threw out some sparse rations, and the book al-Baitar gave him. It thudded open in the sand, pages fluttering like the wings of a wounded butterfly.

Wei crumpled into the sand, blood soaking his robes. A raider had cut him as they seized the reins. He dimly saw a younger raider pick up the book, with strange scripts and meticulous drawings of plants and ferns. He shrugged and tossed it aside. “The pursuit of immortality is futile,” he murmured, voice barely stirring the cooling air.

The bandits mounted up, vanishing into the darkness. Wei lay alone, gazing at the emerging stars, blood ebbing out of his wound. His fingers touched the open page of the manuscript, the delicate ink drawing of the white rose blurring in his fading vision. He thought of the Emperor’s trembling hands, his dead coachman, and the numerous patients he had treated before. Had the book reached Lin’an, who knows how many lives would be saved, how many diseases cured, how many wounds healed in the years to come, mused Wei to himself. A strange sense of calm washed over him as he took his final breaths and closed his eyes for the last time.

The Black City

Victoria Shanghai Academy, Van Hoof, Chloe – 11

The sun cast a golden glow on the serene scenery when I, a lone traveler with heavy bags, struggling up endless sand dunes, gasping in the scorching heat, saw something shining in the distance. Willing myself forward, I refused to become the worthless traveler my family predicted I would be—dead in the desert, a disappointment even in death. Summoning my last strength, I arrived at a gleaming city, standing tall and proud, the dark marble sign hanging above reading in elegant carving: *Khara Khoto*.

Awed by the towers and throngs of people, and thanking the heavens for this bout of luck, I rushed into the bustling crowds—past silk-clad merchants with porcelain teacups, Europeans with fine horses, and Mongols distributing plentiful bags of grain.

I staggered over to the stone well where a young girl with a gap-toothed smile as bright as the sun, no more than five or six, was handing out pitchers of water to passersby. Wheezing from utter exhaustion, I held out my flask without a word. The girl filled the flask to the brim with water, before handing it back with a cheerful grin. As our fingers brushed past each other, an ominous feeling flickered across the child's face and she hurriedly pressed a piece of paper into my hand. I unfolded the paper and read the scrawled note: *Nothing is what it seems. It starts at midnight. You have until 12:06*. When I looked up to confront the girl about her strange message, the ominous expression had disappeared and she was back to the cheerful, gap-toothed girl she was just moments earlier, ignoring my existence.

Brushing it off as a child's imagination, I headed to the town square with my bags of china and silk. I traded my tea set for a chestnut mare, bartered for crystal glass and blackcurrants—building my family's fortune with each exchange.

Something whizzed past me. Instinctively, I grabbed the arm of a local child clutching my navy silk towel—embroidered with golden dragons and phoenixes, three weeks of labor, worth a fortune. I snatched it back, kneeling to face him. His eyes widened with fear. Before I could speak, he screamed, "Хулгайч! Thief! She stole my towel! Get her!" Tears streamed down his red face as he sobbed, drawing onlookers. I stumbled back in stunned shock, dropping his hand.

An angry mob surrounded me, yelling in Mongolian, Greek, and English. Even familiar Chinese faces from my village joined the condemnation. My face burned with shame. Two burly guards grabbed my arms and stripped me of my goods, dragging my horse along as they forced me from the crowd. Every muscle urged me to run, but I held back. *No goods means no profit. No profit means no home to return to*. My father's words, cutting into me over and over again. I was so close now. I had to obey.

As I was taken away, the real thief—the boy, cockily smirked at me before returning to his performance, the towel still clutched in his hand.

I was dragged inside a stone fortress where guards drew their weapons at the ready. A man with a white beard reaching the floor, dressed in Chinese silk, sat at the front. The ruler. A warrior explained the situation in rapid Mongolian. He nodded slowly. "Why have you committed such an unhonourable crime?" He demanded, his gaze burning a laser into my mind. "Your Honor, I didn't steal. The boy is the real thief—" "Lying and perjury." He cut me off with a sneer. "Worse than I thought. Such a crime is punishable by death." He seemed to flicker, in and out, almost like a spectre or a spirit. A spirit? Spirits were the imagination of terrified five-year-olds, not an 18-year-old girl. *Irrational*. I silently chided myself. *Such things don't exist*. The ruler's next words cut into me like a knife. "Genghis Khan, our great leader is due to arrive in a few days. You may wait here as I inform my messenger to send a briefing of your shameful activity to the great leader. A waste of space."

Time crawled by. I kept my eyes fixed on the clock, the girl's written words echoing in my mind. *Five minutes till "it" allegedly starts.* I thought, slowly bringing my eyes on the flickering form of the ruler. To me he seemed to be getting more and more opaque every second, exactly like a gho— No. I had to think rationally, problem—solve, not waste my time on childish thoughts. My mother's words echoed. *Foolish. Wasteful. A burden.* I had to bring honor to the family. It was only then that I realized the weight of what the ruler had said. If I spent the rest of my days locked up, or if I was killed, I would forever be a disappointment.

The ruler got a distant look in his eyes. "Midnight. This is the 444th time this will happen." His grave voice sounded faraway. There it was again. *Midnight.* What was the significance of this? Why were people in this city so strange?

Tick. Tick. Tick. Midnight. I felt a slight fear creeping up my spine, like a sinister monster hiding in the dark, waiting to jump out at me. A silent tear dripped down the ruler's face. *Drip. Drip. Drip.*

It all happened at once. Black goo started dripping down the walls, cannons started thundering, arrows whooshed past me, whistling, as an army of invaders took down the walls of the fortress. Chinese citizens— some of the people from my village. I recognized Li—Ming, the brother of Li—Hua, among the invading soldiers. I was struck with confusion. Li—Ming was pronounced deceased in battle against the Mongolians, fighting to take back the city of— I realized now. I thought the name was insignificant. That all that mattered was that I had food and water. That the little girl was talking childish nonsense. But I knew the truth now. I did. I stood frozen, as I watched as the little gap—toothed girl calmly accepted being thrown into the well like it had happened hundreds of times before as she was suffocated in the black sea of filth. I watched as the thieving boy wept silent tears as he was gored by an enemy soldier, like he had already screamed his voice out and could no longer scream again. The black sea engulfed him. I watched citizens and fighters alike being slaughtered, engulfed in the black slime. The unmistakable smell of blood filled my nostrils, the sound of screams echoed off stone walls. And finally, the ruler's eyes met mine for a brief moment—not with anger, but with the hollow recognition of someone who had condemned hundreds before me, knowing it changed nothing.

His face was contorted in pain as he desperately tried to force his own hand away, guiding his knife to his neck. The blood splattered on my face as the ruler hung limp, robbed of all life. The black matter took him as well. I understood now. Li—Ming had died in combat attempting to siege the Mongolian city Khara Khoto: The Black City. A city of ghosts. Of spirits. Of turmoil. Of darkness. Of death. A city where once you died, you had to live the same horrible reality. Every. Single. Day.

12:03. The ghosts all turned to me. Then, as one, they started creeping towards me. Step by step. Somehow, I managed to run. I made it out of the fortress, hopping on my mare which the guards had tied to a tree, and rode out of there. Something caught my eye. It was all my acquired goods. I thought of my family. Even then, my mother's chilling voice clawed at me: *A burden. Worthless without profit.* I made my decision. I hopped off. The horse rode into the distance, my last hope galloping away. Wheezing, I lugged the goods forward, the ghosts trailing behind me. *Just 5 more steps.* I told myself. *Into the desert, away from this nightmare.* A smile broke my face as I took the final step from danger, from horror, into safety, into comfort.

12:06. An icy hand grabbed my wrist. It was the young girl. She stared at me with hollow, sunken eyes. "I'm sorry." She whispered, her voice cracking with emotion. The black sludge clouded my vision.

I woke up feeling like an empty abyss. My family seemed unimportant now. I felt numb inside. A hollow hunger clawed at me. I was a spirit now, a dark specter, destined to lure other people to the same eternal suffering I had to face every day.

The sun cast a golden glow on the serene scenery when I, Fei—Yue, an inhuman shell of what I was before, watched as a shadow, struggling to climb up the endless dunes of flowing sand, appeared in the distance, yet another unknowing traveler, bound to fall prey to the horrors of a gleaming city in the faraway distance.

Weaving of Time

Victoria Shanghai Academy, Wong, Hei Lam Celine – 11

I paused outside the entrance of the Hong Kong Palace Museum, my reflection shimmering in the glass doors. Excitement fluttered in my chest as I reached for the handle and pulled the door open, my heart pounding. Slowly, I stepped inside, greeted by the cool wash of air conditioning, and made my way toward the first floor, shimmering beneath the museum's soft lights.

I wasn't here to admire the exhibits—though a part of me wanted to. I was here to steal. I knew it was wrong, but this was a choice that could change my life forever. What was I here to steal? I was going to steal, not a physical object, but I wanted to prove that silk was a gift of destiny that would have existed even without Empress Leizu.

Scanning the galleries, I searched for a specific collection: *"A History of China in Silk: The Chris Hall Collection at the Hong Kong Palace Museum."* It housed the oldest artifact linked to the Silk Road—a fragment of Warring States brocade—and I hoped it would pull me deeper into the road's ancient history.

Minutes later, I stood before the exhibit, eyes fixed on the door handle. I pulled it open and was blinded by the sharp light shining through the glass case that held the brocade fragment. Before reaching for the display, I reminded myself to download the offline Google Translate for later use. I whipped out my phone and did it before I forgot; then, I shrugged and reached for the display again. I froze. Beside the cloth was a description: Legend says silk was discovered when a cocoon fell into the tea of Empress Leizu around 2600 BCE, while she sat under a mulberry tree. I was unaware how important those words truly were then, but it was too late.

Suddenly, wind seared across my face, carrying the scent of sun-baked dust. I was on horseback now, galloping gracefully, the horse's mane flowing in fierce winds. I looked back and saw a grand palace with vast, temple-like structures spreading across the land far away. Quickly, I steered the horse backwards, and trotted across the desolate desert, heading towards the lush valleys ahead.

A few days later, I arrived at the grand doors of the palace. I jumped off my horse and tied a simple knot to the fence, preventing him from escaping. "Stay here okay? I'll be back in an hour or so," I said to the horse, and turned back to the grand doors.

As I approached the palace, I felt something stuck under my shoe. I looked down at my feet and saw a kind of sticky resin on the sole. I pulled out my phone, snapped a picture, and looked it up. "Frankincense" was the name. It also came up with words like *luban*, *olibanum*, and a Latin name—*Boswellia sacra*. Even though these names were unfamiliar to me, I swore I remembered seeing something like "Neal's Yard Remedies Frankincense Intense™ Lift Cream" in my local skincare shop, and I was pretty sure it could reach prices up to \$1,000. Perhaps, in these times, this resin could be equally valuable. So, I ripped it off my shoe, pulled out my water pouch, rinsed the frankincense, and shoved it in my pocket.

Soon, I arrived at the palace doors and went inside. I could not be noticed, although I could be seen. Slowly, I crept around the corners of the fortress until—"Ai you, ni gan ma ya?" A girl said to me, an empty tea tray in her hands. I pulled out my phone and started translating what she said. "Hey! What are you doing?" was the translation. Then, I saw her eyes drift to the floor. I quickly glanced down and saw broken porcelain pieces on the ground. "Ni you sheng zing bing ma?" I whipped out my phone once again and translated what she said. "Pardon?" I said. She looked at me, confused, and walked away. I quickly ran to hide behind the high, majestic decorative pillars. I didn't think much of it at first, until I suddenly thought of the description of how silk was discovered: "Legend says silk was discovered when a cocoon fell into the tea of Empress Leizu around 2600 BCE, while she sat under a mulberry tree." What if the tea I made the girl spill was the very tea the Empress was supposed to drink? What if I ruined history?

As I quickly ran to the imperial garden, I kept saying to myself, "It's going to be okay. The Silk Road isn't only about silk, right?" I stopped in my tracks. There it was, a mulberry tree, its hair-like branches dropping over the trunk. Slowly, I went towards it and looked behind it. She wasn't there. Quickly, I ran out of the castle, and looked for my horse. Where was it? And there, next to the fence, was a broken rope, frayed at the edges. I stomped the ground in frustration, and sighed. I looked around for any type of solution, and saw a camel. Because I was desperate, I grabbed onto it and lifted myself up. The camel grunted as I hopped onto its back, only for me to slip right off

again. All of a sudden, a lady shouted “Ni gan ma peng wo de luo tuo?!” Once again, I jerked out my phone to translate her words. Suddenly, she looked shocked and bowed before me. I turned to look behind me and saw nothing but desolate desert. She pointed at my Tang Suit jacket I bought online for Chinese New Year, and gasped. Then, I realized the suit was made out of silk.

Maybe, in the end, silk would be back after all? I tossed her the jacket and once again, hopped on the camel, and slipped off again. I looked behind me, and the lady was gone leaving a single button on the ground. I walked toward it, but stopped and looked back at the imperial garden one last time. From this distance, with the sun setting behind the palace, the mulberry tree looked bare. I squinted, realizing something was wrong. There were no cocoons. It hit me then, the legend wasn't real. It was me who introduced silk to our modern world. I shook my head and kept walking towards the button, and picked it up slowly, and shoved it in my pocket. Instantly, I felt like I was swirling around a black hole. I opened my eyes, and saw people walking around in fast motion. The celestial cycle turned into a blur of amber and indigo in a matter of seconds, and the sky turned from light blue to dark blue just as fast.

In a jarring burst, a flash of light illuminated everything around me. Once it faded, I was back in the museum. But something wasn't right. The exhibit I was looking at, the Warring States brocade, was no longer there. In its place, was a red Tang Suit with buttons embroidered down the middle. It was the very suit I gave to the girl. I walked out of the exhibit, and saw the same description board, with different words chiseled on it: “Legend says silk was discovered when a camel gave a girl called Xiu.” I rolled my eyes and ran out of the museum. I scanned the roads for a nearby pawn shop, to hopefully sell my frankincense for a high price. Moments later, I found one on the corner of the road, just around a bend. I went inside, and handed them the frankincense. They immediately pushed my hand away and said, “This is dirty, common resin. It's as common as gravel! I'll buy it off you for 10 cents.” I took the money and slammed the door behind me as I left, consumed by anger. At least I know who introduced silk. Me.

A Dream, A Purpose, A Legacy and Hassan Hermani

Victoria Shanghai Academy, Wu, Yinnuo Chloe – 12

It's 2040, in Xi'an, China, a world where everyone has surged into the future, while the past lies forgotten.

Tiny grains of sand scatter across on the damp ground, a faint breeze stirs the air. A middle-aged man sits on a foldable chair at the side of the road, weathered by sun and wind. His skin is dark and peeling. He wears a red-and-white checkered flannel shirt and cargo shorts that reach just below his knees, hiding the raw redness beneath. Beside him is a small fold-out table covered with brochures, "Hassan's Tours: A Journey Along The Silk Road" the letters slanted and faded.

He stares blankly at the road as cars streak past. Nobody knows exactly what he waits for, perhaps a tourist who might stop, someone who could pull him from the trance he has lived in for years.

A large orange-and-white van pulls over. A man in a pinstripe suit steps out, leaning on a cane. He squints at the little stand.

"Pardon me, but do you have a permit?" He says.

"Huh?"

"You clearly don't. You'll have to pack up. This area is scheduled for construction."

"Into what?"

"A shopping mall. It'll be extremely popular."

"But this is so much better!" Hassan's voice cracks.

The man laughs: "Keep dreaming."

"Sir, please." Hassan grabs the man's sleeve and holds tight.

The man returns to the van, but the driver hesitates. Hassan's grip tightens, fingers clawing at the fabric. The driver protests as the man urges him forward. Finally the van lurches ahead.

Hassan runs alongside it, gas and dust pours into his eyes. The van leaves nothing but tracks. And Hassan falls next to the tracks staring up at the sky. It's a perfect blend of vermilion, yellow, and violet. Hassan falls asleep underneath this gorgeous sky.

Hassan Hermani is thirty two years old, son to a hardworking Indian electrician and a Chinese seamstress, who had lived in a tent for more than half of his life. At fifteen, he left his middle-class home in India after a school project on the Silk Road revealed that its eastern endpoint lay in his mother's homeland. When he asked her about it, she spoke quietly of her family's ancient role as guardians of that historic site until modern development forced them to abandon it.

The thought that this great cultural landmark, his family's greatest responsibility, had been reduced to nothing haunted him. So Hassan traveled to Xi'an. He started his tour, and though barely anyone visited, he never gave up, because to Hassan Hermani, this was his legacy.

Dawn breaks. Hassan wakes and begins the long walk home. He walks for an extra twenty minutes, to a phone booth in a nearby town. It's the only place available for Hassan to make long distance calls as his old mobile phone cannot make long-distance calls. He closes his eyes and dials a number that has avoided for years, his rich and powerful uncle, Eric Chan.

The phone rings twice.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Uncle Eric."

"Hassan ? Is that really you?"

"Yes. I know our family doesn't get along, but Mum said I could call you if I ever need help. I need a favour."

A pause. "She did?"

"Yeah." Hassan pours out his heart to his uncle, about the booth, the coming demolition, the legacy slipping away .

"There's a council meeting in three weeks," Eric says, "Citizens can plead their cases. It's your chance to do so."

"I'll be there."

"I'll send a car. Be ready when I arrive."

"Thank you, Uncle."

Hassan has three weeks to craft the most important speech of his life to council or he has to sacrifice this dream of the Eastern Endpoint of the Silk Road. He has spent ages rewriting the same sentence, he buys dictionaries and even books on how to write the perfect speech. He stayed up till midnight, writing under a candle, writing till his hands ached, till his legs felt like they were physically stuck to the ground, and even till his eyes were barely open.

The evening before the hearing, Hassan rehearses again and again. He looks outside, staring at the view. Outside his tent, it's dark but the modern towers of Xi'an light the night sky among the small stars. Exhausted, he falls asleep under the sky once again, crying himself to sleep.

A long black limo pulls into the narrow alleyway, and stops in front of Hassan's tent. It takes about five minutes for Hassan to emerge transformed. He's cleanly shaved, wearing a tight polo shirt and khaki shorts that stop just above his knees, his mouth is pressed tightly together as he walks towards the limo.

Uncle Eric welcomes him from the passenger seat as Hassan enters the backseat.

They're almost there when Hassan's uncle speaks.

"Nervous?" Eric asks as they near the council building.

"A little."

"When you arrive, you'll be directed to the third floor. Others will be waiting their turn. Don't be worried, the council will listen."

"Uncle, what if they don't approve?"

Uncle Eric doesn't turn around this time, sniffing. "Then you'll humbly return to India."

"Oh right."

Uncle Eric faces him, a single tear sliding down the side of his face. "I see so much of your mother in you."

Hassan climbs the stairs slowly, his breath heaving as he steps onto the stage. It's unlike what he expects, the chamber is larger than he imagined: a sea of people, his uncle and two other men aides at the front desk, a straight line of twelve council members behind them and an entire level of people. All people that would make the final choice on Hassan's life. He leans on the lectern, hands trembling as he shuffles his notes, adjusting his microphone.

"I have a story to tell," he begins, voice shaking. "It is about a boy born to an Indian father and a Chinese mother. At fifteen he learned that his mother's family were the supposed guardians of the Eastern Endpoint of the Silk Road. Knowing only the Indian side of him, he jumped at this small window. He packed everything into a small bag, ready to move, he had nobody except a phone number and a one way ticket."

"He set up a booth to share the Silk Road's history. Over the years, almost no one came. Now that boy is thirty-two, lonely, and the only purpose he has found is about to be paved over for a shopping mall." Hassan takes a deep breath and wipes his tears away.

"Good morning everyone, I'm Hassan Hermani. Many of you may find the Silk Road terminus as a waste space. To me, it's a passageway that once connected the world, bringing goods and culture. For years, I had no purpose. I was a boy in India, trapped inside the box that the world created for him. Until I learnt of a family legacy slipping through the fingers of my family, lost within the world and the people we have become."

"My mum made a brave choice when she moved to India, leaving her family and conflicts behind her, leaving this historical monument behind her. I don't blame her for leaving this giant mess untaken care of. I don't blame my uncle either, the other end of this conflict. He had a purpose, and now he's one of the most powerful people in China." Hassan closes his eyes for a second, letting his emotions out.

“I was angry with them once. But I let it go. They had a purpose, a story that didn’t involve this old monument. My story was unwritten, the pen paused over the page, but who said I couldn't write it myself?”

“I had made a huge risk moving to Xi’an, breaking through stereotypes, and facing harsh judgement. The world was confusing for me, and it still is. The world moves on just like people, you have to make sacrifices to make a change in this world. And it’s hard, but you have to lose people, you have to learn to be alone, fight your battles. It might come to nothing in the end, you might not end up rich and powerful, but it all matters.”

“Look at me now, I’m not rich nor powerful, but I’m happy. I’m somewhere where I’m needed, somewhere where I feel a purpose. I might not ever leave my small tent and that’s okay with me. This might not be your ideal life, but it is mine, and I’ll keep choosing it no matter what.”

“So I ask for your help, don’t let this dream die, and instead, nurture it with me. Thank you.”

Silence falls, then the council votes.

The eastern endpoint of the Silk Road is declared a protected cultural monument. Hassan has won the battle and he will win the next ones too, because nobody touches Hassan Hermani and his legacy.

Spark Of The Past

Victoria Shanghai Academy, Wun, Lauren – 11

Days faded into a watercolor blur. The sun would dig its heels into the sky, marking the clementine orange canvas. Eventually the moon would draw its sheath of dark night over the world. It was in the wake of midnight, where the moon would blanket the sky into eternal darkness of peril stars. Like pencil linings on a piece of paper, the stars drew light across the sky. Like raw fire in the air, the moon attracted luminescence to the sky's canvas. Like a thin duvet hugging your body, the clouds obscure the moon's luminous haze.

A wispy, fragile hand reached out into the void of darkness, lighting a match and dropping it into a pile of collapsed wood. Fire erupted from the deepest curves and crevices of the wood logs, hugging it in eternal ablaze. In the light, storyteller Old Man Guo's features were illuminated, his soft smile, crinkles in the corners of his eyes, lines that were carved into his face from his ethereal smile, and his salt and pepper hair that danced shadows among each other.

Three children gathered among the fire, eager to listen to Old Man Guo's exciting and adventurous story telling. He was famous in the village for giving children the ever-lasting experience of storytelling. Today, children from different lands emerged from the shadows; Yuki from Japan, Krishna from India, and Emma from Europe. They huddled around the warm fire, eyes irradiated from the light of the fire.

"Tonight", Old Man Guo's gentle and cordial voice draped along the children's ears. "We explore the Silk Road. The Silk Road is what *you* think it is. The Silk Road is what *you want* it to be." His eyes reconnoitred the children's eyes – whether cerulean, eigengrau, or chestnut – and smiled at the pureness of them. "What is the Silk Road ... to *you*?" The children sat in screaming silence, thoughts wandering, eyes darting, ears wishing for sound, for voice. The cackling of the fire intruded into the conversation, loud against the silence. Old Man Guo's eyes flickered across each of the children's faces. The children looked away.

Then, Krishna stood. The fire hushed upon her daring stance. "I think that the Silk Road is made of *real* silk." Old Man Guo was intrigued, chin resting upon his lightly curled fist. "The Silk Road was silk. Silk at its finest, woven by the bygone wrinkled hands of ladies that aged with each knit and knot. It enveloped the entirety of the road – endless but never forgotten – and it was treasured among the merchants very well. The silk was plush, yet firm in a way that could hold weight to the extent of an elephant."

Krishna's voice echoed along the village, each word still bouncing with young elation. She looked at the fire and saw the Silk Road, *her* Silk Road, and saw the endless bundles of sewed silk. Her imagination flared, and she continued with the same excited virtue. "It wasn't the sheen, shining fabric – but the fluffed, layered, cotton-textured material, bound to the thick strip of the road. When the merchants stepped on it, their weight would slowly sink into the silk, leaving its imprint on it for history to see. Silk danced across the globe, wrapping it in an eternal blanket." Krishna giggled at the thought, the thought of *her* Silk Road made with imprints and footprints that danced along the world. She continued, words spilling out of her mouth. "The Silk Road was the world's treasure, belonging to everybody, but most and first most encircling China. The plush silk along the Huangpu river in bustling Shanghai, the light silk sheen running alongside the Great Wall of China in the Northern suburbs of Beijing, cornering the edges of Liaoning. Silk was woven carefully into each and every crevice in the road, corners embracing the road. The plushness of the Silk was welcomed, alongside the mystifying culture that it brought." Krishna felt exhilarated at the thought, the thought of being able to see the Silk Road, *her* Silk Road made of silk, come to life right outside her doorstep. The other children smiled up at her, excited to exchange their ideas, eyes brimming with golden desire.

Yuki stood next, her enthusiasm burning from her face. “I think that the Silk Road is a dragon. The Silk Road *is* a dragon. A dragon woken from eternal sleep, clutching onto the remains of its own demise. It was entrapped into the imprint of the Silk Road, the silk just a coat, a skin, to hide the dragon from the world. Its detailed scales were slowly indented into the woven silk, its claws gnawing into the silk around the sharp nails.” Yuki imagined the Silk Road as a dragon, being trapped under Krishna’s invincible silk. “In China’s ancient XinJiang region, the Silk Road was named the Palong ancient road, translating into the “coiled dragon road”. Its scales glistened with light envy, shrouding the road in a light, misty haze. The dragon wished to be free, to be cast from the binds of the silk that enwrapped its body. It was stepped on, made stalls on, traded on, walked on, explored on, like it was the treasure of a pirate ship no-one knew existed. The money from a lottery. The win from a gamble.” Yuki slowly sat, breathless from her flowing words.

Emma stayed sitting, but still spoke. “The Silk Road is endless”, she said, chiming in. “The Silk Road was endless. It ran along the curves of the Earth, circular and infinite. Everyone, whether poor or rich, had a piece of land that was their’s, a piece of silk, a piece of the dragon. The dragon underneath the Silk Road chased its own tail, hoping to release itself from the boundaries.” Emma looked along into the still burning crimson fire. “The Silk Road met the depths of the North Pole and encountered the Egyptian lands. It slipped from each country’s grasp, it wasn’t for just one person or one place – it was everyone’s. It was a road with no end, and everyone was walking on it.” She finished that thought, held it with her breaths, then continued. “It held a myriad of possibilities, a plethora of dreams. Each turn and each route held its own meaning and its own story – the fallen apple cart, the dead pigeon, the golden nugget underneath the blanket of silk, and the last dragon scale. The endless road wasn’t just a road – it was a lifetime of possibilities and endless stories for generations to continue.”

Old Man Guo fell silent after hearing those words. All those words. His smile faltered, then came back with glittering eyes. Finally, Old Man Guo looked at the children and shared what he knew from long ago. “The Silk Road was more than beauty and magic,”he said lightly. “It was the beginning of the end. Wars threatened the life of the Silk Road, dangers impruding each route. There were swords, bloodshed. Blood in each corner. Corpses without their souls. The Silk Road wasn’t just there for beauty – it was there to hold the tales of each hero that stepped foot on that road.” The children sat in silence. Old Man Guo’s words built a vivid picture in their minds, hearing the distant clang of swords and the silent blaring of the war horn. They were used to imagining a dragon that soared along the entire world, the endless dragon that was entrapped in warm, sheen silk, but also felt the weight of Old Man Guo’s words. The children understood that the Silk Road reflected more than just imagination – it revealed how history and dreams blended to shape the view of the past. And as they dispersed that night, wandering back home, each child carried a new vision of the Silk Road: a bridge where different worlds meet, frail but enduring, like the eyes of children learning to see beyond themselves.

New Tale of China's Silk Road

Victoria Shanghai Academy, Yin, Trevor – 13

I, again hear footsteps. Demons follow me wherever I go. At home, they always taunt me. Hearing them, their sinister maniacal laughter. Sometimes seeing them, the occasional scaled serpent or pitchforked tongued lizards. For some reason, no one else sees them. They call me crazy, but I'm far from that; just more aware of my surroundings. I can't stand the torture of it, being thought of as a lunatic, everyone lost faith in me. But determined to find people who understand me, I escaped Tehran and started to travel to Europe through the silk road. It's the 15th century after all, and a peasant like me can do whatever I please. Even, migrate to the area of the enlightenment, and where the renaissance began.

No. It's not a delusion.

I now sense something off. Something eerie. Everything morphs into black and white. The sparse people also walking along disappear. I sense cold, shivering chills though it's incredibly hot. Then, a loud methodical, almost hypnotic walking sound emerges. Then a sharp cut of a deafening cry. A cry for help. It sounds like a little girl, a terrified scream. I get shaky, it's unnerving, a searing migraine and I feel sick. Mist, blue mist then spirals and forms into a flame, a monster, a Jinn. I heard stories about these harassing travellers. It opens its mouth, to the point where it's bigger than the rest of its body. It shrieks, the same cry of that little girl. "You'll never make it, not when I'm here." Shoot a Jinn and a demon are all the same, terror. I run, quickly run.

"Sleep Leon." A voice says, but my name is Muhhamd. Of course it is.

I wake up, confused. I'm nowhere where I used to be. But being haunted by what I just saw, possibly a few days ago. My sense of time is almost nonexistent now, the blazing sun is certainly not helping, making me tired, fatigued, even delirious.

Suddenly, a city rises out of the sand. In a deep voice, like a whale's wailing: "Welcome to Khara Khoto, home of the ghouls and ghosts of the silk road. Trespasser."

The city gates open, and ghost with mongolian armour starts heading towards me. The ground shakes, and from the ground. Hopping vampires emerge in traditional Chinese clothing. The lines of armour rattle faster, and faster. I wanted to run. But my legs didn't give in, I froze, petrified in fear. A deep, burning sensation entered my body as I realised. It's over. Even if I run, they'll catch up to me. I close my eyes and accept defeat.

As I open my eyes, I have no memory of a dream I just had but it frightens me. And I'm drenched in sweat. There comes Dr Harold, he seems to be speaking but I can't hear anything. Something to do with a fever. Very severe. I might need to stay in the hospital for a few more—

"Leon! Wake up! Dang it. God dang it."

I'm suddenly extremely alert, again I hear footsteps. Far away from any civilization, sweat pours down my face. And my hands are fidgeting and I can't stand still.

Shriek. Like a cackling crow spewing sharp broken glass, a sudden deafening sound almost breaks my ear. Demons. I'm familiar. Very familiar. Too familiar even. The sky fades to a magenta purple, almost if the sun is bleeding. Then, they appear. Bearing sharp axes and swords. Bandits. Like those in Marco Polo. They surround me, all 40 of them. 40 bandits? Then, their master appears. I recognised him, Ali Baba? He speaks in a language I don't understand, and

slowly creeps towards me. He draws his lengthy sabre, smiles and. My heart rate rises so much, my brain stops working. Then I shiver, it's a blizzard. He slashes at my face and I bleed, my cheek bleeds out and I collapse.

"Dr Harold, the brain scan shows Leon is hallucinating."

Who's Leon? Who are those voices?

"About what?"

"Something to do with the silk road. Are you sure he's mentally fine enough to be discharged in 2 months?"

"Well, he has a fever. And he's a fan of Marco Polo and the one thousand and one nights book. The silk road isn't the wildest of fantasy."

"He's been in a coma for 3 weeks now. What about that?"

"An experimental pill called Yanam."

"But that has certain side effects and it's not approved by the government."

"Try it anyways."

I awoke with a strange feeling of sudden jolting, like a car on a bumpy hill speeding to go somewhere. Every few steps I take, I suddenly lurch forward. But I feel I'm getting closer. Thanks to god, I have magically been transported to the correct path, full of people. I believe I will soon reach Constantinople, after yesterday's nightmare of mazes and hell lakes.

I hear the gentlest piano in the background, an angel singing in heaven's choir. It's serene. The jittering stops and it almost reminds me of the time I went to a hospital. No hospital. I don't even know what that is. I'm a medieval Persian peasant. How would I know what a hospital is, or why am I speaking English? I should be speaking Persian. I think. I think. I think.

The piano suddenly fades. I hear nothing, but. But footsteps. Mist begins to shroud and surround me and hot hot rain begins to pour down. Like a ghost running and sweeping dust, the fog spins and spins and spins. Tornado. A dreadful tornado. A freight train, a wreaking ball of wind, barreling toward me. I hear sinister, oh so sinister laughter. I believe it's coming from the tornado.

But it too, metamorphosizes. A bloody demon, a Jinn. The same Jinn I saw earlier. He transforms into 40 bandits and their leader. They all yell in a sinister laugh, like a looney drunk, he slurs: "I nearly had you. But every time, you slipped away, cuz of your doctors." What doctors? I'm not the Leon. He charges at me. My legs finally take flight, but he's too fast. And I stumble, my legs get awkwardly twisted as I fall. His sabre finally does the long anticipated, slash. Cutting right through my back. He swings again, this time it's my face. And again, he strikes me in the leg. It hurts so bad that I don't feel fear, just an urge to have it over with.

A deep cut at my throat, I, begging for mercy, desperately cry: "Stop, please Jinn. Stop!" He's frustrated. He yells in a tantrum: "I'm not a Jinn. I'm not a ghost or a monster. I'm your illness. And if you just give up, I could control more of you. But you and your pesky doctors don't give in."

He disappears, and a man emerges. Zhang Qian? The creator of the silk road? In a wise voice he says: "I can help you, all you need to do is to put yourself in this jar." He is powerful, and I trust him. I do as he says and fit into the

giant jar he's holding. I realise I can't get out. Zhang Qian turns back into. No. No. No no no. Back into the Jinn. He grins at me and laughs hysterically: "Thank you for your help."

"Leon? Leon? Shoot, he's awake. Where is his psychiatrist? Dr Harold? Dr Hen?"

There is this sudden urge to unleash myself, I don't feel safe, I feel overstimulated. My legs keep jittering, so do my hands and even my entire body.

Dr Hen rushes in, "Leon, are you feeling better from your fever?"

I blurt out: "Schizophrenia and a fever?". "You did this to me, I know you did. Just tell me the goddam truth. Now."

Dr Hen: "I know you feel confused, but let's be calm here, don't freak out."

I'm a freak. It's you! you!" "You are the one who did this to me. And now, you are going to pay for it, both you and Harold."

I grab a syringe and begin stabbing him, laughing hysterically. He bleeds out onto the floor as I keep stabbing him, I want him to feel the pain he caused me. This is all his fault, his and every other doctor who came to "cure" me.

Someone jabs me with a needle and I collapse.

I, again hear footsteps. Demons follow me wherever I go. At home, they always taunt me. Hearing them, their sinister maniacal laughter. Sometimes seeing them, the occasional scaled serpent or pitchforked tongued lizards. For some reason, no one else sees them. But determined to find people who understand me, I escaped Tehran and started to travel to Europe through the silk road. It's the 15th century after all, and a peasant like me can do whatever I please. Even, migrate to the area of the enlightenment, and where the renaissance began.

A Very Merry Mayhem

Victoria Shanghai Academy, Yu, Jing Xi Michelle – 13

“This is such a waste of time.”

I stood there at the side of the road, waiting for a specific red truck. It was supposed to arrive 30 minutes ago.

“Seriously Dad, where is the truck?” I yelled into the phone, frustrated at the time wasted when I could’ve been studying for upcoming exams back at headquarters.

“There’s been a mishap on the road—“

“Oh and let me guess, you want ME to go fix it?!” I interrupted, my patience draining with each passing moment.

My dad, the Captain of Operations, sighed. “Look Zhenzhen,” He always uses my nickname whenever I got irritated, “it’s not that simple, I—”

“I always want what’s best for you but you have to take others’ opinions into consideration too!” I mimicked, knowing very well that was exactly what he was going to say. “Well guess what? I’m tired of always being second to your stupid company.” I heard him start another sentence, now shouting after being triggered by my outburst, but I hung up. I was done with his nonsense.

My eyes shifted back to the road, staring at the uneven rubble that made up the roads. Suddenly, my phone lit up. I ignored it. It lit up again. I turned off my notifications.

Several minutes later, a black SUV pulled up from around the road and stopped right in front of me. The window rolled down, and the world’s most annoying face appeared. I rolled my eyes. This day could not get worse.

“What are you doing here?” I asked.

“The red van fell into a ditch a few kilometers back, so I generously offered up my time to go get the artifact before the authorities started crawling all over the van. You’re welcome.” Fankai said as he showed me the small box in his hands.

I snatched the box and rolled my eyes.

“You mean Principal Franklyn forced you to be the backup because you had nothing else to do? I understand now!” I laughed as I saw the smirk get wiped off his face. I opened the door to the passenger side of the SUV, satisfied.

“Haha. Very funny. Anyways, your dad updated me on everything that’s going on and it’s now our responsibility to get it to the banquet on time via the silk road. 2 days, in case you forgot.” I ignored that comment.

“What about my luggage?”

“It’s all in the back.”

“Information details on the mission?”

“I sent it to your phone as an encrypted file.”

“Since when did you have my number?”

“Since five minutes ago when I called you a million times.”

Oh, curse him. This was going to be annoying.

“Just drive.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He started the car while giving me a wry salute.

The silence lasted hours. I was just starting to fall asleep when I heard his voice.

“So, Xiaozhen. We should probably make a plan for the days ahead.” I silently cursed him for using that nickname.

“No thanks for reminding me that I’m stuck with you for the next two days.” He looked at me with a fake gasp while clutching his chest, failing to contain the amusement behind his eyes. “Seriously, what’s our plan?” He asked again, this time in a more professional tone.

“Since I was just falling asleep, you can drive tonight. I’ll switch with you in the morning. Now shut it.” I knew he was being serious but I was too tired to care. Who told him to force thoughts into my head at this time?

“Fine, Ms. Grumpy pants.” Then the car went back to silence as I drifted off to sleep.

A couple hours later, I woke up to the sound of “annoying” shaking my body.

"Zhenyuan. We have a problem." I looked out the window to see flashing red lights hovered behind us, indicating enemy drones. Without a word, I motioned for Fankai to stop the car and we switched places. Then the SUV swerved onto a crumbling track that veered off the normal road.

"This is one of the old paths." I said as the wheels manoeuvred over stones that were driven on a thousand years ago by animal caravans. While I navigated the compact paths by memory, Fankai used his technology and aimed a jamming device out the window. Zap! All the drones crashed onto the mixture of concrete and dirt below in unison. For a moment, it felt like it was just us and the ghosts of the ancient merchants who had roamed these roads centuries ago.

After the adrenaline rush subsided, I drove us back to the main road. Fankai offered to switch back and drive for the remainder of the night, but I dismissed the idea; he should take a break too.

By the following night, we arrived at the banquet just in time for the exchange.

“Our codenames will be Mr. and Mrs. Lang. We’re married as it’s the simplest explanation for private conversations.” Fankai explained, and I was frustrated.

“You did that to annoy me didn’t you?” I asked.

“It was for the sake of the plan.” He said simply, but his eyes suggested otherwise.

He continued describing the drop off location of the artifact.

“The client is known as La Regina and will be in a room near the fruit punches. We will then complete the exchange after seeing the signal.” I nodded, and changed at the back of the SUV into an elegant red gown with delicate mistletoe patterns woven into it. I added a reindeer headband too; it is a christmas party after all. Fankai wore a classic tuxedo and we strolled in through the front doors with our VIP passes. The room was bedazzled in Christmas decorations, guests hurried along everywhere around us. We hung around the room until 6:30pm, the drop off time.

We kept a close eye on the entrance until we saw her: a beautiful lady dressed in an immaculate green gown with a feathery mask. I turned and walked towards the fruit punch, the artifact hidden in my hands, heart pounding as I waited for the signal. A flicker of red shone through the cracks of the doorway. I went in.

She sat at the end of a long table. I held up the box and slid it across the table. I was prepared to leave when her bodyguard stopped me.

“Give me your necklace.” She said.

I was puzzled, the necklace was given to me by my mom before she passed, I wasn’t about to give that away.

“Why?”

“Because it holds the key to the box, Zhenyuan.”

She just called me by my real name. How did she know? I was just about to question her when she removed her mask.

“Give me the necklace Zhenzhen.”

I stood in shock as I registered who was sitting in front of me.

“Mom?!”

“Yes darling, now, the necklace please.”

I had so many questions, but now was not the time. I simply handed her the necklace while my brain was still processing everything. The client— no, my mom slid the key in along with another one on her matching necklace and turned.

“Finally, I’ve gotten my hands on—” She was interrupted by a crash through the door and Fankai burst in. He snatched the box from her hands, grabbed my wrist, and ran.

He dragged me out of the building like a lunatic and when we reached the SUV, I demanded for an explanation.

Turns out, my mom planned to destroy the entire trading company using a hacker chip placed inside the box, but was almost caught and forced to take safety measures after faking her death. Since then, she's been rebuilding for today, but didn't anticipate me as the representative.

"Your dad then called and filled me in on the details. You know the rest."

"About how you broke through the door and almost screamed in pain?"

He burst out laughing. Hard. At that moment, it felt like it was just the two of us, and it felt oddly calm. But soon we had to return. This time, the ride wasn't silent anymore. We chatted while making sure we weren't attacked, listening to music and sharing our favourite moments, it was... nice.

When we reached headquarters, we were informed that we were almost late to the Christmas Prom. Since we were late and everyone else already had a partner, he asked me out. Yes, that egocentric idiot asked me out, with fireworks in the background too! I said yes. He then dragged me to the dance floor and pulled me into the most electrifying dance I've ever had.

Later when we were seated, he said: "You didn't do bad today."

"Not too bad yourself," I hesitated before continuing, "Partner."

He just chuckled, then smiled: "To a very merry mayhem" he raised his glass of fruit punch and I reciprocated, before he grabbed my hand, pulling me towards the twinkling lights of the party.

My Hope and the Dawn Star

Victoria Shanghai Academy, Yuan, Yuan Dong Doris – 12

Dust swirled around me, blinding my eyes as I pushed forward in the merciless desert. Mama gripped on to my arm, a constant reminder of the reason we came.

She shudders. “Maybe it’s time to stop...” Her voice is weak, barely a whisper fighting against the wind. I feel her steps falter, letting the wind push her. I tense in fear, taking more of her weight on my 11 year old frame.

“No. Look up at the star.” I raised a finger towards the only source of light in the cloak of darkness, our only guide. “Look at the Dawn Star, Mama. Just like in the stories.”

Her head tilts lightly, I feel the shaky movement on my cheek. “Venus” She murmurs. “The liar. Not a star at all.” A ghost of a smile returns to her face.

“But it is still a guide,” I reply, my voice stronger and firmer than my steps. I’m repeating her own words, what had given me hope two nights ago when the Jeep’s engine finally gave up. Even then, her sickness had been spreading rapidly, tormenting her body. Now, after hiding from the sun in thin tarps, she became a wisp of herself, leaning into me.

Around an hour later, she sinks into the sand. “Kian, I can’t go on.”

Her words are a knife slicing through my hope. I kneel down, holding out the last sip of water in the waterskin. She shakes her head frantically, gesturing for me to drink.

“We will share.” I say. It’s our rule of the journey. She takes a sip, her throat swallowing painfully. I look into the vast desert and a thought whispers: *It’s just a giant rock. The songs are lies.* I crush that thought, fear is a luxury that I can’t afford.

“Mama, tell me the story of the Dawn Star again.”

She’s silent for so long that I think she didn’t hear me. Then her voice comes, softly weaving the old tale. “She was a traveler, like us. Lost in a desert of endless days. The sun took pity and gave her a piece of his heart to carry at night. A promise. So she walks... ahead of him... lighting the way for others. A promise that there is a way.”

I listen, my eyes on that promise in the sky. Suddenly, I understood something. Grit isn’t about being strong. It’s choosing to believe a promise when every part of you screams that it’s a lie.

“Okay,” I say, standing. I pull her up. “We’re going to follow the promise. We have to believe.”

She groans, and the sand claws at me. Finally, she musters the strength to rise. We take a step, then another.

At the darkest hour of the night, we find ourselves at the foot of a towering sand dune. The wind is harsher than ever, whipping Mama’s hair into her back again and again.

Suddenly I stumble, falling down and dragging Mama with me. This time, when I strain to push back up, my arms refuse. Dawn Star looks down from its distant perch, a light with an empty feeling of promise.

There’s no hope, I think. The silence swallows my thought. I have no strength left, just a boy, small and completely used up. I let my body give away to the soft sand. *We can’t go on.*

I’m ready to let go, to let the desert take us.

But I turn my head.

Mama lies in a heap next to me, her chest fluttering. I see traces of tears left on her face. I see her body, skin on bone. The woman who kissed me softly on the forehead before I went to sleep. Who worked grueling jobs to get food and shelter for me. Who told me the ancient stories, ways to make the universe seem kind. I refused to let her story end here, because we didn't go on.

She never gave up on me, through the many challenges.

A new feeling creeps up onto me, fiery and rapidly spreading across my heart. It's not grit anymore, but desperate love. My grit is gone, but my love can't be exhausted.

"No." I say to my weakness, to the sky, to the icy desert.

I force myself to stand, lifting Mama up. Every small movement was agony, sending pain through my body. But it was clear. We have to keep moving towards the smallest bit of hope. *Love will drive me there.*

We walk. But as we go on, each step becomes a bigger challenge than the last. Each passing second fights my hope. I look at the star, where all our trust has gone. I feel my belief fading away.

If I let go of the trust in the star, I let go of Mama. I will be letting her story die. These thoughts are the only thing keeping me standing.

The myth isn't just a story. At this moment, they are the only way that we will survive, a guide that I have to keep following. Even if I can't believe in it.

My faith doesn't matter anymore, I realize. But Mama's does. I will believe, because she isn't able to right now, I can believe for us both.

With a final effort of willpower, I choose the myth. I choose Mama's story.

I take a step in the story's name, then another. Each step forward is an act of faith.

Many steps later, my foot comes down again. This time, it meets an unyielding stone. Solid, just like the promise.

I look up from the ground, squinting my eyes against the wind and dust. Amidst all the chaos, a stone well filled with water stands. Starlight pools into the calm surface.

I let out a gasp, a cry of relief, like my soul can finally breathe again. I half drag Mama the last few steps, and we collapse and the well's base. I lower a leather bucket into the well, and the *splash* as it breaks the surface of water is the most beautiful sound in the world.

I draw the bucket, brimming with cool water. I don't drink first, but hold the bucket up to Mama. I feel her drink, lapping at the saviour. The water works magic on Mama, pulling her back to life from her dying state. Her eyes stared into mine, clear with triumph that I earned for her. The Dawn Star shines above, its promise is now a fact.

I look at the star, then at Mama. I hadn't just followed the star and the myth. In the darkest hour, when all my faith was gone, my love for her had been the strength to keep going. And believing was the compass that led us here.

I help her drink again, then take my own share. The water tastes of stone, and of the victory not in the sky, but in a son's heart.

The Crack On the Silk Road

Victoria Shanghai Academy, Zhang, Hayley – 11

Would you wish to be surprised that you were going to travel on the hardest and longest journeys to a place you've never known? I'd rather not. But still my stubborn brain decided to.

The Silk Road was my parents' life, not mine. All I wanted was the safety of our house, Mother's laugh. But the sickness changed everything. So there I was, holding a contract I didn't understand, guarding a porcelain vase called the Moon Flask as if my life depended on it. For my family, it did.

I could see the desert looming in front of us, the endless dunes. Riding one sand dune after another, the other men in the caravan tried to teach me how to navigate by the Pole Star. They were people Father trusted—enough—to bring me on this journey. They obviously thought I was not fit to travel—a waste of water and space. There was Chan Wu, the gruff, strong leader who measured worth in grain. The tall, sly Quan Xi, who was Chan Wu's favourite. Li Su Jin, who once shared his water when I choked on dust. Lu Xu, who stood back and listened more than he talked. Fu Shang, grumpy and closed-minded.

The mountain pass was a scar in the world, a narrow gouge of scree and terror. The wind screamed here, bellowing madness like a drunk old man. The path was a sheer ribbon of rock. I hugged the crate to my chest, my world narrowed to the cliff edge and the precious weight in my arms.

During a noon rest in a narrow gully, Chan Wu called for an inspection. "Show me the Flask, boy. Let us see what we risk all this for."

Trembling, I set the crate down and began to carefully undo the latches. The men crowded around—all except Quan Xi, who, weirdly, was watching from a distance.

I lifted the lid of the box—sealed since almost forever—and presented the Moon Flask, for them and for *me*. The beautiful, flawless vase nestled in red silk.

As everyone's eyes were fixed on it, I heard a shuffle behind me. Quan Xi, who had been sulking behind us, stumbled. He verged forward, his elbow swinging down onto the edge of the crate.

Time stopped. A sharp, demeaning crack came from the crate.

The Flask lay in two clean pieces, the broken edges a stark, brutal white.

Quan Xi righted himself, dusting off his shoulders. "Oh! Clumsy me! This treacherous ground!" His voice was all apologies, but his eyes shone with pride and smugness. They met mine over Chan Wu's erupting shoulder. It was no accident. It was a cold, gleaming message: *You are nothing. This is my road.*

Our road was shattered. Where could we go now?

I only came back to reality at mealtime. My mind swirled, fearful of what would happen. Feeling it was completely over, I slumped onto my cushions. I was about to fall asleep when Lu Xu appeared beside me as if from the shadows.

I looked up, startled. "What is it?"
"I just thought of something," he said, sitting down. "They say in Tashkent, there are people who can repair—" He didn't need to finish. Hope, sharp and sudden, pierced through the dust in my heart. "Yes! We can go! We *will* go! We will save the Moon Flask!"
Lu Xu smiled vaguely. I didn't care—we had a solution.

But I didn't expect rejection.

"Tashkent?" Chan Wu roared. "That detour into dust? No!"
"We... we can't go to Samarkand without the Flask, right?" I stammered. Chan Wu stared, his eyes full of fury. "Then go yourself, child! I am not going! We head east at dawn—with or without you." He stormed outside. The hopeful light in my friends' eyes died as I spoke. "He said no. Chan Wu said no."
Everyone looked at the ground. Everyone but Lu Xu. His gaze was steady, waiting. The decision was now mine.

Tashkent was not such a "detour into dust," but it was no bustling Samarkand either. It was a city of stubborn, sun-baked clay and sudden, cool courtyards. The air smelled of roasting mutton, spice, and the hot, metallic scent of the forge. It was a city of repairs, not of grand beginnings.

"Very interesting place." Lu Xu remarked, nodding at the yards beside us.
We ask for the man who can fix porcelain, and they all seem to know him.
"Oh! The Porcelain Healer! Um—well, Kuo isn't very well lately..." a man said.
"We need to see him!" I exclaimed.
The woman beside him said. "Okay, I guess we'll—bring you to him then..."
Where they brought us to was in fact, not a master's workshop, but a wine shop, full of drunk men.
The villagers of Tashkent pointed at the man sitting right in the middle, pouring a jug of wine into his mouth.
"There he is."

Kuo refused immediately when we pleaded with him to heal the Moon Flask.
"I could," he interrupted, his voice a ragged scrape. "When I had a reason. My reason died with the fever. My wife. My little boy." He took a swig from a clay bottle. "So, you see, I am closed."
The words hit me like a physical blow. *The fever*. The same unseen enemy that had stolen my place in my family's cart.
As he turned away, I knew I had to act. "Please," I breathed. A strange, desperate courage pushed my words out. "My family... the same sickness," I said, my voice trembling. "That's why I'm here alone."

He was silent for a long time, staring at the fracture. Then, with a tenderness that contradicted his rough hands, he picked up the two halves. He fitted them together. The *snick* of the meeting edges was the softest sound in the room.

"To mend it," he said, his voice now clear and quiet, "I must make a paste of its own dust and fire it again. The scar will be part of it forever. It will be strong, but it will never be 'perfect'."

I thought of my mother's laugh, which would sound tired now. Of my father's strong hands, which would be weak. They would not be 'perfect' either. They would have scars from this, too.

"A scar is not a break," I said, the truth solidifying in my chest. "It's a seal. It's proof it held."

Kuo looked at me, and for a flicker, the hollows in his face seemed to fill with an old, familiar light—the light of a craftsman who sees not just what is, but what could be.

“Come back at dawn,” he said. “Your Flask will be waiting. And so will I.”

The wine shop fell silent, the crowd holding its breath. Kuo laid the two pieces of the Moon Flask on the stained wood. He did not look at the break with disgust, but with a deep, weary recognition.

“You see this?” he said, his voice quiet in the hush. His finger hovered over the crack. “This is not an ending. It is a new kind of beginning. But it is a painful one.”

From a pouch, he produced a small mortar. He scraped a whisper of porcelain from the broken edge itself. “I will use its own dust,” he said. “It must remember itself to become whole again. It will carry this memory in its bones forever.”

He mixed the dust with a clear oil, creating a paste the color of a faded leaf. With a brush made of a single hair, he painted the seam. “The fire will ask it a question,” he whispered, as he bound the pieces with wet leather. “The fire will ask, ‘Will you hold?’ And the answer,” he said, looking at me for the first time, his eyes pools of shared grief, “must be ‘Yes.’”

We turned to leave Tashkent, the mended Flask wrapped securely once more. As we walked, Lu Xu fell into step beside me. He didn’t speak. He just glanced at the pack holding the Flask, then at the road ahead leading to Samarkand, and finally at me. His steady gaze said what I was only beginning to feel.

The road to Samarkand was still long. Chan Wu and Quan Xi were ahead of us, carrying their version of the truth. But we were no longer chasing them. We were carrying our own truth, warm from the kiln and sealed with a scar. And for the first time, I felt not like a boy sent on an errand, but like a merchant carrying his most valuable ware: a story of what had broken, and what had chosen to hold.

The Sands of Time

Wycombe Abbey Nanjing, Chen, Joseph – 12

Philip and his team were discovering the ancient Silk Road but his three teammates were all either hurt or got lost on the way back to their camp. It was a cold and dark night, only a single man trying to reach the camp and look for help. Suddenly, Philip missed a step, and Ahhhhhh!

Years passed and his little son Nick is already 13. As normal, Nick came to his dad's grave, but Nick didn't know that he is going the wrong way and the way he was going was just the place his dad tried to discover. He kept on walking for 30 minutes until he finally realised that something was wrong. He spun around trying to find the way back., when he finally felt tired and stop spinning around, he saw that he was mysteriously in a huge desert. Not having a second to think, he dropped into quicksand and teleported to an ancient temple in Xian, China. In the meantime, a time travel has also taken place.

The next moment that Nick woke up was a new day. In a moist and old temple, all the walls covered in creepers, a thought came to Nick's mind

'I need to get out of here.'

'Boss, someone has teleported to our base again...'

Nick doesn't know that his dad got lost in the same way as he did. Where is this place, is it a temple or tomb or is it something else. Hundreds of thoughts came out of Nick's heart. But still, the first thing is to get out of this spooky place...

He wondered around for a bit to just get familiar. Just at a corner, he found some treasure and clothes. Could this be someone else who tried to discover here, or was he just trying to find treasure?

While Nick was thinking about all the questions, a secret door opened...

A little white fox came out of the door, but nobody knows what and who it is. Where did it come from, how did it just appear suddenly? Is it friendly or will it attack me, possibly a mythical animal from the old Chinese book I was just reading?

Thinking of that, Nick reached into his bag to find the book. But just then, he touched a very hard piece of stone. He took the bag off to find the book and he also took the strange stone out of the bag. It is light blue on the top and cyan-ish indigo on the bottom.

What a beautiful stone, but why would it suddenly appear in my bag.

A mist form from the thin air and boom, a man that looks exactly like Nick's dad jumped in front of him. This was a humongous shock to Nick because he hasn't seen his dad for 10 years!

'Listen Nick, the stone you have is called the Water stone. You need to find a fox that you will meet on your way, it will teach you how it's used. If you want to go home, you will need to find the guardian spirit of the Fire stone and defeat him.'

Just after speaking, the man disappeared into thin air again.

On the other hand, the door to the outer world finally opened. A glimmer of light shot on Nick's face. Taking the little fox in his hand, WOW!!! This is awesome.

It was a very old Chinese style street. But why would a pyramid randomly appear in the middle of a road, but when Nick turned his head the temple he was in suddenly just transformed into a random food shop.

What a heck?

Ohhhhhhh, so this world is a dimension that magic is present. So the rock I have in also probably magic relating! That's so interesting, but the man said that I need to find the fire stone in order to go home.

Where I am suppose to find the clues of the stone?

Just thinking of that, the little white fox barked and ran in the opposite direction of the temple. His mind was telling him to follow the fox.

And so another ten minutes passed, and finally Nick saw a volcano like structure take place in front of him. So this is the place where the fire stone is, but that man said that I've to defeat the guardian spirit and what about the little fox teaching me how to fight?

Nick decided to go on the volcano first. The lava everywhere scared him but his thought of going home kept him going. Finally, at the very top of the volcano, he saw the fire temple.

At first, nothing happened but eventually a monkey lit on fire appeared.

So is this thing here the guardian spirit that I need to beat in order to go home.

Nick thought that it's going to be easy to beat the monkey, but as it grew bigger and bigger he almost had a heart attack.

I'm not going to fight this enormous monkey, I will die if I did.

Ohh yeah, I thought that man said the little fox would teach me how to fight with that strange stone.

Hey foxy, can you teach me how to fight with this stone really quick. I want to finish fighting and go home fast.

Ok, so it's this.

The fox suddenly started talking and it really scared Nick.

You will need to put your finger on the stone, and you will automatically absorb it and you will have the power of controlling water. Fight, fight with our opponent.

Nick felt full of energy and happy. He didn't know why but he had never felt so happy before.

Nick pushed off suddenly and smashed a powerful punch and the monkey tried to take it bare handed but by absorbing the water stone, Nick has a lot more power than the fire monkey now.

But the thing was Nick didn't know that the guardian spirit can absorb energy from others. That means that the more you hit it, the more powerful it is.

But clearly, Nick doesn't know this fact. He is still using his greatest strength to fight with the guardian spirit.

After he fought with the monkey for a minute, he realised something unusual. The monkey had no sign of being defeated, but Nick himself became more and more tired.

If it continues to be like that, I will soon be out of energy, and the monkey could just easily counter kill.

Nick noticed that monkey has grown larger and larger throughout the fight.

No wait, the first punch I gave it seems to be powerful enough to let it back up but the punches after that was clearly not powerful enough to defeat that creature.

What if I concentrate all my power on one punch, will it be able to defeat the guardian?

As Nick was thinking of whether to execute his idea, the monkey dashed towards him and therefore he didn't have time but to give his most powerful hit and as he punched out, the monkey was knocked out immediately by that powerful punch.

Just as Nick let down his guard, the monkey jumped straight up and hit Nick just so that he was further from the Fire temple.

Nick was very upset and scared, he knew this is the only way that he can get home.

He didn't want to be stuck in this strange place forever with nobody caring for him and even knowing him. This was a completely new world to him and because so, he thought hard of how to sneak into the Fire temple.

First he tried to go in the back door, but he didn't notice that the first time he fought the monkey, it came out from the middle of the temple. So there will be no difference if you go from the back, FAIL!

Then he thought of trying to make friends with the little monkey but as soon as he steps into the guarding area, he was attacked by the monkey.

But he realised a thing, the monkey's power was kind of reset, which was the only chance of him going back home.

He went to the temple once again, and at the very first of the fight he used all the pure powers he had known and knocked out the monkey in a millisecond.

He then rushed to the middle of the temple and absorbed the fire stone.

Congratulations, you have successfully absorbed two infinity stones. You are now able to go back and forth time.

Nick got sucked into a time travelling hole and successfully got home.

Yeah!

Star Crust

Wycombe Abbey Nanjing, Smale, Logan – 13

Chapter 1: Eric Takes a Nap

It was a warm autumn evening and after working for 7 hours with the sun beating on the back of his head, Eric was ready to go home. In fact, he was ready to leave 6 hours ago. But he still had to get paid otherwise he couldn't pay for his mum's medical bills. Unfortunately, his boss (whom he really doesn't like) asked him to do unpaid overtime until 11:30 again for the fifth time that week. So, he kept working.

Eric was an archaeologist; he chose the job because he loved the Indiana Jones movies. He thought archaeology meant cool leather jackets, fedoras, and flying around the world collecting treasure. But it wasn't. Eric spent most of his days digging trenches with a spoon that wasn't even straight because his boss was a cheapskate.

After another hour of mind-numbingly boring digging, he finally found something: a rock. But this rock was different—it was bright green and glowing faintly. It looked like it would fetch a lot of money. Eric was going to report it to his boss like he was supposed to, but then he thought, "what has he ever done for me... what if I take this one cool glowing rock for myself?" Except when he reached for it, time seemed to slow down. Everything went blurry and Eric passed out.

Chapter 2: Wakey, Wakey, It's Time for Adventure

Eric woke up in the middle of a bustling market. Vendors were yelling for people to buy their brand-new invention "toilet paper" fit for the emperor, and anti-aging cream made from charcoal and llama poo. Eric checked his phone and it said it was 1391. He asked a vendor what year it was. The vendor looked at him like he was crazy and said, "its 1391 why?" Eric fainted on the spot.

When he woke again, he was in a room that smelled like dust and medicine. A girl sat next to him—tall, with long black hair tied in a bun—and beside her was her brother, a few inches shorter and way too confident.

"Hey you, you're finally awake," he said. "You had a rough fall. Thanks to me you're still alive."

"Hey, I helped too!" the girl snapped.

"I'm William and that's my sister Cindy," he said. "We nursed you and your big head back to health future boy."

Eric stared at his phone in Cindy's hand. "Wait How did you know I'm from the future?"

"One, you asked what year it is and fainted," Cindy said. "Two, we don't have glowing metal rectangles filled with words."

"Give it back!" Eric yelled.

"Not so fast," Cindy said. "Help us sell our silk first."

"Fine but only if you help me figure out why this rock brought me here," Eric added, holding up the magic rock.

"Fine, we leave in the morning and we'll get some info tonight" they said. "Now sleep."

Chapter 3: Let's Get Moving

"Wake up Eric it's time to go," William said.

"Five more minutes," Eric replied.

He immediately got a bucket of freezing water dumped on his head.

"Okay I'm up. Any info on the rock?"

"Yep," Cindy said, loading supplies onto a llama. "The place you need to return it to is on our route."

"Ooh can I ride the llama?"

The llama replied by spitting at him.

"I'll take that as a no," Eric said, and the llama nodded like it agreed.

As they left, Eric noticed a strange shadow in the crowd watching him. When he blinked it was gone. They started their journey along the Silk Road.

Chapter 4: The Nearly Endless Walk

After walking for several days Eric was tired and bored. His games were online only, and since the internet hadn't been invented yet he couldn't play anything on his phone. William and Cindy walked like deserts were just long hallways.

"Are we nearly there yet?" Eric cried.

"NO FOR THE LAST TIME NO I'LL TELL YOU WHEN WE ARRIVE !!" yelled Cindy.

Eric tried to pet the llama. The llama being a llama spit on him.

"Ew," Eric said, wiping his face.

Then Eric saw shadows up ahead—four or five figures watching the group. Everyone saw them.

"Probably travelers," William said trying to sound upbeat, but Eric knew he didn't believe that.

"Ignore them," Cindy said. "Keep walking."

That night they camped next to the road. Just before Eric fell asleep, three small balls rolled into the middle of the camp.

BOOM. Smoke filled the area and four masked men appeared. Before Eric could react he got knocked out again.

Chapter 5: The Thieves Guild

Eric woke up with a bag over his head and ropes on his wrists. After a bit he managed to get the bag off. Next to him were Cindy, William and even the llama.

A tall, lanky man walked in with two guards. "You are in the hands of the Thieves Guild," he announced, like he'd practiced in a mirror.

"Who are you?" Eric demanded.

"I ask the questions," the leader said, launching into an evil speech.

While he talked, William sawed at his ropes with a hidden knife that he had in his pocket. Finally, the ropes fell and William lunged forward and stabbed the leader in the gut. The guards took one look and decided the Thieves Guild wasn't worth dying for and ran.

"Cut us free!" Cindy urged.

"What's the magic word?" William said.

"Abracadabra," Cindy replied with confidence.

"Good enough."

They ran—straight into more guards—then dove into a side room and barricaded the door.

"Window?" William suggested.

Eric looked out. "That's a cliff we are not jumping out the window."

In the corner were barrels of gunpowder and broken spear heads. Eric's brain did a little backflip. "Rope. Flint. Now."

After a few minutes of crafting, sawing and shaving he held up his creation. "I call it a gun. It flings rocks really fast."

"Can I have one?" Cindy asked.

"Absolutely not!"

Eric kicked down the door and administered a shot of pure lead into a random guard that was passing by. Everyone screamed, including Eric, which did not help. Somehow, through panic, punching, and pure luck—they burst out of the hideout.

"That was fun," Eric panted, "but I really want to go home."

Chapter 6: Pulling an Indiana Jones

After following directions they got from the Thieves Guild they arrived at an ancient looking door. Inside was a massive room leading to a pedestal—definitely where the rock went. Sadly someone beat them to it.

"Hey, didn't I stab you!?" William yelled.

"Yes, but you missed my vital organs like an absolute idiot," the leader said. "Now give me the stone or I'll kill your precious llama," he added, revealing a very grumpy looking llama.

William and Cindy being siblings, started arguing about how they forgot the llama and how each of them were idiots.

“SHUT IT!!!” the leader screamed, then began ranting about his evil plan to destroy the world and overthrow the government.

Eric thinking back to Indiana Jones took advantage of the speech and ended the leader’s evil plans forever with his gun just like his hero.

The trio climbed the steps toward the pedestal.

“Well I guess this is goodbye,” Eric said.

“Yeah,” Cindy said, trying to hide her tears. Eric had only been with them about two weeks, but they were still the best friends he’d ever had.

Eric placed the gem on the pedestal. Everything blurred—but before he passed out again for the hundredth time, the llama bit into it and they travelled back to the future together.

Chapter 7: Get Back to Work

Eric awoke in the present with his boss standing over him looking like he was about to explode into a tantrum, which he was.

“YOU ARE FIRED!!!” his boss spat.

Eric tried to protest but his boss just pointed at the exit and Eric gave up.

The llama, on the other hand, was having none of this. It spit directly into the boss’s eye and kicked him in the stomach before turning around and leaving with Eric.

Seven years later Eric was a world-renowned author who wrote about his adventures disguised as children’s books with his most famous book being one called “Star Crust” which included magical bread being sent down from the stars which was just about a time, he made bread that didn’t taste terrible. Since he was rich, he could now afford his mother’s treatment and she eventually got better. Finally, Eric could relax with his llama, (which he named Sir Andy Spitsalot) in his mansion.

New Tales of China's Silk Road

Wycombe Abbey School, Chao, Kira – 12

Between 1271 and 1294, the Mongol Empire reached its peak, thriving under Kublai Khan, its leader. However, after his death in 1294, the empire gradually weakened, plagued by corruption, rebellions, and economic troubles, until its eventual collapse in 1368.

Go Ling! Go Ling! Villagers were chanting her name as she walked past, welcoming her back home from her recent journey. As a courageous, successful explorer, Ling has went on many adventures, learning, exploring and influencing many other young villagers like her to explore the world. This was all she ever wanted – to find her meaning – to have recognition amongst the villagers. This was the life she always dreamt of as a child.

‘Lingggg! Wake up! You’ve been sleeping for long enough now. Come help me feed the chickens and cook breakfast.’ Ling sat up from her bed. Great. So that was all a dream. ‘I’m up mom!’ Ling shouted as she hurried down to the chicken coop. Ling longed to travel all around the world through the silk road. When she was younger, the Mongol Empire flourished. Every morning, she used to see traders roaming all around her village, speaking in strange tongues. The air will be full of the smell of spices, making the air warm. The silk road was blooming with color and people. She loved that. But now, it is almost empty. The leader of the Mongol empire, Kublai Khan, died. The number of caravans slowly decreased. The silk roads became dangerous to travel on. No single authority could protect the routes. Bandits roam freely around these roads. Her hopes for exploring the world now vanished. Ling is now 15 years old. Her father died because of black death when she was 6. Before he died, they used to talk about everything. Ling would tell all her dreams, hopes, and worries to him. He would sit there, quietly listening to Ling’s thoughts. He was a good listener. He never interrupted Ling. Ling loved that about him. When he died, she was devastated. She was close to her mom, but her mom isn’t really the person she would have deep conversations with.

Ling was an extremely talented child. By a young age, she already learnt how to weave silk and embroidery. This was her hobby. When her father passed away, she used to spend hours alone in her room weaving. This helped her get through this hard time easier. Her mother did not know about her talent before. However, one day, her mom noticed her artwork. ‘Ling,’ said her mother that day. ‘What is this?’ ‘It’s my artwork mom.’ Ling replied. ‘It’s beautiful. Where did you learn all of this?’ ‘I’m not sure,’ Ling answered. Later on that day, her mom decided they should start selling this. ‘I don’t want to. I want to keep it for myself.’ Ling replied. ‘Ling,’ Her mother said. ‘This will help with our money problems now. If we sell these, your artworks are going to be spread all around the world through the silk road. The silk road is where merchants trade and sell. Traders will come buy your silk artworks. I know even you can’t travel, your artwork can!’ ‘I guess...’ replied Ling, hesitantly. Then on, Ling weaved every day and night. She really enjoyed this, but her hopes for traveling around the world still stayed. She wanted to meet other traders and new people, increase her social life, discover other cultures, and venture into different places. The silk road was not only for trading items, it was also for trading cultures, ideas and knowledge. The silk road is how countries connected. And she wanted to be part of it.

One day, she noticed no caravans came. The village was empty. That evening, a curious child from the village came to her and asked her how it was like before. She told that child about the silk road. The color, the people, the atmosphere still lived in her words. Soon, every night, more and more children came. She told them stories she overheard when traders used to pass by. Even though her small weaving business can’t go on, she still looks forward to seeing the children's faces spark up with these stories. This was how she found her meaning. Even though the times of this decline, by teaching others, the spirit and curiosity lived on. She didn’t need recognition anymore. At the end, she never got to travel around the world. She didn’t even need to anymore. She explored the world through maps and dreams, finding her freedom in her mind and teaching youngsters about the world.

Chinese Silk Road

Wycombe Abbey School, Li, Stacy – 12

Once upon a time there lived a little girl. A descendant of one of the most important people during the Chinese silk road.

“Ma, what’s this?” Mu Yao asked.

“Hm?” Mei Xuan said while washing the dishes.

“This.” Mu Yao showed her mom.

“Ah, that is the ancient book about your ancient ancestor.” Mu Yao’s mom explained.

“My ancient ancestor?” Mu Yao said in confusion as she tilted her head.

“Yes, come sit.” Her mom said. Mu Yao sat obediently.

“Empress Leizu was a very important person. She’s the one who discovered silk. According to Chinese legends, they say a silkworm cocoon fell into her hot tea under a mulberry tree. The hot water softened the cocoon’s sericin as the long filament of the silk unraveled inside the tea. She became intrigued and studied the silkworm’s lifecycle and food source. It was said she invented the Silk Reel and the Loom. Her discovery of silk led to a very important event, twenty-two centuries ago there was an ancient network of trade routes, exchanging silk, spices and much more. It was a major route for trade but there was a rough side to it. Many explorers suffered boisterous storms, treacherous landslides, blisteringly hot summers, harsh winters and more.” Mei Xuan told Mu Yao.

–138 BCE –

“Zhang Qian, are you sure of this mission?” Emperor Wu of Han asked.

“Yes, Emperor. I shall not fail you” Zhang Qian said with no hesitation.

“Very well.” Emperor Wu said as he beckoned military soldiers over to accompany Zhang Qian.

“Thank you, Emperor Wu.” Zhang Qian affirmed. He bowed then made his exit out of the palace.

The desert sun cracked their lips, and the mountain winds sliced through their silk robes like knives. “Zhang Qian, are you sure of this?” One of the soldiers questioned while gasping for air.

“Yes. I’m sure.” Zhang Qian responded.

“Alright...” The soldier replied.

Zhang Qian and the rest of the soldiers continued to make their way to different countries, trading their silk and goods.

On one unfortunate day, there was a violent, spine chilling, strong storm that decimated the fleet.

“Batten down the hatches!” A mariner yelled. “Hold fast!”

“Zhang Qian we are going to sink!” A soldier cried.

“No, we must persevere.” Zhang Qian said.

“We’re going to die!” A mariner screamed. The boat was filled with panic. Everybody was distressed, but only Zhang Qian did not lose hope. He continued to persist. He was calm showing no worry. Everybody fought till the very end but sadly not everyone made it alive. Some soldiers drowned as some made it to shore.

“This is just insane!” A crying soldier spluttered.

“Why must we continue Zhang Qian? We have already lost many of our soldiers and not just any soldiers, our friends, family and peers. If we go any further, we will all die!” The crying soldier blurted in agony.

“Han Yue—” Zhang Qian said, then paused.

Han Yue, a loyal soldier who had lost his best friend in the storm, was grieving. “It’s all my fault,” he mumbled.

“No, Han Yue its mine.” Zhang Qian said disappointed in himself.

“No. You don’t understand. It’s all my fault. I shouldn’t have told him to join the army.” Han Yue started. Zhang Qian was unsure who was ‘him’ but then soon realized Han Yue was talking about his best friend.

“It had always been my dream to join the army, to protect my country. But it was never his dream. It’s all my fault for making him join with me. If I hadn’t told him to join then none of this would have ever happened. All because of me... I cost him his whole life and it’s all my fault. I’m a terrible friend.” Han Yue sobbed.

"No. Han Yue you're missing something. It is not your fault. It was no mistake to ask him to join with you because of that you two have learned so much together. He agreed to join because he wanted to be with you because in his eyes, he saw you as the greatest, most coolest person anyone could ever ask for. Isn't that right soldiers?" Zhang Qian asked.

"That's right!" A soldier said.

"Yeah! He never stopped talking about how cool you are, Han Yue!" Another confirmed.

"See, Fang Jia admired you a lot Han Yue, he would never think that you're a horrible friend." Zhang Qian told Han Yue.

"R-Really...?" Han Yue said in astonishment.

"Yes, Fang Jia would never think of you in a bad way and I'm sure he wants to see you happy instead of feeling sad, don't you think so?" Zhang Qian said.

"You're right, I don't want to make Fang Jia sad because of my emotions. I'll be sure to smile now. Thank you, Zhang Qian for reminding me what friendship really means." Han Yue thanked Zhang Qian.

"No need to thank me, just glad that you have understood the importance of friendship and to acknowledge one's feelings to what you say about yourself." Zhang Qian responded. Han Yue grinned and eventually got up to his feet, and so did the rest of the soldiers.

They continued to trade around Asia, Europe and Africa. Although they suffered difficult times during their journey, they accomplished many things, such as connecting countries, spreading religions and trading goods across the world. It turned out to be a huge success with new alliances.

Zhang Qian and the others were on their way back to the palace when a sudden earthquake started.

"What's happening?" A soldier asked, terrified.

"An earthquake. We must take cover QUICK!" Zhang Qian ordered. Everyone scrambled to their feet to the nearest shelter they could see.

"HELP!" Someone cried in the distance.

"Who is it? Where are you?" Zhang Qian shouted.

"Here! Help me... I'm stuck!" The voice yelled. Zhang Qian walked cautiously to the crying voice as it grew louder and louder each time he crept towards a rock in front of him.

"H-help me..." The voice grew raspy and quieter...

"Hang in there!" Zhang Qian said hastily. He lifted up the rock and found a figure. The figure turned out to be Han Yue.

"Han Yue! Don't panic I'm coming to save you!" Zhang Qian told him with hidden worry.

"Zhang Qian..." Han Yue whispered.

"Yes?" Zhang Qian replied while cleaning Han Yue's wounds from the earthquake.

"I see him..." Han Yue said in a quiet, raspy voice.

"What? Who?" Zhang Qian asked in confusion.

"Fang Jia. I see him smiling at me..." Han Yue said smiling to the air.

"Han Yue." Zhang Qian said looking straight into Han Yue's eyes.

"I can feel his warmth..." Han Yue mumbled.

"Han Yue! Keep your eyes open!" Zhang Qian exclaimed.

"I'm tired, Qian. I want to rest..." Han Yue whispered.

"No, you can't, not now Han Yue..." Zhang Qian murmured with tears trickling down his face. "You're my most loyal soldier Han Yue, my friend too... You can't go, not now Han Yue." Zhang Qian cried.

"I'm sorry... Zhang Qian..." Han Yue whispered tears in his eyes.

"No... I..." Zhang Qian didn't finish. He began to feel lightheaded and dizzy, his vision becoming blurry and static.

"No..." Zhang Qian said quietly. His vision became blurry... then it all went... to.... black.

A sea of voices filled the room. Zhang Qian slowly opened his eyes.

"What happened?" Zhang Qian murmured. "Was it all a dream?" Zhang Qian thought to himself.

"Zhang Qian you're awake! A voice gasped.

"Where am I?" asked Zhang Qian.

"You're in the hospital, Zhang Qian." The voice answered.

"The hospital?" Zhang Qian questioned.

"*You have been in a deep sleep for many moons, your spirit wandering between worlds.*" The physician said.

"What..." "What do you mean??" Zhang Qian stammered.

"Remember that earthquake? Your head was injured from the rocks. You've been here ever since." Another voice said.

"What...?" Zhang Qian stuttered.

"Zhang Qian." A familiar voice called. Zhang Qian turned to who's voice it was. It was Han Yue.

"Han Yue?" Zhang Qian asked.

"Yes, It's me." Han Yue smiled.

"I thought you were gone!" Zhang Qian exclaimed.

"No." Han Yue replied.

After Zhang Qian reunited with his fellow companions, he went to the palace to see the Emperor.

"Ah, Zhang Qian you have arrived back from your mission, haven't you? I heard you had a coma." Han Emperor said.

"Yes, that is right Emperor." Zhang Qian responded.

"I am glad to say that your mission has been a huge success Zhang Qian. I'm proud of you." Emperor Wu praised Zhang Qian.

"Thank you, Emperor." Zhang Qian thanked him as he bowed.

"And that's it!" Mei Xuan said as she closed the ancient book.

"Wow! *I love this story! It's amazing to think that Empress Leizu's blood flows through my veins, and that Zhang Qian braved such dangers just to connect the world.*" Mu Yao blurted.

"Haha yes, I understand" Mei Xuan replied while smiling."

—The End—

Tales of China's Silk Road

Wycombe Abbey School, Lu, Justin – 11

Many, many years ago, traders from China would deliver goods to Europe by travelling along the Silk Road. This journey was essential but perilous and stretched all the way **Chang'an China to Mediterranean ports such as Antioch. This route connected** East Asia with the Middle East, Central Asia and Europe, and was influential for trade and cultural exchange such as the practice of Buddhism which was practiced in the Gansu province where Zhang Qian lived with his family. Traders from China would deliver goods such as tea, porcelain, and silk. But not all traders would survive to deliver their precious goods.

The route from Lanzhou approached the Great wall of China then on to Yumen, Anxi, over the Kunlun Mountains and Takla Makan Desert, across the Karakoram Range towards The Golden Caravan (Kabul, Afghanistan) before continuing west across Iran and Iraq, and eventually towards the Mediterranean. The journey from Lanzhou to Kabul alone could take many months and meant travelers would endure many hardships along the way, especially if inexperienced. For food they would eat a flatbread called Panir, and make Porridge from Wheat and Barley. They would travel with goats so they could make cheese from milk. They packed Qurut which they would crush and boil when food was scarce and the journey hard going.

Zhang Qian woke early on the morning of his departure and packed his silks onto his trusty Donkey and loaded water and food supplies for the first month. Zhang Qian was a peaceful man, but for his journey on the Silk Road he always brought his crossbow because the journey towards Kabul was not like life in his peaceful village of Dayatan in Lanzhou.

Zhang Qian's family were nervous every time he raveled through the Silk Road. And for this reason, Zhang Qian travelled with his most trusted companions. Their names were Zhu Re and Xiao Lin. They were also traders who traded in lacquerware, paper, and tea. The three men were good friends and would often spend hours together talking about their travels. They told tales of their adventures on the Silk Road, often grateful for the good luck that allowed them.

The three men packed their goods and weapons and headed off early to begin the journey of many months. The donkeys were fed and watered so they could carry their heavy loads, but this did mean that progress was slow. The friends did not mind as there was always much to talk about and the journey was easygoing and without danger. Their journey would first take them north to The Great Wall, then westward toward Kabul. They spent most days in pleasant conversation during the long periods of walking, and at night they made warm stew with dumplings, smoked their pipes, and played chess. For many traders, the first part of the Silk Road journey was enjoyable.

By wintertime, the three friends were in the mountains and the temperature dropped many degrees. Now the journey became more difficult. They would build large fires at night to keep warm. In the day, they traveled less miles due to winds and storms. It was hard work to navigate through the mountains and the journey took many months to complete. The three friends did not make it out of the mountains until spring. The donkeys were very tired and even Zhang Qian was exhausted as food was scarce at times and the cold took its toll on his body. As the weather grew warmer, the friends began to cover more ground, but Zhang Qian knew the Karakoram Range was a dangerous place to travel so he did not allow himself to relax. As they were so tired, he decided they should make camp for a few days along with fellow traders who had gathered on the edge of the desert before entering Kabul, The Golden Caravan.

Traders from all over China would often camp in groups as there was safety in numbers, and it was known that there were many bandits along the Silk Road. Xiao Lin erected the tents and Zhu Re built while Zhang Qian talked with fellow traders and discovered there had been many bandit attacks upon traders throughout the wintertime. Many men seemed nervous and were returning home, unwilling to cross the desert due to rumors of further attacks. This news caused Zhang Qian to keep his crossbow closer that night as he ate dinner with his friends. He remained more vigilant than ever and thought of his beautiful family and how he missed them.

That night, Zhang Qian dreamed of being back home with his family after successfully trading his goods in Kabul. It was a good dream, and he was saddened to be woken up by Xiao Lin who had been keeping watch over the donkeys and their precious goods. It was Zhang Qian's turn to watch over the camp so he made himself tea and walked out to higher ground where he could better keep watch for bandits and thieves. He did not like being alone in the dark on the edge of the camp and it was cold at night on the edge of the desert. When he had settled in the spot he had chosen to spend his watch, he made himself comfortable and drank his tea. He looked out into the darkness across the desert. He imagined the day he would return, perhaps only six months from now after good trading. He also imagined working on new silks and designs. These thoughts kept him warm as he remained vigilant over the desert landscape. The small fires outside the tents across the camp looked like candles in the night, and he could hear the quiet conversation of his fellow traders and travelers filling the quiet night air.

He must have fallen asleep after he drank his tea because, the next thing Zhang Qian knew, he was awoken to the sounds of stampeding horses and a terrible screaming and shouting coming from the darkness. His fellow traders were shouting to one another in panicked voices as they tried desperately to put out their fires and get to their donkeys. Zhang Qian shouted for his friends and ran down the sand dune towards the camp. He could see Zhu Re and Xiao Lin putting out the campfire and reaching for their weapons. They saw Zhang Qian approaching and were happy to know he was safe. Zhang Qian and his friends had heard about tribe's people called Tartars who ruled the Tartarian Empire. As far as they were concerned, the lands belonged to the Tartars and they attacked the traders who made camp in the desert when vulnerable. The nomadic empire of the Tartars were legendary and struck fear into the hearts of all traders on the Silk Road route.

A huge battle ensued during which Zhang Qian, Xiao Lin and Zhu Re fought for their lives. Two Tartars stormed into Zhang Qian's camp and stole Xiao Lin's donkey with all of percaline and precious tea. They also cut Xiao Lin's shoulder with a sword blade which caused him to fall to the ground bleeding badly. All of the traders formed groups to defend their camps and eventually the Tartars stopped their attack and disappeared into the desert as quickly as they had arrived.

The three friends looked around at the devastation created by the attack. Many of the traders had lost all of their goods to the, including Xiao Lin who was still bleeding from his shoulder. Zhang Qian added a clay patch to his friend's shoulder after treating it with alum stone and myrrh. For the rest of the night, Zhang Qian did not sleep. Instead, he kept watch over the camp and had to make the difficult decision because he was worried for his friend's safety. Xiao Lin was badly hurt and would not be able to ride with his injuries. And Zhu Re was very scared and worried he would never see his family again. There would perhaps be many more bandits along the trail before Kabul, and they would also return the same route with the traded goods and gold.

By the next morning, Zhang Qian had reached a decision. The three friends met with fellow Traders who had made camp next to them. They too had suffered injury but were determined to make it all the way to the Turkish Coast. Zhang Qian made a deal to sell the traders all of their remaining goods. He knew he and his friends would be losing some of their profits, but this morning Zhang Qian felt in his heart that it was time to return home and see his beautiful family once again. There would always be other journeys to take along The Silk Road, and other adventures to be had. But today, he felt good in his heart to be returning to his home and live to tell the tale.

Journey Through the Silk Roads: Awakening of Crawl

Wycombe Abbey School, Yick, Nigel – 12

The sun glistened overhead as Josh Smithers wandered the lively streets of China. Josh had black hair, emerald eyes, and freckles. Fascinated by Chinese history—especially the Silk Roads—he spent hours reading about them, but longed to experience the journey himself. The air was fragrant with street food, and lanterns swayed above. As he admired a silk scarf, a stranger handed him a leaflet: "Our Silk Road tour is now open. Come Join!" Excited, Josh packed his bags the night before and waited eagerly for the adventure to begin.

The next morning, Josh, running on little sleep, hurried to find the meet-up location listed on the leaflet: 11 Huanyuan Street. Not knowing the way, he called a cab. The ride seemed endless and strange, filling Josh with a sense of unease as he wondered what this adventure would truly hold.

The cab dropped Josh in a dark, foul-smelling alley. As he ventured forward, he heard thumping and glimpsed a monstrous creature—a mix of giant and rabbit. A dark figure dashed at him. Josh froze, sure he was doomed.

Suddenly, sunlight poured in, and he felt safe.

An old man with robes and what appeared to be a staff grabbed Josh by the collar and ascended to the roof of a nearby building. The old man let Josh settle down and then immediately got up and, with 2 taps of his staff, the giant-rabbit hybrid was gone. Josh was in a state of utter shock. He had seen magic. This couldn't have been a dream; it felt so real. The old man was now walking towards Josh, his long robes covering his entire body. The old man also had long white hair that dropped all the way down to his shoes and a pair of ruby eyes. "Are you hurt?" said the old man in a soft, comforting voice. "No, I'm fine," Josh said, still having trouble comprehending what had just happened. The old man then took his staff and spun it around, and in the blink of an eye, they were back on the ground. "You're probably confused. What you just witnessed was an example of what kinds of evil lurk in the world," announced the old man. "I am Diago, the wizard of Azera." Josh's head was spinning, "Um, sir—" "You can call me Dee," interrupted the old man. "May I ask what Azera is?" questioned Josh. "Ah. You're not the only one who's asked that question; many of my students thought the same when they were first introduced. Azera is a town of peace. Villagers were enjoying a life of leisure and relaxation until one day, a beast arrived." "A beast?" wondered Josh. "Yes. A beast known as Crawl," said Dee in a chilling voice. "So that thing I saw earlier, that was Crawl?" "No. That was only a minion of Crawl. No one knows for sure what Crawl looks like; it is said that if you make eye contact with it, you would vanish. We don't have much time; we need to go."

Dee raised his staff and started speaking in an unrecognisable language. It sounded like a mix of every single language. With a swirl of magic, Dee transported Josh to a grand living room, where an elderly woman greeted them with concern. She introduced herself as Eloise, Dee's wife, and gently sent Josh to a beautiful guest room to rest, saying there was much to discuss.

Josh opened the door and was met with an enormous bedroom with clean, white walls. The room smelled like jasmine, way better than what Josh had smelled in that alleyway just earlier. Josh sat on the bed, put his phone on the rough-wood bedside table, and lay down. As Josh was about to doze off, he heard a buzzing sound come from his phone. Josh jumped out of bed and picked up his phone. It was a text message from "Mom". "Josh, when will you come home from China? Dad and I are really worried about you." Josh wondered whether he should tell his mom about what had happened, or just keep it a secret. "Hi Mom, I'm doing fine, I still have a few more days in China." A creaking door sound startled Josh, he looked up to see the old woman from earlier. "Hello, your name was Josh, right? My name is Eloise, I am Dee's wife," she expressed. Josh nodded, "Yes, that's me, nice to meet you, Eloise." "Anyways, Dee told me about you. I could tell that you were curious and courageous. Those are qualities essential for what lies ahead." Josh's stomach lurched. "What do you mean?"

Eloise took a deep breath, "As Dee has already told you, Crawl intruded Azera many years ago, and..." "And what?" asked Josh, "Dee has sensed a disturbance, Crawl is aware of your arrival and is preparing his minions for war." Josh's heart raced; he felt both excited and nervous at the same time. "There are books with skills required to defeat Crawl in the library; you should go learn those ancient martial arts in case Crawl attacks early." whispered Eloise.

Josh was determined. He got out of his room, filled with energy and courage. He saw a sign past the hallway that was labelled as "Library", so he marched down and entered. The smell of old books filled up Josh's nostrils, the floor was

brown and smooth, and the bookshelves were full of books stacked together neatly. Josh thought surely, this immense haven of reading would have the answers for defeating Crawl. He went to the person at the desk and asked, "Excuse me, do you have any books on martial arts?" The short, dark-haired librarian led him to the section. The shelf was very small and dusty compared to the others; it only had 2 books in it. "Magical Martial Arts" and "Forbidden Mysterious Weapons".

Josh sat down on a plush, cushioned chair and placed his 2 books. He looked at the covers. On the "Magical Martial Arts" cover, he saw an old, cloaked man with a staff that looked exactly like Dee's, staring into a cave with a substantial dark figure lurking in the shadows. The other book's cover showed an old woman, yielding a long blade. Josh looked closer, he realised that the people on the covers matched the appearances of Dee and Eloise perfectly, the white hair, the cloaks. Josh felt a sudden tap on his shoulder, he turned around to see the librarian, pointing at the entrance of the library, not saying a word. Josh went there to see what it was.

It was Dee and Eloise; they had worried looks on their faces. "Josh! We don't have much time, Crawl has arrived!" yelled Dee. "What? I'm not ready! I haven't even finished training!" Dee tapped his staff; they were on the ground in an open grass field. Eloise handed Josh a wooden wand. "Be careful, any eye contact, and you will vanish," stated Dee. Josh couldn't believe this; it had all led up to this moment. Josh jumped as he noticed a dashing shadow in the corner of his eye. "They're here!" shouted Josh.

A cloaked figure 30 times the size of a normal human emerged from the shadows. A deep voice spoke, "You really think you have a chance against my minions and me? 2 Elderly and a little boy against the greatest beast in history, feared by all that walked upon the land!" Hundreds of giant and rabbit hybrids slowly marched out, lining up in a straight formation.

They dived at Josh, Dee, and Eloise. Josh closed his eyes, accepting death. Surprisingly, Josh was still alive. Dee and Eloise had set a forcefield around them, protecting them from the minions. The cloaked figure walked forward with heavy footsteps, each one shaking the field. It looked down at the 3 of them, as it was about to ready a magical force with its hand, Dee whispered, "Raise your wand and try to think of happiness, that's the only thing that can defeat it." The 3 of them raised their staffs and wands, charging a powerful beam with the combined happiness of all of them. The blast shot, and the Crawl was stunned for a moment. It collapsed and disintegrated into particles, disappearing into the air.

"Did we do it? We defeated Crawl!" Josh celebrated. Dee interrupted, "That is far from the truth. Unfortunately, it will be able to come back, but this will be sure to hold it off for a long time."

And so with newfound strength and courage, Josh realised that his journey had only begun. With new companions by his side, they would be ready for any difficulties that come their way. He would help Azera be safe again after all these years.

The Golden Return

Yew Chung International School of Shanghai, Davis, Emily – 12

“Eni, when will Father return?” my little brother murmurs, hugging me tighter in either fear or an unspoken plea for a logical answer.

I turn to look at him. “I don’t know, Abel.”

It has been almost three years since Father left, and we miss him terribly. Once a year, on a chosen day, he used to return with gifts from the Silk Road. Even though what he brought home were either small seashells or ancient copper coins, I didn’t mind. I held onto my wish that one day he would become a successful merchant, bringing home rich incense and shimmering pots of gold to sell for medicine for my sick mother. But these last few years have been difficult. With no letters and no sign of Father’s kind presence, it feels as though my family is slowly falling apart, bit by bit, into small, lonely specs of sand owned by an hourglass. More and more, my mind is filled with worries that he was either killed or dragged away, never to return.

We are the poor, unsuccessful family living at the edge of the village, always sadly relying on others.

That is what my family is known for. Father always gone, Mother always sick—my brother and I spend our free time begging for spare change on the dusty, unpredictable streets. Other than pleading for coins, I hardly speak to anyone unless spoken to first. One suspicious word blurted out, and I know, the gruesome bandits who stalk our village will drag me away, just as they did my neighbor the other day. Every night I sit by my windowsill, looking up at the moon, thinking, thinking, thinking if Father will ever return to us, or if Father is lost to us forever.

I realize I had been thinking to myself for too long. Abel has disappeared from his bed. I run across the creaky pinewood tiles and step out into the shadows.

“Abel?” I call out. “Where are you, Abel?”

I run through my tiny, broken-down house that I lived in ever since I was born. I search the deep, dark mouth of the village well. I look into the shops, look past the gates of the wealthy and blessed. There is no trace of my brother at all.

I look up at the full moon above and wish, desperately wish that Abel would find his way back and hadn’t been snatched away by the bandits, the horrible, cruel bandits that keep finding a way to ruin everyone’s lives one by one.

Disappointed, I trudge back to the outskirts of my hovel. At the door, surprisingly, there are lines and lines of camels and livestock, drenched in a golden veil of light coming from my house. I rush back, and I squeeze into my unexpectedly crowded doorway. At the table, I hear laughter both my Mother and Abel. A serene, joyful sound that I never heard from the two of them.

“Mother? Abel? What is all this?” I ask, my eyes taking a while to adjust.

Someone pulls me into a tight hug, and I look up. A friendly, bearded face that I have known since forever, his clothes periwinkle and gold cloth and a strong scent of rich incense.

My eyes widen, “Father?”

He smiles, “Yes, Eni. I have returned.”

Just a “Normal” Day on the Silk Road

Yew Chung International School of Shanghai, Li, Chereen – 12

Finally. He was there. The prestigious place all the townspeople dreamed of going to. He had made it. He had made it to the Silk Road.

Zhang Yue, the poor merchant hastily wiped away the beads of sweat dripping down his face with a tatty old blue handkerchief, fading in colour and dusty at the sides. He clutched the handkerchief tighter, suddenly remembering his mother’s words: “This handkerchief has been passed down for many generations, and your father and I think it is time for you to be its next successor. Don’t be afraid, and make wise decisions. One last thing before you go— make your Ma proud.” This was not only his first time out of China, but this was also his first time on the Silk Road. He didn’t know anything about people of other countries, but he still held high hopes and had dreams of connecting people of different worlds to share knowledge, goods and empathy. But he was naïve, and he had no idea of how much and how little he wished for was true.

Zhang urged himself to continue walking, despite his stomach’s desperate cries catching the attention of other travelers. He told himself: “Keep walking, until you find someone to trade with. Trade first, then food. Trade first, then food.” With his every step, the sun set lower and lower, and the fewer and fewer amount of energy he had left. When Zhang Yue thought he was going to collapse from lack of strength, he saw a merchant. He thought he must be too tired to see straight, so he rubbed his eyes, but, to his surprise, there he was— a merchant wearing a grey wool garment with a sack over his shoulder. Zhang hurried over to the man faster than someone chasing a missed flight would run.

“Hey! I see you’re also a merchant! Care to trade with me? I’m Zhang Yue from China.” said Zhang, panting as he pulled out a porcelain vase and a handful of green tea leaves from his bag.

“Oh sure, I’d love to trade with you! I’m Ardashir from Sogdia, and I have wool felts dyed crimson. What do you have to trade?” Ardashir the merchant asked politely, even bowing to Zhang as a symbol of respect.

Zhang Yue, amazed by his politeness, bowed in return, and answered him, “I would love it if you gave me the wool felts. If I give you a porcelain vase and a handful of green tea leaves, is it enough?”

“Yes, it’s enough for me. Thank you for your kindness. I’m sorry, but I must be going now.” Ardashir bowed again, put the vase and tea leaves into his sack, and walked away.

‘Such a nice person,’ Zhang Yue thought, ‘so that’s what everyone else here is like, I guess. I can’t wait to meet more people!’ Sadly, he didn’t know that his claim would be very, very, very wrong for the next merchant he would meet.

After walking a few more miles, an exhausted and tired Zhang Yue stumbled into a restaurant. He quickly ordered rice and meat without hesitation and wolfed them down as if he was someone waiting for their paycheck. Not long after, he finished his meal and continued to trek up the Silk Road.

A few moments later, he saw a rich merchant dressed in silk textiles and Zhang ran up to join him. Upon closer inspection though, Zhang Yue discovered the man not only wore a diamond necklace, he also had a ring made out of gold, something poor people like Zhang would never have the chance to touch, or not to mention even buying it.

Zhang slowly approached the man carefully, as he thought he must have some sort of authority to earn so much money. But Zhang decided it was worth the risk, as the last merchant he met was very nice and warm.

“Hello sir, would you want to trade with me?” Zhang Yue asked politely.

“Oh ho, let’s trade, young man. What’ve you got? I’m Kanishka from Sogdia.” the rich man asked.

“I’ve got green tea leaves and porcelain vases from China, sir, and my name is Zhang Yue.” Zhang replied eagerly, as he thought that the merchant would trade something expensive with him.

Even though the rich merchant acted kind and friendly, he actually wanted to exploit Zhang Yue by trading him coins that were not actually made of silver but instead made out of lead to make it seem heavy, and Kanishka also knew that porcelain was very valuable and his greediness would make him do anything to get it.

“Zhang, would you like these silver coins in exchange for one of your porcelain vases?” Kanishka asked slyly.

Kanishka let Zhang touch the silver coins, but Zhang felt that the coins didn't feel quite right. They were a bit heavier than usual, and Zhang was very sure of this as his family used to sing on the streets for money and he knew the difference between real and fake coins very well.

"Kanishka, sir, these coins don't feel quite right. Can we trade for something else?"

Kanishka, angry because his cover got blown, suddenly sneered and turned dead serious.

"I call the big shots on this road. You don't trade with me, you're in big trouble. See those horses in the distance? On top of those horses are my men, who will take you away if needed to. Now, let's play 'yes or no.'"

Zhang, scared by Kanishka's authority, said yes to the game, although he knew Kanishka was a trickster. A thought suddenly came to him: 'If Ardashir and Kanishka are both Sogdians, why is one nicer than the other? Shouldn't they all be the same?' Suddenly, his whole envision of life got turned around.

Kanishka told Zhang Yue with a sneer, "If you go through this dangerous path carrying these wagons," Kanishka paused, pointing to some wagons with cloth draped over so people couldn't see inside, "I will allow you to pass through without taking anything from you. Will you say yes, or will you stay on the Silk Road?"

Zhang Yue was about to say yes, but before he could even speak, he heard Kanishka talking feverishly with the warlord. Even though they were far away, Zhang's ears were always alert as he had to listen for foxes in the chicken coop in his house back in China. Kanishka was saying something about the route Zhang might go through was an illegal route used to smuggle illegal items and something else about the wagon that he didn't quite catch. If Zhang said yes, he might get arrested and might not ever be able to see his family again, but if he said no, he would be controlled by Kanishka and would never get out. When Kanishka finished talking to the warlord about their plan, he turned to Zhang Yue.

"So, boy, what do you choose? Yes or no?"

"I-I-I... I choose—"

Zhang's answer was cut short by the sound of Kanishka's horses.

The New Silk Road

Yew Chung International School of Shanghai, Shen, Ryan – 13

As the sun painted the sky orange, Li Daqiang breathed in the smell of the forest—it was time to begin his journey. He glanced at his wife, Zhang Ruihua, who looked fatigued. Though she was asleep, a storm of pain crossed her face, and he felt determined to return to her with a cure. With that resolve, he set off.

The journey was tougher than he had expected, uncharted lands with only animal trails and memories. Daqiang walked for days with little food, his silk robe turning into a dusty shroud. After a week, a small group of traders found him, starved. They were not Han, but Sogdians, with bright eyes and faces covered in dust. They didn't speak his language well, but they noticed a man in need, or perhaps a man who might be useful. Daqiang worked for the Sogdians, who saved him by caring for their grumpy camels. In return, the Sogdians helped him find the road to the west. He learned bits of their language, and when they met other groups—Parthian spice merchants, Bactrian wool-sellers—he listened even harder. He memorized every name, every distance between oases, the price of jade in Kashgar, and the desire for Han bronze in Merv. He wasn't just traveling west; he was building a mental map of connections. The "heavenly horses" of Ferghana were not just a tale; he discovered which clan produced the fastest ones and what they valued most in trade: silk, specifically silk of a certain weight and color.

After many months, a clear plan took shape. The Yuezhi were gone, absorbed into other empires. Yet the route to where they had been was more precious than the people themselves. Daqiang traveled back east, his goal now sharp and clear. He needed to reach Emperor Li Shimin and tell him about the routes.

Getting an audience was the next insurmountable task. He arrived in the capital, looking more like a desert wanderer than an official. The guards at the gate laughed at his story and threw him into a jail cell for vagrants. Days passed, then months. His determination kept him from despair; the image of his wife's pained face was his only light. Finally, in a desperate move, he begged a passing scribe to deliver a message to the minister of the Emperor. He still had one thing in his possession: the official knot from his original mission document, a complex weave of threads that proved his identity. The scribe, intrigued by this wild man who spoke court Mandarin, agreed.

It worked. They dragged him from the cell, washed him roughly, and brought him before a minor official, then a senior one, and finally into a side room of the palace where Emperor Li Shimin was holding a private council meeting, discussing the ongoing Xiongnu problem on the borders. Daqiang was led into the room and then he knelt, his forehead touching the cool floor.

"Rise," said the Emperor, his voice calm but heavy with authority. "They told me you are a ghost. A man sent out by my father, who got lost for years without any information. You were to find the Yuezhi."

"I was, Son of Heaven," Daqiang replied, his voice raspy from disuse. "I failed to find them as allies. But I found the weapon that will make the Xiongnu irrelevant."

The room grew quiet. A minister scoffed while the Emperor merely raised an eyebrow.

Daqiang did not mention the armies. He spoke of tariffs, silk, and horses. He pointed west with a bony finger. "The Xiongnu raid because they are poor, and they occupy the only routes they know. But there are other

paths, far to the south of their lands. I have set foot on them. I have drunk from the oases. I know the clans who control the passes. The Parthians in the west desire our silk. The Romans beyond them crave it even more, and they possess gold, glass, and strange arts. The Parthians act as middlemen. They buy our silk from the Xiongnu—approved traders for a little and sell it to Rome for a fortune."

He took a shaky breath, preparing for the most important speech of his life. "We must become our own middlemen. Not a single caravan, but a river. Establish official waystations. Offer imperial protection to any merchant carrying our seal. The tariffs will flow into your treasury, not into Xiongnu saddlebags. We can acquire the heavenly

horses of Ferghana directly and breed a cavalry faster than theirs. We can overwhelm them with wealth, not weapons. We must build a road, Son of Heaven. A road of silk.”

The silence that followed was thick. Then the ministers erupted into an argument. Some termed it genius while others called it a fantasy, a waste of resources. Throughout it all, Emperor Li Shimin observed Daqiang. He saw the fierce, desperate intelligence in the man’s eyes. He saw practicality forged from years of hardship.

When the debate quieted, the Emperor spoke. “A road of silk. An interesting idea. You have suffered much for this knowledge. What reward do you seek? A senior official post? Gold?”

This was Daqiang’s moment. He bowed his forehead to the ground once more. “No reward, Magnificent Emperor. Only a opportunity. My wife... she is sick with a painful disease. Our physicians are wise, but their knowledge ends at our borders. In Bactria, they used surgical procedures from Greek texts. In Persia, they have herbs from India that treat internal tumors. In Rome, they possess tools of steel finer than our needles. I do not seek a cure here. I seek permission to find it there. Let me oversee the first official caravans on this ‘silk road.’ My duty will be to your empire, to establish this route. But let my purpose be to send back every scroll, every remedy, every tool I find that might save her.”

The personal plea amid grand strategy stunned the court. A minister began to object about mixing state and personal matters, but Emperor Li Shimin raised his hand. He understood desperation. He recognized that this man’s love for his wife was the driving force behind his brilliant strategy. A man fueled by such private passion could be trusted to build a public road with unwavering dedication.

“Granted,” said the Emperor. “You will be the first superintendent of the western trade routes. Build my roads. And find your cure.”

The following years passed in a blur of work. Using his mental maps and language abilities, Daqiang planned, negotiated, and organized. The first protected caravans set out, and not long after, the trickle of trade turned into a flood. The Silk Road was born, altering history forever.

But for Daqiang, history was measured in small moments at home with his wife. He returned from long trips with unusual treasures: a clay pot of black paste from an Egyptian doctor, a delicate bronze scalpel from Antioch, a Sanskrit palm-leaf manuscript on the body’s energies. There was no single miracle. It was a daily battle for Ruihua, fought with new medicines, new diets, and new prayers from foreign lands.

One evening, years later, he sat by his wife’s bedside. She remained frail, but the storm of pain on her face had dissipated into a distant, manageable cloud. Ruihua could sit in the garden. She could drape a silk scarf around her neck. She could even laugh at the snorting sound of occasional camels passing by.

“You brought the world to our door,” she whispered to Daqiang.

He looked at Ruihua, then out the window at the silk banners of a passing merchant from Samarkand. He had built the empire’s greatest asset, a highway of ideas and wealth that would endure for thousands of years. But looking at her peaceful face, he knew his real creation was the quiet space he had carved out for her amidst the storm of her illness, a shelter constructed piece by piece from the hope he had gathered from the ends of the earth.

The Caravans of Two Skies

Yew Chung International School of Shanghai, Sun, Zihan – 12

The dust of the Western Road tasted of adventure and aspiration. With a heart full of dreams and a head for numbers, Lin watched as the caravans were loaded for the unknown lands of the West. Her father, Bai, was neither a wealthy soldier nor an emperor's envoy, but a shrewd merchant, and his mind held an insightful, trailblazing wonder: What if someone west of the dunes wished to wear the sunrise?

"We carry more than silk, Lin Lin," he said, his hands firm on the rope. "We carry a question into the wind, and we will not return home until we find its echo."

Their journey was a poem written in blistered feet and the polestar. They traveled across the time-scoured Taklamakan, the Desert of No Return, and climbed the auspicious Pamir's heights, the roof of the world where the sky felt close enough to touch with both hands. In the bustling, buzzing crossroads of the Samarkand, they unfurled their sheaves of silk.

What followed was not haggling, but a held breath, and a whispered wonder.

The fabric, lighter than a sigh yet stronger than it seemed, flowed through the hands of the merchants like captured sunrise. The question they carried was answered with astonished smiles and bars of glittering, unfamiliar gold.

Ever since, the caravans started coming back. Not just with gold, but with strange seeds that became grape vines, with soothing melodies played on foreign instruments, with scrolls of wisdom and bolts of dazzling wool. Chang'an swelled, prospered by a hundred faraway lands. The Silk Road was no longer a mere path, but a living bridge. For over a thousand years, it hummed with the voices of countless wayfarers and vendors, each of them finding that a well-timed flattering word and a smart barter could achieve what no sovereign's decree ever could.

(Samarkand, 1450 CE)

The bridge was fading. Omar, whose childhood lullabies were the bells of disappearing caravans, watched the last merchant from the East pack his dwindling silks. Why brave the desert? The sea routes were safer, faster. The old overland song was ending, its final notes lost to the desert wind.

"Will you come again?" Omar asked. The merchant smiled, faint as a smudged map.

"The world turns, little kid. Nothing goes on without a break forever. But remember, the road is not in the silver or the silk, it is in the wanting to know what lies beyond the horizon. That never disappears, it only slumbers."

The New Sky (2025CE)

In Xi'an, an ancient wellspring of dreams where a thousand journeys made their first promises, Lina now traces a path of a new kind of treasure, the new silk, a container of solar panels, leaving the old capital on the ribbon of steel. It flowed west, an echo of the awakened wonder along the timeworn caravan spine of Kazakhstan. Its journey was a quiet verse in a familiar song: soon it would meet the azure-veiled sea in Piraeus, the Saronic Gulf, and ascend the windswept hillside in Sagres, the verge of the world where once seafarers dreamed of other seas. Destined near the sunlit, spacious plains of the town of Ourique.

This was the new Silk Road, not a single path, but a web, connecting more than a hundred horizons. The road never truly vanished, it only rested, waiting for a world ready to listen to its story once again. The first travelers carried a question, the last carried a memory, and the new travelers carry a promise. A promise that in a changing world, the true moral lies in weaving a future, where as silk once journeyed west and wisdom traveled east, every nation has something precious to offer and a tale to learn.

Baba's Legacy

Yew Chung International School of Shanghai, Wei, Riley – 12

I remember the day my world crumbled vividly. I was writing a story on the steps in the street, watching my sisters dance, carefree, blissfully happy. Mama was in the kitchen; having finished putting a pie in the tannūr, she was working on finishing the stew in the ibrīq. My beloved baba (a successful trader on the Silk Road) had been supposed to be home in Baghdad a week before, but mama insisted that he was fine. And foolishly, selfishly, I didn't give it much thought — I assumed baba would be fine; he always was. The sun was shining brightly, mocking how oblivious I had been. I remember thinking that this would last forever. I think I wanted to be a writer. Only now do I realize how stupid I was, how young, how hopelessly optimistic.

Knock, knock, knock

The creaking of the door. The practiced, professional sympathy in the messenger's voice. "We regret to inform you that Abu Ali al-Hasan ibn Umar al-Kūfī is no longer with us."

I stopped listening after that.

Crash

Our plate fell with our dinner.

Mama's shrill scream.

My sisters' confusion.

Tears blurred my vision.

Nothing was the same after that. In the blink of an eye, we moved from our comfortable home to a shabby shack. To keep a roof over our heads, mama started working as a beautician and I started working as a laundress. My two younger sisters — too young to be good at work — helped around the house. Despite all this, we still hardly had enough to feed ourselves and often had to choose between rent and food. Gone were our comfortable, lavish robes, replaced by tattered rags. The laughter that had filled our house was replaced by heavy silence. I hated it. I hated the stench of dirt and sweat covering me. I hated working as a laundress. But most of all, I hated the fatigue and worry that plagued and dulled my once-vibrant mama, the fear and uncertainty in my sisters' eyes. Writing became my escape, my haven. It was the only time I didn't feel weighted down by my responsibilities, when I felt as free as a bird. And perhaps a naïve part of me still believed we would get our happily ever after. I would write about how we would explore the world and not have a care in it, just like our erstwhile happy days.

On one particularly miserable afternoon, three years after my father's death, I am walking home from work when I see a shady-looking man following me. He has a small scar that runs across his eyebrow and beady, suspicious eyes. Exhausted, I pay him no mind and continue along the path toward my house. Suddenly, he lunges and grabs my arm. Hard.

"Let go of me!" I demand coolly, trying to look unfazed despite the sudden quickening of my heartbeat.

"Come on. Your father never mentioned this would happen? Of course, his precious daughter never knew about his crimes," he snarls.

"No. He didn't. Who are you?" I ask, trying not to sound as confused as I am.

"You really don't know, do you? Spoiled brat. Your father was involved in our gang, and the little rat really thought he could trick us. Now he is dead, and his precious little princess will pay." The man drawls, clearly loving the idea of ripping me to pieces.

"W— what are you talking about? Who are you? What do you want from me?" I splutter, my calm façade cracking, revealing my spinning mind.

"Come with me. I will take you to our leader," he barks, leaving no room for my protests.

Before I know it I am pulled along the cobblestone path and into a dimly lit room where around two dozen pairs of eyes glare at me.

"Hello, Inan. Miss me?" A tall man with green eyes and a smile on his face greets me, far too friendly for someone who supposedly has issues with my father and wants me to pay for his supposed crimes. But wait. That face looks

familiar. I recognize the white hair and slightly crooked eyebrow and those familiar green eyes. No, no... It can't be...

"Ya 'amm Bardia?" I ask, my voice barely audible even to myself.

"Yes, my dear child, it is me," he says with a smile. Both confusion and betrayal course through me. Bardia is like a second father to me; he practically raised me and is my father's best friend. However, I haven't seen him since my father's death.

"How could you? You were my father's best friend! You were like a brother to him. If he were here now, if he knew what you were doing—"

"He would be proud," he cuts me off.

"Proud?" I stutter. Whatever I expect, it isn't that.

"Yes, proud. Your father was a brilliant bandit. He taught me everything I know about banditry," he reveals nonchalantly, as if he hasn't just turned my world upside down and made me question the legitimacy of every word my father told me. "I am so sorry he passed." He adds in a softer tone.

"You're lying. My father was a respectable merchant, not some lowlife bandit." I try to argue confidently, but I feel like I am also trying to convince myself.

"Ahh, yes, that was a terrific cover for his actual job." He winks. "And now, you shall be his successor, and I will be your mentor. He always hoped you would join," he adds. But wait. Something isn't quite right about that statement.

"Well, the man who brought me here mentioned that I am just part of some sick plan that will serve as payment for my father's supposed crimes. You really thought I was stupid enough to believe you?" I ask.

I expect rage, but instead I see his warm smile. "I am testing your observation skills. But you take after him; you have his sharp mind. I hope you can join us, and maybe one day be our leader."

This is wrong.

THIS IS BABA'S LEGACY.

I don't want to be a bandit.

BUT I DON'T WANT TO DISAPPOINT HIM.

I feel their stares on me as I stand up and open my mouth.

"I will do it," I blurt out.

"Good. I always knew you were just like him," he smiles briefly. "We need to go now. We are wanted all over Baghdad."

"But my family—" I start to argue.

"You mustn't worry about them. We will make sure they are provided for, and you will come with us in the meantime," he cuts me off. "We will travel to the deserts southwest of Baghdad. There, merchants on the silk road will enter the city. That is where we ambush them"

I know how heavily merchants and their families depend on trade, and it goes against everything I believe in to hurt that. But I desperately miss my father, and this is the only thing I have left of him. So, I nod and straighten my back, not wanting to disappoint Ya'amm Bardia or my father. He passes me a shawl, explaining that it will be cold. As I walk out of the room, I notice a copy of the Quran sitting on top of a table and grab it as well. I smile as I remember Mama reading it to us every night before Baba's death. She teaches me everything despite girls not being technically supposed to be literate.

When we prepare to go out, Ya'amm Bardia explains how we will hide out in the desert, then rob the unfortunate merchants who cross the path and disappear into the desert with the stolen goods. I smile, but inside my heart tightens and my jaw clenches at the thought of robbing innocent people.

Later that night, as I ride on horseback alongside the rest of the gang, I feel my heart pounding. As I look upon the vast expanse of the desert in the moonlight with nothing in sight but sand, I feel oddly hollow.

This isn't the life I want to live; it isn't too late to run away, a part of me whispers.

DON'T BE SELFISH, DO THIS... FOR BABA. the angry, hurt part chides back.

Remember the Quran, remember Mama, do not hurt others, the kind part of me reminds me.

"Hi? Hello, Inan?" Ya'amm Bardia's voice snags me back from my daydream. I look up and my blood goes cold.

Lanterns bob over the next dune — the caravan we are meant to ambush. For a blink I can't breathe. Then I see it, unmistakable even in the moonlight — Mama's shawl, hooked to a pack horse, the same frayed corner she always

wears. A child's laugh rises from the group, a sound I know as well as my own name. Bardia nudges me forward, smiling, and all at once the choice I have been avoiding slams into me.

The Road Beyond the Maps

Yew Chung International School of Shanghai, Yang, Sean – 12

Xuanzang realized he was lost when the sun rose in the wrong place.

For weeks, he had walked with the morning light on his left shoulder, heading toward India to seek the Buddha's true teachings. Yet now, as he climbed the dunes, the sky burned ahead of him.

He stopped and pressed his palms together.

"Perhaps," he whispered, "the road has turned. Or my heart has."

Behind him, the desert rolled like a golden sea. In front, a thin line of dark shapes moved across the sand. Camels. A caravan.

Xuanzang hurried forward, his worn sandals sinking into the sand. As he came closer, he saw tall, bearded men in long robes and white turbans. Their camels carried bales of silk, baskets of dates, and jars sealed with wax.

One of the men raised a hand. "Peace be upon you, traveler! You will die alone in this desert if you walk without a caravan."

Xuanzang bowed. "I am a monk from the Great Tang. My name is Xuanzang. I seek Buddhist scriptures in India. But... I have lost my way."

The man laughed, a deep, friendly sound. "Then you have found us instead. I am Farid, of Samarkand. We follow the Silk Road. Today, our road goes west."

"West?" Xuanzang's heart sank. "But India lies to the south."

"Perhaps." Farid shrugged. "The wind and market call us west. Come. Ride with us. If we reach the next city, you may find someone who knows your path. Alone, you will find only sand."

Xuanzang hesitated. He vowed to reach India, not to wander farther from it. But his throat was dry, and his legs shook. The desert did not care about vows.

He pressed his palms together again. "Then I will travel with you, Farid, until the road divides."

Farid pulled him up onto a camel. The beast lurched, and Xuanzang grabbed the saddle in surprise. Farid laughed again.

"Do not fear. The camel knows the desert better than any of us."

As the caravan moved, Xuanzang watched the people around him. Men spoke in unknown languages. Women walked with baskets balanced on their heads. The air smelled of sweat, dust, and spices.

"Farid," Xuanzang asked, "what do you trade?"

"Many things," Farid replied. "Silk from your Tang. Jade from Khotan. Spices from India. We bring back silver, cloth, and stories." His eyes shone. "Stories are the lightest cargo and hardest to forget."

They traveled until the sun was high, then stopped beside a grove of low, dusty trees as the heat grew heavy.

Suddenly, a man's voice rang out, musical and long. The traders stood, washed their hands and faces with water from skin bags, then lined up shoulder to shoulder facing the same direction.

“What are they doing?” Xuanzang asked.

Farid smiled. “We are Muslims. We pray to Allah, the One God, five times a day. Now is the noon prayer.”

He invited Xuanzang to sit with him at the edge. Xuanzang watched as the men bowed and rose in a graceful rhythm.

Their devotion was like that of Buddhists in Chang’an’s temples. Different words, different movements, but the same idea.

When the prayer ended, Farid brought him flat bread, dates, and roasted lamb. Xuanzang took only a little.

“I am a monk,” he explained. “I should not eat meat.”

Farid’s brow furrowed. “In the desert, food is life. Forgive us—we have little else today.”

Xuanzang looked at the circle of tired, thirsty faces around him. He remembered the Buddha’s teaching of compassion and the Middle Way—rules must not crush kindness.

He bowed. “Then, for today, I will accept your gift with gratitude.”

Farid’s smile returned. “You honor us, Xuanzang.”

Days passed. The caravan wound through the Taklamakan Desert, where dunes rose like frozen waves. Sometimes they saw animal skeletons half-buried in sand. Once, Xuanzang spotted a bleached human skull staring at the sky.

At night, they camped under stars like silver nails hammered into a blackboard. Farid pointed to constellations and told stories of prophets and travelers. In return, Xuanzang spoke of the Buddha’s life, leaving a palace to seek truth, meditating under the Bodhi tree.

“A man who leaves everything for truth,” Farid said softly, “is honoured in any faith.”

In an oasis city ringed with mud-brick walls, Xuanzang met Layla, a young Muslim guide with quick eyes and a dagger at her belt.

“I know these roads,” she said when Farid introduced them. “I can help you reach lands beyond Persia, if you wish to go west.”

“I want to go south,” Xuanzang said. “To India.”

Layla shrugged. “Then you should not have come this far west.”

“I did not mean to.”

Her eyes softened. “Many travelers think they hold the map, but the road chooses. Still, I will guide you.”

With Layla leading, they moved rapidly. In one town, a Buddhist stupa rose beside a Zoroastrian fire temple and a small mosque, with women wearing veils of Tang silk dyed in imperial colors.

Months passed.

“You are far from Chang’an now,” Layla said. “Beyond these lands lies Byzantium—Constantinople. Where two seas meet, where Asia touches Europe. All trade roads pass through it.”

“But... that is farther from India than ever.”

Farid placed a hand on his shoulder. “If you wish to know how teachings travel, what better place than the Silk Road’s western market?”

Maybe, he thought, wisdom can be found in the wrong direction.

“Very well, I will go to Byzantium.”

Months later, Xuanzang stood on a hill. Before him spread a great walled city.

Domes and spires pierced the sky. He saw a building with a shining dome—Hagia Sophia, Layla said, a church. Nearby rose small mosques with slender towers, built by Muslim traders.

“Two great faiths meet here,” Farid said. “Now your own has arrived, in you.”

Within the city, markets resounded with voices in Greek, Arabic, Persian, and other tongues. Chinese silk hung beside Persian carpets; Indian spices sold next to Roman glassware.

Xuanzang felt dizzy. “My homeland is far,” he murmured, “yet it is here. Our silk, our jade, carried by hands I have walked with.”

Farid guided him to a quiet quarter, a Muslim scholar named Yusuf hosted them in a stone house shaded by a fig tree.

Yusuf welcomed Xuanzang with food and cushions. “We have heard of the wandering Chinese monk.”

Evenings they sat under the tree. Yusuf brought scrolls in Arabic and Greek, speaking of how Muslim scholars collected books from many lands: Greek philosophy, Persian astronomy, Indian mathematics.

“Our faith tells us to seek knowledge,” Yusuf said. “The Prophet said, ‘Seek knowledge even if it is as far as China.’”

“China is my home. You seek it already in your books and goods.”

“And you,” Yusuf replied, “have brought China here in your stories and presence.”

He unrolled a map, showing the world as ancient geographers knew it.

“Here,” Yusuf said, tapping the margins, “men write ‘unknown lands.’ That is where Tang lies. Beyond the ink, the Silk Road pulls us toward it—through stories, trade, pilgrims like you.”

Xuanzang leaned over the map. “I meant only to reach India. Instead, I have come west. I have failed.”

“Have you?” Yusuf’s eyes were kind. “On this road, have you learned nothing of suffering, compassion, how different faiths live together?”

“I have seen Muslims pray devoutly, Christians light candles for saints, caravans where Buddhists and Zoroastrians share bread.” Xuanzang’s voice trembled. “I have seen the human heart seek truth in many tongues.”

“And you think this knowledge is less than palm-leaf scriptures from India?”

Xuanzang was silent.

Over the next weeks, Yusuf introduced him to Christian monks copying Greek scriptures, Jewish scholars debating law. Xuanzang listened, comparing their questions to those of Buddhist monks in Chang’an. He saw patterns: the same search, same doubts, painted in different colors.

One autumn evening, Xuanzang climbed a hill outside the walls.

Farid stood beside him. “What will you do now, Xuanzang? Chase India still?”

Xuanzang watched a caravan enter the gate, camels bending under silk and spices. He touched his dust-stained robe.

“At first,” he said slowly, “I wanted fixed scriptures. But here, at the Silk Road’s end, I see teachings do not stand still. They travel.”

He turned to Farid. “Perhaps what I bring back to Chang’an is not books, but understanding. The Buddha taught compassion—how can I practice it if I close my eyes to other faiths?”

“Will you return, then?” Farid asked.

“Yes.” Xuanzang smiled. “I will go east along the Silk Road. Visit the cities, share what I have seen, listen to seekers and traders. I will collect no scrolls—only stories and questions.”

“Then you carry a new kind of scripture.”

He stepped onto the eastward road next morning.

This time, Xuanzang did not ask if he was going the right way.

Wherever the Silk Road led, he carried its lessons within him. And that, too, was a scripture worth bringing home.

Parting is Such Sweet Sorrow

Ying Wa Girls' School, Coney, Choi Wan Lam Kirsten – 14

“Hang on there buddy,” mumbled a Chinese merchant, “the next stop is just over there,” pointing over to a random wall that seemed far, surely visible yet miles away. Tianyu groaned, his teeth colliding into his lower lip, adjusting his shoulder pole. The loads on the pole dragged him down but he pushed himself up harder. His eyes roamed around his foreign surroundings, mysterious, hilly, but bright. He pulled his feet up, step by step, closer and closer he was to paradise.

As he looked up, peculiar faces greeted him. Ones that he was told were foul, monstrous creatures, with bushy beards and frizzy fur. But what he saw was different— aquiline noses with dorsal humps, striking and prominent cheekbones and an intense, spiritual gaze. One face stood out particularly, the only gaze that didn’t reply to the Chinese. There was Aphrodite in human form; long brown waves, luscious red lips, mysterious glowing orbs.

Tianyu gasped, while extending his greetings to the Roman merchants who acted with grace. Their eyes sparkled as he stared them down, respectfully. Brushing across his ears was unknown gibberish that sounded patterned but illogical. He could distinct some greetings and shows of appreciation through the minimal knowledge he had in Latin. Though his busy ears, his eyes only cared about one person, Lavinia, daughter of a Roman merchant.

Upon arriving at the caravanserai with the rest of the merchants, he sighed in relief as his shoulders were finally free from burden. In his next breath, his fantasies came true. Lavinia, standing next to him, with her coruscating aura and simple nature. She could sense his staring, and immediately looked back at him and shot him a knowing smile that hit him like bullets. And he reciprocated, reacting as if it were actual bullets, with the look of love and a tremble crawling up his smile. Lavinia seemed to have caught up on his nervous demeanour, her eyes glinting. She had always known she was pulchritudinous, and to have someone of foreign territory to think the same made her feel honored.

At the same time, their eyes widened as they had gotten a taste of the forbidden fruit; and realized that they would never be able to talk with each other. She did not speak his language, nor did he speak hers. The only way they could communicate was through their hearts.

Was that enough? Definitely not. She knew that was the unfortunate truth and planned to savour the moment. She gave a long, detailed look. Phoenix eyes, straight nose, heart lips, oriental features that were out of the blue, but unique in their own way. Her grip involuntarily opened up as it longed for contact. Tianyu looked down, then looked back up to seek approval. She gently nodded with a bewitching grin that melted him.

“Thud,” their hands met. Palm in palm, fingers interlocked, tangled in mixed feelings. Lavinia thought, “is this what love is?” Her confidence faltered for a split second, it was the first time she had ever experienced anything like this, something so forbidden but mind-blowing. Tianyu could sense her inner turmoil, and he leaned in— not for a kiss but to observe her closer. What he saw behind those watery orbs was affection, love but shining a gleam of fear. It was the fear of separation— after this moment, they disappear from the other completely, eternally.

The staring continued for seconds, then minutes, but failed to make it to an hour despite feeling like no time had passed. “Let’s get going!” cried one of the Chinese. Lavinia understood nothing he said but knew it signified their eternal farewell. Oh how parting is such sweet sorrow, their red cheeks, eyes of yearn and glow of love. But this was unavoidable, they were never meant to be. Separated thousands of miles with no way of communication, how love is a cursed spell.

Tianyu sighed and got up. He turned his head and his body followed. Lavinia watched him, and he never looked back. Never, ever, again.

The Echo of the Desert Caravan

YK Pao School Shanghai, Wang, Zi Fan Jaydon – 12

Dawn filled the day as sunlight seeped into the clouds, casting a warm light around me. I sat on a chair, its legs creaking every time I shifted position. The light of the morning sun warmed the Earth and cast a glow to my wrinkled face and bony fingers. I had woken up this early specifically to see sunrise. Because it reminded me of a memory from my youth that I would never forget. I closed my eyes as I recalled that piece of unforgettable memory, sharp and clear.

The air shimmered with heat as the camels trotted and grunted. The creaking of the carriage wheels, along with the occasional chirp of a bird, filled the otherwise silent air. I lifted open the cloth that was draped over the window of the carriage and peered outside. We had been travelling for days on this new, phenomenal, trade route that would later be named the silk road. It's a fantastic rise of efficiency compared to the past, when our ancestors passed down goods to other traders until they reached a specific destination whilst hoping that their items wouldn't get lost or stolen. There was practically no way of transporting things from one place to another in one go. It was inefficient. It was insecure. I grinned, admiring the sophisticated, stable system we have now. We really took it for granted these days. Everything was easier.

The carriage stopped at a checkpoint for the camels to rest. I groped my way through the carriage, and felt my fingers close around a wooden box with a smooth, polished exterior. My fingers trembled as I lifted its cover. The interior of the box was covered with velvet. It felt smooth and silky. However, what's inside the box made the presentation pale in comparison. A jade amulet that always caught the light at perfect angles, reflecting arcs of light that made the jewel seem translucent. It was the work of years of craftsmanship from the most talented jewelers. And we were giving it away as a courtesy gift to the Emperor of Rome. We, the traders, were reluctant to gift such a beauty to the Emperor of Rome, but it's supposedly crucial for our future alliance. We carried a huge burden of keeping this safe, and somehow, I was entrusted with the honor of transporting and presenting this piece of otherworldly jewel to the Roman Emperor. Me, of all people. Probably because I knew the foreign language of the Roman Empire, which was Latin. There were officials of higher rank than me, but the Han Emperor Wu entrusted this job to me. I still felt the giddy excitement of bearing that honor. All I must do was to keep this safe, present this to The Emperor of Rome, and I would get a promotion with a bonus of chests of gold. It was easy as that. At least that was what I thought.

The journey continued, the carriage rattling from the pebbles on the rough ground. It was silent, save the crunching of stones under the creaking carriage wheels. The air smelled damp and musty. We passed the Taklamakan desert. We were nearing our destination. That was when everything went wrong. The sound of a new set of hooves covered the slow trot of the camels. Horses. Lots of them.

I barely had time to contemplate what had happened when one of our guards shoved the polished box into my arms and barked orders at the other merchants.

"Keep it safe.", he told me. "Hide it. Put that box in the tin of tea to conceal it. Hurry." I nodded; my words were stolen from me. I stuffed the box inside a tea tin, just as the guard told me to. I then felt my own hands pinned behind my back. A burly man grinned and growled in a gruff voice.

"Sorry, petty official", he said in a mocking tone. "Looks like this place is going to be our campsite tonight!" The man then barked a laugh and went to celebrate with his lackeys. We could hear their drunken cheers as they celebrated their victory. Our guards and the other traders were tied up, except for me. Because they thought I was weak. That I'm a person that's all brains and no muscle. It's true. And I could use that to my advantage.

There were bandits guarding each caravan, so freeing my fellow merchants and the guards seemed like an impossible task. That left only one option: to bargain for our freedom. I slowly got up and approached the bandits. I then spoke in a clear voice devoid of the fear I was hiding.

"I wish to make a proposal", I said in a near commanding tone, one of pure authority. The bandits roared with laughter and slapped their thighs, as if what I had said was merely entertainment for them. However, I pressed on. "I want to trade with you. I know you could take our goods and disappear to where you came from, and this offer might seem useless. But think about this: if our mission fails, if we cannot forge an alliance with Rome, and

Emperor Wu learns you are the cause, he will hunt you to the very ends of the Earth. Never forget that. Unless you want to spend the rest of your days rotting in a prison. Think carefully. Stealing will only get you so far. Raid and steal from every caravan that passes by, and sooner or later, you will be caught. You have tons of mouths to feed,” I added, gesturing to his lackeys huddled around a distant fire, “and thievery will never promise them that every meal will grant them a full belly. Trade with us, and you can become our partners. You could live and make money completely free of guilt. Consider my offer. Think about it carefully.”

I let the proposal hang in the air, and turned around, my back facing the bandits.

“Hey. Come back here”, The leader of the bandits called out, his voice stripped of its taunting brutishness. It was now serious. The plan was working. We might have a chance, after all. I turned around, and found myself staring at the leader, who was deep in thought. The shadow of the campfire the bandits had started flickered across his face, and the tension between us was so thick I could cut it with a knife. Then, he responded, his voice a low rumble over the crackling of the flames and the silent night. “I agree to this deal of yours.” I resisted the urge to whoop with joy at the success, but forced my voice into a calm monotone, acting as if I was bored of this whole ordeal and that I would rather continue with my journey instead of bargaining with them.

“What do you have to offer? We’ll give you tea for it. And food”, I said, whilst rummaging through the tins of tea, whilst checking if there were any scuffs or scratches on the box that held the jewel. If they had seen this, they would’ve lost all heart to trade with us and instead sell this to the black market for heaps of gold. This jewel was worth the wrath of our emperor. It signifies the bond of two countries. It’s practically priceless. I closed the tin of tea, a handful of dried tea leaves resting on my palm. I scattered them into the pot of water boiling over the fire. The leader of the bandits leaned over me with curiosity, his shadow looming in front of me.

“The scent is rather intriguing. And pleasing. My hometown produces glass beads. But because it’s somewhat secluded, so we couldn’t sell them out, but I promise you are going to be satisfied with it. I think we’ll call it a deal”, the leader of the bandits mused.

“Very well. After I head to the Roman Empire and return, I will trade food and tea for your glass beads. It would be pleasant to introduce it to the market.” I spoke. “I will leave one carriage of high-quality silk here, worth thousands of silver coins. I will mortgage it until I return. You wouldn’t need to worry. I look forward to working with you again.” I opened the door of the carriage that held the silk. The Leader reached in and felt the silk, his eyes glinting. “This carriage of silk could feed us for half a year, he said, his voice trembling. I then handed him some tins of tea and he reluctantly untied the ropes that held the merchants captive. The merchants sighed in relief, wiping the sweat on their brow, and hopped into the carriages. After dawn arrived and the warm sunlight broke the sky with a burst of warm color, we were sent on our way to continue our journey to the Roman Empire.

Creative Writing
Fiction

Group 3

The Lament of the Silk Road

G.T. (Ellen Yeung) College, Hui, Allyson – 14

I, the great Silk Road of China, ancient and magnificent, weave through vast deserts and towering mountains, bridging the East and the West. People call me mighty for the fortune I bring and the connections I foster between nations. They worship me like a god, carving my name into histories and praising everything I embody.

Every day, I witness countless traders passing by. The shimmering silks and delicate pottery, the smell of perfumes and spices, and the animated cries of traders fill the air. Camels laden with treasures stomp impatiently, while porters march alongside. The porters comfort their camels of burden and follow the traders who clutch handfuls of coins. As soon as they spot their precious find, they let out an exclamation. In the blink of an eye, the trader claims his treasure, leaving the seller with a handful of coins. This is what I observe every day.

Yet, as I bask in the honor bestowed upon me by the people, I feel neither pride nor joy. Others never understand. They scoff at me for being ungrateful, but they do not see what I have seen. They are oblivious to the tales of sorrow lying behind my glory. I watch the traders, coins spilling from their hands, their camels' backs laden with goods. They ride in sedan chairs, sheltered from the burning sun, avoiding all the rugged paths that I bear. Meanwhile, porters march in silence—some with bruised hands, others stained with their own blood. Beneath the relentless sun, their breaths grow heavy as they struggle to keep up. If I had a heart, it would be pierced with wounds carved by their deplorable sighs. Yet, I am just a road. How vast and mighty I am, yet I cannot help.

In the night, the moon rises above me, casting silvery light upon my stones. Porters, finally able to get some rest, gaze at the round, radiant, yet distant moon. Tears fall down their faces, shimmering in the darkness. Yes, they may be strong and able to trek across rugged terrains; however, the prolonged parting from their loved ones carves wounds deeper than any stone or desert. They miss the growth of their children, the time with their parents, and the warmth of home. In the dark, I hear them pray to the moon for reunion, their voices trembling in the wind. Yet the night remains silent, offering them only a shiver of sorrow.

Often, I witness weak porters collapse on my land, some never to rise again. Their comrades mourn their loss, but the traders turn a blind eye. They command them to quicken their pace. Slowly, their cries of grief fade away with the wind, leaving only the sounds of coins clinking and traders' laughter behind.

Porters fade from memory, their names lost to time, while the traders are remembered and celebrated. And I, the Silk Road, embody both magnificence and sorrow. My stones remember every step taken, every lament.

Why is it called The Silk Road?

G.T. (Ellen Yeung) College, Kwok, Rane – 14

The Silk Road earned its name from Chinese silk. The Silk Road is defined as a vast network all over the land and sea routes connecting East and West for centuries, from Han Dynasty China to the Roman Empire and beyond. In 1600–1046BC, Zhou and Han dynasties mastered producing several kinds of products that were important and unique, that the West was interested in and the products were greatly prized there, such as silk, porcelain, and paper. Then how did it happen? At some point during the 1st century BCE, silk was introduced to the Roman Empire, since it was considered an exotic luxury. It became extremely popular, it illustrates its importance as a royal fabric and an important source of revenue for the crown. Thus, this luxury item was one of the early impetuses for the development of trading routes from Europe to the Far East. So Han emperor Wu sent Zhang Qian to the west, and the journey became one of history's greatest voyages of exploration. Which Zhang and his 100 men journeyed to the western end.

From there he ventured towards the notorious Taklamakan desert, which he was told by the localist that if Zhang went into the place, then he wouldn't be able to come out alive. Then Zhang found a way around the Taklamakan by travelling between the remote oases which skirted the desert. The next thing he had to deal with was the high passes over the Tian Shan mountains to Ferghana. The whole time, Zhang was in danger from Xiongnu. He was taken as a prisoner twice, and one of these periods of captivity was to last for over ten years! I was impressed by how long it took. Finally, after 13 years of adventure and hard travelling. Zhang Qian and one man left managed to make it back to Chang An when the Emperor Wu-di had long given hope for Zhang and his expedition, believing that they were all dead. Zhang reports revealed opportunities for trade and interactions, officially opening the route. Even though Zhang Qian wasn't the first person to travel across the mountains to the west. This route had almost certainly been used by occasional traders for several centuries. But it was Zhang Qian who discovered the potential for trade with the west, thus laying the foundations for what was eventually to be known as the Silk Route.

The Chinese power spread across the entire Yarin Basin. So the Caravans could safely journey through the region and traders soon began to explore the new route to trade for the silk by jades. Then the west bound traders discovered silk was popular in the West, soon they opened a new route of the Pamir Mountains. And it was a positive outcome such as cucumbers, grapes and other foods. As time went by, more and more silk roads were found. There are 2 important Silk Road paths from Merv went through Nisa and Sarakhs. They joined together in Masshad, a big city in Khurasan. The Silk Road extended westwards from the ancient commercial centres of China, the overland, divided into northern and southern routes bypassing the Taklamakan Desert and Lop Nur. There are a few routes such as the south western route, Maritime route, etc. Many things were traveled such as goods, ideas/techs, culture, and diseases. The Silk Road was used for over 1500 years until the mid-15th century, it was closed when the Ottoman Empire boycotted trade. But it was revived in 2013, and it quickly became the biggest international trade project in world history, with 150 countries becoming involved. With the Silk Road, we can have enhanced trade and logistics, Economic cooperation, and global governance. The most important thing is the culture exchange, it brought immensely benefits by spreading religions, technologies, arts, ideas, etc. enriching societies with new knowledge and practices, promoting mutual learning and development across the world.

The Silk Road wasn't just a trade route but a dynamic network that connected diverse peoples, fundamentally shaping the historical development and interconnectedness of civilizations across the world. But the Silk Road also brought disadvantages including severe environmental hazards, significant risks from bandits and pirates, the high cost and complexity of long distance trade with many intermediaries, and last but not least, the devastating spread of the disease causing massive deaths tolls and economic collapse, what are the diseases? It was Plagur(Black death), smallpox, leprosy and anthrax, and intestinal parasites. Overall the Silk Road was a double-edged sword, bringing prosperity alongside significant risks and societal disruptions, including pandemics and conflict.

The Silk Road

G.T. (Ellen Yeung) College, Yip, Jane – 12

I slung my coat over the rack while kicking off my shoes. The faint smell of burned breakfast still lingered in the air. The old couch creaked under my weight as I grabbed the sticky remote. My fingers flicking through the familiar channels before I finally land on the one about the Silk Road. I almost laughed at the irony. We'd always wanted to travel by the Silk Road. It was one of my daughters' obsessions. She would talk about going to see the Chinas terra-cotta army Uzbekistan Bukhara's great fortress and so on. I promised her we'd go one day. I promised her and I couldn't keep it.

On the next day, I arrived at the center again. Same place. Same time. Same receptionist. Same chair. Same questions from the same therapist.

"How have you been holding up?"

"Well"

"Do you still have those nightmares"

"Mnhm"

"Have you met anyone recently? A friend maybe?"

"No"

She sighed and gave me that disgusting look of pity. "Joe, I understand that their deaths had a massive impact on you, but it's been 3 years already. You can't just keep hiding from the world and pushing everyone away. You need closure to fully heal from this."

I scoffed in annoyance. "You don't know me ok? Maybe I don't want to move on and I certainly don't need any closure or whatever. Your job is to make me feel better can't you just give me some pills?"

"Mr. Reed this is therapy not a doctors appointment I can't just give you some pills and send you on your way."

She said matter of facts.

"Well your useless to me then." I spit out.

I slammed the door shut as I leave. Storming out the building before she can stop me. Rain trickled from the grey sky, leaving me cold and wet as I quickly climbed onto the bus. I slumped onto a seat by the back of the bus, and immediately took the picture out of my wallet to make sure it's not wet. Two faces stared back at me.

My wife was wearing that beautiful blue summer dress that brought out the green in her eyes. Her blond hair was tied back into a messy ponytail as she smiled at the camera. Her two dimples reminded me of first time I saw her laugh. Holding her hand stood a little girl smiling bashfully as her ice cream dripped from the cone to her hand. Her brown hair stuck to her nose where her ice cream had touched. I smiled at the photo and hugged it to my chest before quickly putting it back into the safe space of my wallet.

I'd go there for them. Not for closure or whatever, but for them. For the dream they never got to experience.

A few months later, I boarded the plane to China to start my journey. The moment I landed, the sounds of an unfamiliar language entered my ears. The air smells of cigarettes and the heat made me sweat and my hands clammy as I boarded the train to Xi'an. First stop, the Terracotta Army. A place where me and my wife had always wanted to go but always put off. There was always some excuse. We had to focus on our work; we just got married and had to settle first, our daughter was too young. So many excuses for something we should've done years ago before fate snatched her away from me. I force myself to blink hard before the heat reaches my eyes.

As the train slowed to a stop, I got on a bus that could take me there. I sat on the seat by the aisle. It was a habit. My wife would sit by the window because she loved the views. My daughter would sit in the middle because she

wanted to be between her parents. I sat by the aisle because I always needed to go to the bathroom. It was a perfect seating plan for wherever we'd go.

When the bus finally slowed down, the sight of local stalls and warrior themed stores for tourists greeted me. The air was bustling with laughter and bargaining, filling the air with a cheerful atmosphere. As I walked down aisles and aisles of terracotta warriors. I found that no two warriors were the same and it truly shocked me on the amount of dedication the sculptors had. I took a picture of a warrior my wife would've found funny and went to a nearby shop to print it out. I placed it next to the picture of my wife and daughter.

The next stop was Uzbekistan Bukhara's great fortress. This was a place my daughter had always dreamed of going to, if only the trip was a few days earlier, maybe she wouldn't have killed herself. Before the car crash that killed her mother, it was all she could talk about. How it was the most underrated place, the history of it, how it was basically a city within a city.

As I stared up at the imposing walls, I finally understand why she was so obsessed with it. The walls were beautifully curved, like small imperfect hills in a land of desert. The entrance was a beautifully detailed arch. It's beige and white colours were the perfect combination for that calming effect. I took pictures of things she would've liked, the murals, walls and even a cute dog walking around.

And it was in that moment, I finally felt like I was at peace. I breathed in the fresh air. Snippets of memories floated through my mind: Sunday breakfasts at the restaurant down the street, the board games we'd play whenever we were stressed, the Mondays when I'd taken my daughter grocery shopping, and the cute hideaway by the lake when my wife and I needed some time alone. That was what my therapist was talking about. The closure that I needed was to be in the presence of my family. Even though they're no longer here with me, the Silk Road reminded me that all I needed was the little memories of them in my heart.

The Road That Never Ends

G.T. (Ellen Yeung) College, Yu, Vania – 13

The wind chimes kept ringing outside my window, their soft, silvery notes dancing through the air like echoes from old times. I sat still, my eyes can't let go on the open history book in front of me. The pages were filled with stories of the Silk Road. Oh I wish I can witness the birth of Silk Road. As I turned to another page, something awkward happened, the fresh air surrounding me turned to dusty and sandy, I looked around. I was in the ancient times!

A hot and dry breeze brushed my cheeks. The temperature was a dragon's breath. It was like staying in an oven. I opened my eyes. Thousands of camels appeared. They blended perfectly with the golden desert, acting as a whole. Their back carried products to different places. They are not only carrying products, but also the reputation of Silk Road, second to none. Their legs stepping on the eternity sand ground, stomping a rhythm for the ancient era. I closed my eyes and visualised as if I was a wind, blowing every grain of golden sand, feeling the grand project——
—Silk Road

The golden sand was like the fragments of time, bringing me to the future 2080. The desert that was a just then transformed to skyscrapers, touching the rebel blue sky. In 2080 the legend was still continuing. However, the camels changed to different high tech planes and cars. The plane was silver and with streamlined shape. The plane was with cutting edge technology. The lighting speed prompted the development of Silk Road to a next level. All the products were neatly place in the vehicle. Every single second was not wasted. The running of the engine was the heartbeat of the Silk Road. With every pound, it pumped through boundless horizon and the centuries of Silk Road .

'Cling! Cling!' The sound of wind chimes rang again, bringing me back to the reality 2026. I gazed at the history book on my desk. Will the Silk Road continue? The modern and high efficiency I saw just now was out of that world. The future was bright as a day. I looked out the window. I looked at the azure sky, and smiled. Maybe one day, the vision I saw would become reality. I believed that the journey would never end. It would only change its form. I trusted that legends would never die and continue to write its unique chapter.

New Tales of China's Silk Road

HD Beijing School, Chen, David – 14

The story starts in Chang'an at dawn, with the light hitting the walls in golden patches and deep shadows. Bob is this young merchant guy with his hair tied back in a red cord, fiddling with his pack by the big gates. He's got James next to him—the boy with mixed heritage, Chinese and Central Asian—checking the camel saddle. His eyes look excited, like warm jade or something.

"Are you sure about this?" Bob says, sounding a bit nervous. The Silk Road is tough, not for weak people.

James laughs, kind of like chimes in the wind. He says his dad traded these paths forever, and the best stuff is always out past what you can see. So they take their camel, Kamil—a sturdy one—and head out through the gates into whatever is coming.

They follow the Wei River first, past farmers in wheat and millet fields. People in the villages watch them go by, dressed in silk from China mixed with wool from farther away. Bob feels proud carrying his family's goods: silk bolts, porcelain vases, those small bronze mirrors. James has herbs for medicine, woven carpets, and jars of that mare's milk his mom showed him how to ferment.

As they keep going west, things get rockier, hills instead of flat land, and the air dries out. They hook up with a caravan from Persia and Sogdia, bells on the camels jingling quietly. The leader, Karim—old and rough-looking—tells them about bandits and storms in the sand.

"Stay close," he warns. "The desert won't let mistakes slide."

Bob listens that night under all those stars. Merchants whisper about some big empire to the south, past the mountains, with gold temples, spices that fix anything, and people with earth-colored skin.

"India," James says, his eyes going wide. "Dad talked about it—cities like in dreams."

Maybe that's where the real trade is, Bob thinks, curiosity hitting him.

Then bandits come the next morning. Shouts and swords clashing wake everyone. Bob grabs his own sword to protect the goods, but he's no fighter. One lunges at him, blade shining. Bob just freezes there.

James knocks him down, tackling him hard. "Stay down!" he yells, pulling a dagger quick. He moves like he's dancing almost—fast and sure. The bandit backs off, surprised, and Karim with the others chase them away.

"You saved me," Bob says later, still catching his breath on the ground.

James pulls him up steady. "Partners do that—look out for each other."

The caravan is rattled afterward. Some merchants head home. But Bob and James push on, taking a side path south with Karim's map. It's rough, crossing those high mountains with snow, the air thin and the wind biting through their clothes. There are narrow spots where one wrong step and you're gone.

One night, huddling close for heat, Bob sees James shaking. "Cold?" he asks, throwing his cloak over him.

"No—scared," James admits softly. "What if there's no empire? What if we die here?"

"We won't," Bob says, squeezing his hand. "We've come this far already. Even without it, we've seen more than folks back home."

James smiles a little—a real one. "Yeah. Better to explore and risk than stay stuck."

A month later, they hit the Indus River—wide, blue water—with villages of mud houses along the banks. Locals stare but seem friendly. James knows some Sanskrit words and talks to a farmer who points east to a big city, the capital of this Maurya Empire under a strong king.

“They trade with everyone there,” he says, his eyes respectful. “Lots of buyers for you.”

Following the river east, their hopes rise again. The land turns green, with rice and sugarcane fields everywhere. Forests hold elephants tusked like ivory, tigers striped black and orange, and peacocks blue and shiny.

Then Pataliputra—finally. Nothing like it. Wide stone streets, bazaars full of hagglers from Egypt, Greece, Persia. Palaces of wood and brick with lion and elephant carvings. The air is full of cinnamon, cardamom, and cloves, with music and laughter everywhere.=

They set up a stall, showing silk and porcelain. Indians love the silk’s feel and the patterns on the vases. They trade spices, gems, and ivory for Chinese things. Bob deals with a rich merchant and gets a gold offer for a silk shipment.

James wanders the city by day, seeing the stupa dome with Buddha carvings. Monks in orange chant and give to beggars. He tries cooking local dishes—spices in rice and veggies, bold tastes.

One evening by the Ganges at sunset, Bob says, “We did it. Found the place, made money.”

James nods, thoughtful. “More than that though. Learned their ways, their culture and beliefs, made friends. Stuff that changes you.”

“Yeah. Bring it back to Chang’an, share it,” Bob says, smiling.

James’s eyes light up. “Teach Buddhism, spices, music. Bridge our worlds.”

They stay months more. James learns Sanskrit and Buddha’s teachings; Bob trades and builds contacts. They head back with Indian merchants wanting to trade with China.

The trip home is long but without big trouble. The Indians are amazed at the Great Wall and Chang’an’s glory. The Emperor sees the spices and gems, listens to tales of the Maurya and Buddha’s teachings.

“Remarkable journey,” he booms. “Wealth and knowledge—a new path opened.”

“Honor, Your Majesty,” Bob bows.

That night the streets are alive, fireworks red and gold in the sky. James holds a small Buddha statue from a monk.

“Look,” he says. “Crowds dancing and singing for us.”

Bob smiles, a different kind of pride swelling in him. They didn’t just travel the Silk Road—they helped build it, linked civilizations.

James leans on his shoulder. “It’s just the start. More lands, people, stories.”

Fireworks going off, the journey has changed them—danger and uncertainty, but friendship, love, and possibilities. The Silk Road to India, and to themselves too.

The horizon is still out there, the path waiting. I think that’s the main thing—how it keeps going.

New Tales of China's Silk Road

HD Beijing School, Chen, Phoebe – 11

The lotus pattern sways gently in the evening breeze strung between the workshop's wooden beams and the digital loom's glowing screen. Lin Xiao hands me a warm cup of jasmine tea just like the kind my master used to brew, and we sit on the floor our legs tangled in pinky fuzzy socks. Outside, the Dunhuang sky blushes orange and purple, with a delivery scooter running by its horn blending with the soft hum of the loom.

"I showed Grandma the pattern today", Lin Xiao says sipping her tea. Her eyes crinkle at the corners just like how her grandma's did when she first touched the lotus silk. She cried. Sat there running her fingers over the petals for minutes shuttering about how it felt like my grandpa's hands were weaving again. He used to make her silk ribbons with lotus patterns back when they were young. He said each petal was a promise to stay together even when he had to travel for silk. I run a finger over the lotus petal real silk woven with digital precision. The gold threads are catching the last beam of sunlight like flecks of honey. For a second, I swear I can feel my master's palm on mine; rough for decades of sorting cocoons and adjusting warp threads. I hear her voice too low and warm as she hums the old Silk Road Ballad about caravans and starry nights.

Beside me Lin Xiao's phone buzzes and a photo pops up: her grandma smiling, holding the lotus fragment we found in the Dunhuang cave tears glistened on her cheeks. It's a small ordinary moment but it tugs at my chest like the way my master used to tuck a loose strand of hair behind my ear when I fumbled a shuttle.

This isn't just a pattern. It's the steam from jasmine tea curling in the air mixing with the faint smell of potato chips (Lin Xiao calls them workshop fuel, and we've gone through half a bag of them; there are already crumbs littering on the floor). Lin Xiao jokes that these crumbs are our fuel after half a day of work, and she laughs so hard at me when I mix a splash of jasmine into the microwave to offer her tea. It's the sound of her grandma's favorite that drifts over the tune mimicking the creak of the wooden loom. It's the way we stay up until midnight arguing over whether the lotus petals would be woven with three gold threads or four, until Lin Xiao's grandma calls to remind us to eat the dumplings left in the fridge (steamed pork my favorite; juicy, and warm; nothing like the dried mutton we ate during the blizzard.)

The digital loom beeps softly as if nodding off a long day's work. I tuck a loose thread back into the lotus just like how my master taught me fingers moving on muscle memory and LinXiao taps her phone to save the pattern. Tomorrow we can weave the second half she says, wiping a chip crumb from her chin, and I'll teach you to order dumplings on the app; no more sneaking to the street vendor and trying to pay with the jade hairpin. The vendor thinks you're a very committed cosplayer by the way.

I laugh, a sound that feels foreign and familiar all at once. It's been months since I stumbled out of that blizzard scared and confused clutching my wooden shuttle like a lifeline. Back then I thought the world had ended; my workshop burned, my master gone, the Khan orders weighing heavy on my shoulders. But here in this little space in 2026 I've found something I never expected, a home; not the kind with mud brick walls and charcoal fires, but one made of neon socks and digital looms, jasmine tea and shared laughter from worlds bound by my silk.

I think all the little moments that got us here: Lin Xiao teaching me to use the magic box to heat dumplings, her patience never wavering even when I accidentally burned three batches. Me showing her how to soften silk thread with tea, how to feel the tension in the warp with just my fingers, how to sing to the loom so threads listen better. The time old master Wei came back grumbling about digital nonsense only to stay for hours helping me fix the wooden loom in the storage closet, his calloused hands working in sync with mine as if we'd been weaving together for years. The day we took the bus to the Dunhuang night market, LinXiao buying me a sugar figure shaped like a lotus, and me teaching her to barter with the vendor in the Silk Roadway.

As the sun dips below the dunes painting the sky a deep shade of purple, we turn off the glowing screens and light a candle just like the ones I used in my Yuan Dynasty workshop, tallow melting slowly as it casts warm shadows on the walls. The lotus pattern glows in the soft light bridging past and present silk, patterns of loneliness and belonging. I take another sip of jasmine tea, and it tastes like home, the one I've woven here with a girl in neon socks a digital loom that sings and a heart full of stories.

Lin Xiao leans her head on my shoulder, and I can feel her smile against my arm. "Grandma says we're carrying on the Silk Road," she murmurs, "not the old one with camels and caravans but a new one where stories and crafts no matter how different our worlds are."

I nod because she's right. The Silk Road never ended, it just changed threads from camel caravans to WIFI signals, from jade spools to 3D printed shuttles, from solitary weavers working by candlelight to two people sharing potato chips and tea under a sky that's been watching over silk for a thousand years. It's in the way Lin Xiao's grandma passes down her favorite folk songs, in the way we blend digital precision with the warmth of human hands. It's in the small ordinary moments; the laughter, tea, the shared dumplings that make something old feel new again.

The candle flickers and I look at the lotus pattern, at the way the silk and digital threads are tangled together, impossible to tell apart. I think of master Lin Xiao's grandma, of all the weavers who came before us; their hands, their stories.

New Tales of China's Silk Road

HD Beijing School, Ding, Olivia – 11

It was a windy day, the sands start blowing when Charles is walking back home. The sands cover Charles eyesight that he cannot see what is forward. Just in a second, Charles sees a vague figure sitting on the sand dunes. Then he hears someone crying, Charles walk toward and saw the Silk Road Princess.

“I am lost inside this desert. Can you take me home?” the princess asked softly. Charles nodded his head and agreed, then he grab the princesses hand and lead her back to his home.

Suddenly, a big wind blow by, that misleads their direction for going home. By some how the princess faint after the gale. So Charles carried her through the way back home. They walk through several sand dunes and finally Charles sees a small house standing in front of him. But beside the house their is a monk standing by. His hands are together seems praying for something. Charles ignored him and walk back home. However, he don't know that all of this is a harbinger disaster.

The night sky starts covering the dune, the sky turns black like being in the underworld. Charles go back to sleep after he prepare for the princess, while the monk still sits outside Charles home praying to the night sky. The time stop at that moment, the stars twinkle on the sky are lighting up the whole darkness. It seems like if something moves carefully the peaceful will be destroyed at one second.

The morning comes, Charles wake up and go to work. In the afternoon he go back home and teaches the princess how to survive in the dessert.

“You first needs to learn how to find foods and water resources. These will add and keep your energy when you are in danger. Then you needs to learn how to keep yourself safe through the wild. You need to make weapons for safety. And at last you need to find the right direction and walk back home, if you cannot find the path home you can call someone to help if there is one.” Charles said slowly. He tell her all the importance to survive in the wild, but he don't trust and hope the princess to remember because she never is on her own before.

“Okay, I remembers it so what will we learn today? Finding resources or to make weapons?” the princess asks quietly. She looks at Charles, but he doesn't answer. The princess copies what Charles doing and then learns how to make knives and also axe. With curiosity the princess ask the monk what he is doing, after learning with Charles.

“The dangerous is coming, it is coming! There will be a disaster soon! Run, run away quickly!” The monk shouted loudly and the sounds are in shiver.

“So there will be a disaster?” The princess asks carefully. Then she laughs loudly, and tells Charles this ridiculous joke from the monk. No one believes the monk, no one talks to him anymore. They all ignored him, just pretend him as air.

That night, as Charles lay asleep, the ground began to tremble subtly. The monk, still outside, knelt and chanted frantically, his voice echoing in the silent dessert. Suddenly, a massive crack split the earth near Charles's house, and from it emerged shadowy figures with glowing eyes.

The princess, awakened by the commotion, screamed. Charles bolted upright, grabbing a makeshift knife. “Stay behind me!” he shouted. The shadowy creatures lunged, and Charles fought them off, his movements sharp from years of desert survival. But there were too many.

Just then, the monk rushed in, waving an ancient scroll. “The Silk Road's curse! Only the princess can break it with her royal blood!” he cried. The princess, trembling, placed her hand on scroll. A golden light erupted, repelling the shadows.

As the light faded, the desert calmed. The monk explained, “ Centuries ago , a princess of the Silk Road angered the desert spirit. You , as her descendant, were the key. Charles, your survival skills kept her alive long enough to fulfill this duty .”

Charles looked at the princess, then at the monk. “So what now?” The princess smiled softly. “We rebuild, and I’ll learn not just survival , but how to lead . And you’ll be my teacher-----both in the desert and in life.”

The next morning, they started repairing the house. The monk helped, and soon travelers on the Silk Road began stopping by, drawn by tales of the brave man and the princess who tamed the desert’s curse. Charles’s small home grew into an oasis town, a beacon of hope and safety. And every evening, as the sun set over the dunes, Charles and the princess would sit together, planning for a future where the desert was no longer a place of danger, but of new beginnings.

Years later, the oasis town had flourished into bustling hub along the Silk Road. Merchants from distant lands traded spices, skills, and stories here, all marveling at the transformation from cursed desert to a land of opportunity. The princess, now a wise and respected leader, governed with compassion, her decisions guided by both the ancient scrolls and the practical lessons Charles had taught her about survival in the harshest of environments.

Charles, for his part, had become a legend-----a desert warrior turned mentor, whose knowledge of the arid lands kept caravans safe and helped farmers cultivate crops in once – barren soil. Every evening, as they had done since the beginning, the two would still meet at the edge of the dunes, watching the sun dip below the horizon. But now, their conversations were no longer just about survival or leadership; they were about the legacy they had built together, a legacy that wove the ancient magic of the Silk Road with the resilience of the modern age, ensuring that this corner of the desert would thrive for centuries to come .

New Tales of China's Silk Road

HD Beijing School, Dong, Nathan – 11

I am a merchant, I go through the desert with the guide, I am friends with him, I don't need money to go with him and he uses less money to buy my things, I go with him to see the desert, and to know where people go a lot, and I will sell things there, so I am very familiar to the desert too, I am so familiar to the desert that I think that I can be a guide too, but I realized I am not suitable for this job, my speaking is not good. He also leads other people too, I think he is almost friends with everyone, because he is very good to everyone.

My second friend is the Buddhist monk, our language is the same, though. He is from China too, it's a long time ago when we met the first time, there are only three people that came to buy my things: the Buddhist monk, the Artisan from the oasis city, and the nomadic horse-archer. The other two: the Artisan from the oasis city and the nomadic horse-archer is my friend too. The Buddhist monk said he finds Buddhist sculptures in the desert for years, when he finds one, he will take it home, of course, he will first buy it. He will give me some photos of China these years, after that day every week, he will come to my shop and buy Buddhist sculptures from me, and every time I have sculptures, because every time he finish buying and went back to China, I will buy more Buddhist sculptures, and every time when he comes to buy more Buddhist sculptures, he will give me some photos of China and talk about it and talk about the fun things happened in the place he lived or some one posted online.

My third friend is the Artisan from the oasis city, she always bring arts that she made to let me see how much it can sell or just sell it to me, she always sell lower prices to me and I will sell lower prices to her too, she buys all the things she need for drawing and sculpturing, like paints, paint brushes, color palettes, and drawing boards, little knives to make a sculpture. I forgot to say that she takes sculptures that she made to let me see how much it can sell or just sell it to me, she gives me pictures too, she gives me the pictures that she take of the oasis city she lived in, I am learning her language because using translating uses too much time, I forgot to say that she says to me she is a musician too and buys a lot of things she will need for playing music just two days ago, she is one of the people who came to buy my things in my shop on the first day I became a merchant, because other people thinks that maybe I will sell fake things, because it is the first time they met me, I think I had said this before.

The fourth friend of me is the nomadic horse-archer, he is one of the people who came to buy my things in my shop on the first day I became a merchant too, I think I have said this before too, but I will say it again. The nomadic horse-archer is the one who buys weapon for the army he is in, because first, he is the captain, and the second, the king is afraid that if everyone goes out to buy weapons and a bad guy started a coup, no one can protect him, and by the time the army had finished buying weapons and came back, the king is new, the king changed, what can they do? The nomadic horse-archer told me all about arrows, and how to shoot an arrow and the stories in his country and stories about his ancestors, the most he buys is the arrow, because arrows can't be used many times. I have other friends too, of course, like the army in the nearby country which I don't know the name, or maybe it don't have, a person shouted at me, "hey, there, why don't you run the other army in the nearby country which had no names had come, run for your lives!" OK, just think that I didn't say that the army in the nearby country which had no name is my friend, but I am right, the nearby country had no name!

The army is already in the country! Then a lot of arrows flew over my head but didn't hurt any of the enemy army, they "fought" with the army in the nearby country which had no name, no one had been hurted in this fight, then they started to walk to a place that don't have anything, except a forest, just when I wondered, they went in the forest, I went after them, I thought that we will just walk for a short time, like ten minutes, but actually we walked for ten days and ten nights, after ten days and ten nights we have finally got to the end point of this journey, a new country stood before us, at least it is new to me, I had not heard it before and not seen it before, it is the most beautiful country I had ever seen, green leaves on big trees, big forests are nearby, the waters, like rivers, ponds, and lakes are blue, and the sky is blue, not even a piece of cloud, tall buildings, and at

last, I saw the big palace that stood in the middle, there are a lot of jewels, even on the outside, there are a lot of jewels too.

The two armies walked in it, I went after them, hiding and running and just as fast as light speed, change to another person, because if I am caught trying to go with them, they will see me as a spy, and they will kill me. At last, they are just walking through the palace, when they went out, an army went out from the forest and take them into the forest, that is a good thing, because there are a lot of place that I can hide and I can hear what they are saying. The army go for about ten minutes and finally go through the forest, a gigantic thing stood there, I go around the gigantic thing to see if there are any words on it that says what it is and what can it do, and I found it, a line of small words said: Atleentis enormous secret weapon gigantic nuclear bomb(the first Atleentis enormous secret weapon gigantic nuclear bomb in the world), and another small line of words, more smaller than that word in the sentence I have just read, it says: just one Atleentis enormous secret weapon gigantic nuclear bomb could destroy a country, I had make it bigger for you to read, I think you don't know what this is if you didn't read the bigger ones of this, because you can't read it: just one Atleentis enormous secret weapon gigantic nuclear bomb could destroy a country, it is not small enough, the real one is one out of four this big. Where do they want to throw this gigantic nuclear bomb to? As I was wondering, a people in the army in the nearby country which had no name said:" lets throw it to my country!" "Yay!" "I agree!" "Lets get it done!" A lot of sound started in the army, until the nomadic horse-archer said:" OK, we will do this but don't shout!" But no one listened to him, the army went wild. Just as the nomadic horse-archer said, the bomb just flew away, and the direction is really to the nearby country which had no name, with a "boom" everyone cheered, then they started to walk back, some of the people in the army in the nearby country which had no name stayed in Atleentis, I think this is the name of the country we are now, we walked back used five nights and five days, because everyone in the army was very happy and didn't want to sleep, then in one night, I got what I wanted, the soldier said," The king is useless and can just make the people in the country unhappy." And another soldier said," What about the other people in the country, we didn't want to kill them!" The first soldier said," Don't worry, do you think we will let them die? Of course no!" After that, we are back to our country, the people in the nearby country which had no name hug the army and said they are their hero. The army said to all of the people that the other armies decided to never have war with us, never again. The army in the nearby country which had no name is my friend again.

New Tales of China's Silk Road

HD Beijing School, Guo, Charles – 14

Kevin hated ancient Chinese history. While revising for his midterm in the library, he touched a strange, old compass. The world spun, and he suddenly stood on a busy dock. The air had a smell of salt and smoke. The people wore robes, and great wooden ships filled the harbor. He was in Venice, but it was the Venice of the 1200s.

A man with a kind face and sharp eyes found him. "You look lost," the man said. "I am Marco Polo. I am leaving on a long journey east. You should come."

And so, Kevin joined Marco Polo's caravan. They left the canals behind for dusty roads and vast deserts. This was the Silk Road. Kevin saw cities of gleaming blue tiles and endless markets under bright sun. He smelled spices he could not name and saw silks that flowed like water. It was more real and more dangerous than in any book. The desert sun was cruel, and bandits hid in the mountain shadows. Kevin learned to be useful. He helped fix a cartwheel. He remembered a little about filtering water, and it kept some in the caravan from getting sick.

He saw that the Silk Road was not just for trading things, but for trading ideas. He heard new languages, saw new ways to write, and watched as stories and inventions passed from one to another. His modern knowledge was a secret he had to keep away. Once, he almost told a group of scholars that the Earth was round. He saw the wonder in their eyes and stopped himself just in time. He was not here to change the past, but to survive it.

Marco Polo became his friend. They shared the hard bread on the road and the wonder of seeing new stars in the sky. Kevin knew he did not belong in this time, but a part of him wished he could stay.

The end of his adventure came in a quiet place high in the mountains. In an old stone room, the compass he still carried began to glow. It pulled him toward a carving on the wall. Kevin knew it was time. He said a hard goodbye to Marco. "Thank you for finding a traveler," he said. Marco smiled, as if he understood more than he ever said. "Travel safe, my friend."

Leo pressed the compass to the carving. The stone room faded into a blur of light and sound.

He was back in the library. His head was on his book, and the old compass was cool in his hand. Everything was the same, but Kevin was different. He had seen history himself. He had felt its sun and tasted its dust. The boy who only read about the past was gone. Now, he carried a piece of it quietly inside him, a secret treasure more valuable than any silk or spice.

The next day, Kevin had a big history test. He sat at his desk, worried. The first question was about the Silk Road. He picked up his pen. Suddenly, the answers were just there in his mind. He could see Marco Polo's face. He could remember the markets and the mountains. He didn't have to think, he just knew. His pen moved quickly across the page.

A week later, his teacher handed back the tests. He looked shocked. "Leo, you got a perfect score," the teacher said. "This is amazing work." Kevin just smiled. He had the best teacher of all.

New Tales of China's Silk Road

HD Beijing School, Hou, Oscar – 11

When the Han dynasty began the silk road also started. Han people also start their journey of trading. Trading silk was also a huge part of Han's economy. The method of making silk was also kept "top secret". Because if any other countries knew how to make silk they wouldn't buy silk from Han, and Han would lose this part of economy.

But terrible things happened, the best silk maker of Han was caught by Xiongnu his silk making skill was the greatest of all time. If he was leverage by Xiongnu the consequences would be unthinkable.

Yesterday 20 Xiongnu soldiers dress up in Han's clothes and went to town at night time they spread out and they want to find the best silk maker of Han. The best silk maker was called Liuzihou. He lived near the palace of Han dynasty. Two soldiers are standing in front of his house, But there were chatting and not paying attention of the coming Xiongnu soldiers. As soon as they realized the Xiongnu soldiers already at their faces, they killed the two soldiers. They slowed down and get in the house slowly, slow pace.

Soon as they entered the room, they saw another two soldiers. The two soldiers realized them but they were also killed. Two soldiers running in the bedroom where Liuzihou lives other three waited outside the home in just in case of other soldiers came ,but luck are on Xiongnu's side. No one came and Liuzihou was caught when he was sleeping he didn't realize anything has happened because Xiongnu were so fast. The soldiers meet other three and burst out of the fortress gate and sweep away.

When the emperor of Han received this message he was shocked. He was also filled with scaryness if the method of making silk spread to other countries the silk making economy would collided. He took three deep breaths and calmed down. He ordered the military to gather 100000 cavalry and attack Xiongnu and rescue Liuzihou. Military gather around and 30 minutes and ready to fight Xiongnu When there leader says "go"they march out of the gate and start their journey to Xiongnu's city center.

But just after now they left the country, they found it was raining and huge ice balls hitting down. The military need to find somewhere to hide or they maybe on fever after the rain because. Their body are wet and. They are using a lot of energy in the march and using so much energy weaken one's resistance. But a military with 100000 people can't hide in a same place and the formation was soonly spread out. But they would soonly know it was the luckiest thing to have. The foremost group was sudden set upon by the Xiongnu.

Hidden in the tall grass, they loosed arrows in a deadly shower; then the rest of their warriors burst out and fell upon the Han troops with sword and spear. Caught off-guard, the Han vanguard was cut down in droves. Only a remnant broke away and ran.

As they fled back along the road they met the other half of their army—the separated rear column. Breathless, they warned their comrades of what had happened. At once the rear force divided itself into two parts, swung wide in a flanking march, and advanced by acircuitous route to meet the enemy.

After the Xiongnu ambush, the Han army now numbered only seventy-five thousand soldiers. Every step was taken with new caution: they advanced slowly, alert for any trap the nomads might have laid. The unwounded marched in the van, while the injured—supporting one another—followed behind, moving painfully, one halting stride at a time. Yet they did not know another peril was closing in.

Suddenly a fresh mass of Xiongnu warriors appeared at their backs. Like a squall they rode down on the limping column, sabres flashing among the wounded. The vanguard heard the screams, wheeled about, and ran to help. In minutes the road became a frantic melee of thrusting spears and rearing horses. When the dust finally settled, both sides staggered away bloodied—each had

lost roughly five thousand men— leaving the Han army fewer still, and far more wary of every shadow on the march to western reigon.

After being ambushed twice, the Han army adjusted their strategy. They decided to use small units to raid the Xiongnu, as large forces were too conspicuous and vulnerable to attacks. Many of the main army had returned with wounded soldiers. Only over 500 cavalrymen remained to continue the breakthrough. These 500+ cavalrymen were divided into 10 small squads, with 50 men in each squad. Every squad consisted of elite soldiers who had experienced real combat and were highly seasoned. They spread out with approximately 50 meters between each squad, allowing for mutual support and coordination.

These elite soldiers encountered no more ambushes along the way. Perhaps because their small size made them difficult to detect, or the enemy considered these 500+ men too insignificant to pose a threat. With fewer numbers, they moved swiftly and naturally faster. They quickly reached the vicinity of the Xiongnu city. They immediately took cover and concealed themselves. The squad leader of the frontmost team had spotted that Xiongnu sentries were stationed on the city walls. The walls had numerous beacon towers whose fires could illuminate the front lines. Therefore, any careless movement would expose their position.

It's nearly not time and the sun is nearly down so decide they decided to start when it's night time they have rest and eat some food. They wait until it's midnight and the first three groups go a sneak into the city wall. But they found it was so hard to get near the palace. Near the palace there is about 1000 people garden near it, but they haven't give up. They decided to jog a hole down to the palace. Fortunately, they have shovel. But soon they found out it can work because under the dirt it was brick under.

Meanwhile, on the other side, Liu Zihou was tied to a chair and being interrogated. A silk merchant by trade, he was naturally calm and revealed nothing. The Xiongnu, however, showed no mercy, steadily intensifying the torture: first they poured a bucket of scalding water over him, then pressed heaps of ice against his skin. The alternation of searing heat and biting cold was brutally cruel, yet Liu Zihou endured it in silence. Back in Han territory, the rescue force had to advance swiftly; any delay risked his breaking under the torment and divulging vital secrets, inflicting grave losses on the court.

The Han army now resolved to storm the enemy position. Two squads were left outside to pin down the defenders, while the remaining three plunged headlong into the camp to rescue Liu Zihou. They soon discovered that every guard was an elite warrior; within moments most of the attackers had been cut down. The place where Liu was held was fortified by at least a thousand Xiongnu soldiers.

Yet the Han did not pull back. One quick-witted soldier soaked a torch in resin, lit it, and hurled it into the enemy ranks. Flames leapt up, smoke billowed, and the sudden fire threw the Xiongnu formation into chaos. Panic spread; the nomads scattered in all directions. Seizing the moment, the Han troops surged forward and smashed through the defenses. They uses their swords to cut the ropes that has tided Liuzihou and carried him on one soldier's shoulders. But the way out wasn't easy. Xiongnu soon make a line and trap them in the palace to fight, but the hands are lead soldiers, they knew if they stay fight hear they can't get out and they will all die, so half of them use make a to make tiny gaps through the line and the other half get out, but the half of them died under Xiongnu's sword. They burst out in a wild charge, the rear guard covering their retreat.

By the time they thundered through the city gate, barely fifty were still breathing, yet the enemy kept coming. Those fifty leapt onto their horses and galloped hard for the Han base, but Xiongnu pursuers clung to their heels; arrows whistled and thirty more tumbled lifeless to the dust.

Only twenty riders remained, on the brink of despair, when a rolling cloud of dust rose on the horizon—ten thousand Han relief troops swept in. It was the Yuan corps the court had dispatched. Seeing the

Xiongnu pinned, Yu Ji wheeled the twenty survivors about; a hundred fresh cavalry closed around them as an escort. In less than a day that compact column of 120 horsemen slammed back through the gates.

The city erupted in cheers; even the emperor came out to meet them, the taut lines of his face finally relaxing into a smile.

Until now the story ends and although rescued Liuzihou they still lost a lot of soldiers. And Liuzihou was invited to live in the palace and he was fully protected.

New Tales of China's Silk Road

HD Beijing School, Kou, Zoe – 11

Li Xiang stood at the door of his silk shop, watching his servants carefully pack rolls of brocade onto camels' backs. Twenty camels stood in a line at the street corner.

"Master, everything is ready," said the old servant wiping sweat from his forehead and pointing to the wooden box on the last camel.

Li Xiang nodded. He jumped onto the horse, shouted to the camel caravan in front of him, "Let's set off now."

Li Xiang had learned the silk business from his father since he was a child. Now that his father was old, the job of running the silk shop had fallen to him. He heard that there was a wealthy country called Persia in the distant west, where people were fond of silk clothes. Many Chinese merchants traveled to Kucha, where they traded with Persian merchants. Li Xiang was determined to sell his brocade, although the journey to Kucha was full of adventures and even dangers.

The weather was perfect today, sunny and warm. Willows swayed in the breeze. The camel bells jingled brightly. Everyone was excited and joyful with hope.

Li Xiang turned to his guide and said, "I had been dreaming of this day for a long time. Hope everything goes well." The guide was a Hu man named Nadim, who traveled often between Changan and Kucha. His face showed the signs of hard travel. He replied, tapping the sharp sword at his waist with confidence, "With me here, I promise you and the caravan will arrive safely."

The caravan traveled west all the way. The first part of the journey went well. They crossed the Yellow River, climbed over the Qilian Mountains, passed through Jiayu guan, and arrived at Dunhuang. The route was smooth all along.

But trouble came when they were on the way from Dunhuang to Kucha. The caravan entered a desert, a place known as the "Sea of Death." It was dusk, and the desert was colored red by the setting sun. Suddenly, the neigh of horses came from far away. Nadim frowned and watched. A few seconds later, he shouted, "Bandits! Quick, make a circle with the camels!"

As Li Xiang and his servants gathered the camels close, a dozen of bandits rushed toward them, waving swords. Nadim pulled out his sword, stood at the front, and told the others to get their weapons to fight. Soon both sides fought fiercely and it turned into chaos.

Unexpectedly a fierce wind gusted, making the fight much harder. Suddenly Li Xiang heard Nadim yelling, "Master, we can't hold on any longer. Run quickly!"

Li Xiang was terrified. He squinted and looked around but didn't spot Nadim. What he could do was driving the camels towards the deep desert with several servants around him. They ran and ran without looking back. They didn't stop until they heard nothing. Everyone was out of breath and exhausted.

When they calmed down, Li Xiang realized it was a huge loss. He had only half the camels, half the goods, and half the team members left. The worst thing was he lost Nadim.

Night fell and the world was surrounded by darkness. Li Xiang felt extremely desperate in such darkness. Without Nadim, he didn't know where he was and which way to go. They just survived a fight, but another, even bigger danger was waiting for them.

During the next few days, Li Xiang struggled to find the way out with his servants. They kept searching. But unfortunately, they didn't succeed. They came to realize they were trapped in the vast desert. As time passed, food and water became fewer and fewer. All of them were worn out.

One noon, they walked to a dead tree and had no strength to move forward. They settled down under the tree. At this moment, Li Xiang heard a faint sound of camel bells in the distance. He struggled to stand up, searching for sound. Then he spotted a caravan far away. He couldn't believe his eyes. A caravan was just passing by.

He shouted as loudly as he could, hoping they could notice. Luckily, they heard and came towards them. The leader of the caravan was a middle-aged man with thick beard. He looked very kind.

"Friend, what happened?" the man asked politely.

Li Xiang replied, "We met bandits and my caravan got separated. Then we had lost in the desert for three days."

"My name is Salim. Nice to meet you. Don't worry. I'll take you to Kucha." Salim said. The man happened to be a Persian merchant and came to Kucha to sell spices. After hearing Li Xiang's story, he quickly told his servants to bring them water and food.

With Salim's help, LiXiang and his caravan arrived at Kucha. After the arduous journey, they settled down in a small inn first. LiXiang and Salim had dinner together.

Salim asked, "On my way to Kucha, many people talked about a city named Chang'an. I heard the market there was thriving with traders from all over the world. Is that true?"

LiXiang said, "Yes, indeed. The market was bustling with people from sunrise to sunset. Merchants from many countries came here to do business. You can find anything you want in the market, such as spices, gemstones, fine horses, furs, wine and etc. I couldn't finish listing them even if I talk all day."

Salim said surprisingly, "That is amazing. If only I could feast my eyes on Chang'an's elegance!"

LiXiang said with a smile, "Sure. I am glad to be your guide."

Next morning Salim took Li Xiang to Kucha's biggest bazaar, which was full of a dazzling array of goods. They wound through the bazaar for a while. Salim stopped at a stall and said, "Li Xiang, this place specializes in purchasing silk fabrics from the East. Your brocade is of superior quality and is sure to fetch a good price. "

Li Xiang put out his goods. The beautiful brocade quickly drew a lot of traders' attention. They gathered around and were eager to buy them. Within a day, all the goods had been sold out.

After a busy day, Li Xiang and Salim treated themselves to a good meal— a leg of lamb, a roasted capon with herbs, split-pea soup and good wines.

Li Xiang said, "Salim, I'm extremely grateful for your help, not only saving my life but also helping me earn a lot of money. I shall never forget the favor you've done for me."

Salim answered, "You're too kind to say that. We're friends."

Li Xiang raised his glass and said loudly, "Sure. To our friendship!"

As they drank, they laughed and chatted, sharing their travels and talking about the future plans.

A full moon hung in the sky, bright and clear; it was a wonderful night.

After a half-month stay in Kucha, they set off for home. On the way back, everyone was in a relaxed mood. They first reached Dunhuang. Li Xiang showed Salim around to appreciate the wall painting in the grottoes. Then they crossed the Qilian Mountains, enjoying the magnificent and vast scenery, and headed east along the Yellow River. Salim couldn't stop praising all along the way.

Eventually they arrived at Chang'an during the period of Lunar new year. The whole city was decorated with lanterns, filled with a joyous atmosphere of celebrating the New Year. When darkness descended and the lanterns glowed, Li Xiang led Salim meandering through the bustling streets, stopped now and then to admire the firework.

Soon after the New Year celebrations ended, the market returned as usual. The market truly opened Salim's eyes. The exquisite porcelain, top-quality tea, magnificent silk fabrics, and a wide variety of specialties from the Western Regions were spread out in a dazzling array. Salim was overwhelmed by the sight.

Salim said excitedly, "I have never been to such a prosperous and rich city as Chang'an. It's extraordinary!"

Li Xiang answered, "I'm so glad you feel that way! Chang'an is indeed the most splendid city in the world. There are still many wonderful places I haven't taken you to. Tomorrow we are going to visit the East Market, where you'll see other treasure."

Salim said, "Great. I can't wait."

Salim stayed in Chang'an for about two months, buying a lot of popular goods. As the weather turned warm, the moment of parting finally arrived.

Li Xiang got up early on the day Salim set off. As they stood at the city gate, neither of them spoke for a moment.

Finally, Salim said, "Goodbye my friend. I promise I'll write to you as soon as I get back. And hope you to visit my hometown someday."

They hugged tightly, then Salim mounted his horse. Waving goodbye repeatedly, he rode slowly into the distance, until his figure disappeared on the horizon. Li Xiang stood there watching, knowing that though they were apart, their friendship would span the miles between Chang'an and the Western Regions.

New Tales of China's Silk Road

HD Beijing School, Lee, Andy – 14

The College Cowboys just finished their basketball game in the Shanghai American School's gymnasium, sweat poured onto the court from all players, with a strange smell taking over the air.

"Everyone come here! Meeting!" Jamal, the team captain yells. The whole team sprinted to him.

"What's up, cap?" They yell together.

"So, our next game is in Dunhuang, which is on the western side of China, while we are in Shanghai, which is the most eastern part of China. Do any of you guys remember our history teacher teaching us about the Silk Road? Well, if any of you are willing to, we are gonna take a train to Xian, then we're gonna walk on the silk road to our next game. We're not in a hurry anyways since it's in a month. If you don't like this plan, you can just take the train straight to Dunhuang without any of the fun experience" Jamal explained to the rest of the team. "Who wants to walk on the Silk Road?"

"I gotta check with my mom." John replied.

"I could go." Steven yelled.

"Me too!"

"Me too!"

"Bro, you wanna go?" Jack whispered to Mike

"I mean I would like to go, but not with Jamal, he likes to take risks." Mike whispered back.

"True." Jack replied. "Yeah Jamal, Mike and I aren't going."

"Are you sure? The silk road is one of the most important parts in Chinese history? It's gonna be tons of fun." Jamal asked.

"Yeah, we don't really like history." Jack responded.

"Ok then, see you in Dunhuang, I guess."

"See you!" Mike and Jack yelled.

A day later...

"We made it, Jack!" Mike yelled right when the plane landed in Dunhuang, while the team just walked out of the airport.

"Dude, I bet the rest of the team is not making any progress since Jamal's over there." Jack joked. They chuckled while they walked towards the exit of the airport, while the rest of the team was getting held back by Jamal.

"Hold on guys, don't y'all think we should take a picture to show off to our friends?" He yelled as they were just about to get on the bus. All their lips' tips lifted slightly, with visible dark circles under their eyes. Immediately after the picture was taken, Cade sprinted into the bus, took a seat, and closed his eyes.

"What is Cade doing?" Jamal questioned. He hopped into the bus, and found Cade already asleep, the sound of his snoring already taking over the sound of the motor. "How is he able to sleep that quickly?"

One by one, the rest of the team climbed into the bus and took a seat, all asleep in a minute.

2 hours later...

“Here we are! This is where the silk road starts. In the next few days, we will be riding camels on the silk road, and slowly getting closer to Dunhuang. Y’all ready?” Jamal explained as they arrived at the silk road.

“We’re ready, cap!” The team shouted together, as they started the adventure of the silk road.

They started sprinting, playing around until Jamal stopped them. “Guys stop, you wanna get to Dunhuang or not?”

“I regret coming on this trip, Jamal is being so annoying.” Steven whispered to John. “I feel like something bad is gonna happen because of him.”

“I agree.” John responded.

“Should we call Jack and Mike? I wanna know what they’re up to.” He took out his phone, tapped some buttons, and called them. “Yo Jack! What you guys up to?”

“Yo! We’re on the way to this place called Mogaoku, none of us know what this is, but we’re about to find out!” Jack replied.

“Nice! Dude, I regret coming on this trip. Jamal is so annoying, and it’s not even that fun. We’re in a desert, with a bit of wind. Hopefully a sandstorm doesn’t come during our journey.”

“Yeah, that would suck. Yo I’ll call you back in a few minutes, bye.”

“K, bye.” Jack hangs up. “Dang, I really hope I didn’t come to this tri—”

Whoosh! The wind starts picking up.

“Oh no. Guys, the wind is picking up!” John screamed.

“Are we gonna die?” Steven yelled?

Suddenly, all the sand from the desert ground floats up and throws itself into everyone’s eyes, nose, ears, and mouths. The sky instantly turns orange.

“I can’t breathe!” Steven mumbled, fighting the sand that continuously attacked him. “Help! Help! Hhhh...”

Ring! Ring! Steven opened his eyes, sat up, and breathed heavily. The sun beaming into a room, where there was a bathtub, a tv, a bed, and a couch. “The hotel? Was that a dream? It felt so real!” It was the day that the flight was to Xian. “No, I gotta warn my friends about this. That might happen again.”

He jumped out of the bed, rushed straight to the sink, grabbed the toothbrush, and swiped it across his teeth. While brushing, he quickly changed into his daily outfit, then spit out all the toothpaste. He snatched the room card and busted through the door, sprinted to Jamal’s room, and banged his hand on the door.

“Who is it?” Jamal questioned.

“It’s me.” Steven replied. Jamal opened the door, “Dude, we can’t go to the silk road today. A sandstorm will happen and we’ll all die.”

“Are you out of your mind? There’s not gonna be a sandstorm. If you don’t want to go just say you don’t want to go, delete the ‘we’ll die’ part”

“Dude, believe me.”

“I’m not trusting a short 18-year-old freshman whose body is literally a thin wooden stick.”

“You know what? You could just go there and die!” Jamal slammed the door on Steven as hard as he could, and Steven stomped down the hallway back to his room. He sat on the couch and decided to stay in Shanghai.

3 hours later...

The rest of the team started their journey on the silk road.

“What was Steven saying? There’s no wind at all! He’s such a liar!” Jamal complained. But then, the wind picked up.

“Oh no, the wind is picking up, maybe Steven was right!” John yelled.

“We’re not gonna die! Stop thinking so negatively!”

Suddenly, all the sand from the desert ground floats up and throws itself into everyone’s eyes, nose, ears, and mouths. The sky instantly turns orange.

“I can’t breathe! I can’t breathe!” Jamal screamed, while the sand filled up his mouth, “Steven, no way he was ri—”

New Stories of the Silk Road

HD Beijing School, Li, Dylan – 13

"Today we have the story of Zhang Qian. Hmm Hmm..." The old man cleared his throat.

"Now, a long long time ago..." the old man begins.

"Sound like a boring story..." The biggest teenager in the whole group of children interrupted.

"Did you ever start a story with any else phrase?"

"..." The high raised interest of the children fell the instant, but the old man started anyway.

"The wind was far too big today. The dunes before Them eased away like rivers before the great wind, and even folding a piece of fabric two times and blocking it before his eyes couldn't help. He turns his head, blushing the sand out of his sight. Though his sightings were still a big blurring yellow scene, but at least it is better than before, when every single sand wanted to swallow him up. Behind him, are a trail of camels and soldiers, about a hundred meters away. They had lost to many men. The legends here said that their soul will live here forever, blessing the brave men on the routs to live."

"Is everybody okay?" Only the few in the front hear his word and waved. The rest are too far away. He called out again. 'Tell the rest there are only a few miles left. The map says our destiny shouldn't be faraway. When we get there, everyone alive could get a share of fifty grams of gold. Fastened up, and soon we could have a fine rest there.'"

"Small black dot turned, the happy news spread like wildfire, and soon the air was vibrating with the cheering of man. "

"They continued west, passing dunes after dunes. Finally, upon the last dune, their views changed immediately, from endless dunes to meadows of grass. The meadows stretched, rivers flowing through, the high grasses and date palms there stood, they are the guardians of this sacred place."

"Finally, they are safe."

"What happened before that?" A small child eagerly looked up at the old man.

"It needs to be started two days before, when a massacre began." The old man answered, raised his finger, sipping some tea before continuing the story.

"Imagine a dusty war field at a place half desert and half grass field, and a few hundred peoples riding on camels chased by a whole army of Mongolian soldiers.

"The KeHan promised the one that could capture the Han's Diplomat could be given gold 50 kilograms and a hundred cattle!' The voice spread through the dusty meadows, normal nomadic peoples would not choose to live here. This is the best route for them to escape. They had already loosened their horse, only twenty was left: for its strength is too nimble for the sea of sand: the horse itself is a sand to it. They kicked their camels, whipped them, turning their head once and then to find their enemy not far behind. The camels weren't fast, but there is an advantage in it: The nomadic people nearly only know how to ride a horse: not a camel. It would use it high bumps and its stubborn feelings forcing the nomadic people goes on foot. The tall shadow of nomadic body crashed through the sandstorms, their howling voice drumming their ears, the highly raised bows and swords reflecting the only sunlight that has filtered through. A forest of arrows landed down, most blown away by the storm, but many caused direct damage to the camels and rider on the end of the group."

“When they had finally run out of the attack of the Mongolian soldiers, there are only thirty more soldiers left, and forty more hired riders left. The rest are massacred.”

“The deal wasn’t this.’ The leader of the hired riders, a strong Latin man 32 years old said. “Unless you pay double and give all the dead rider’s family a load of pension.” he deeply knows the importance of local riders in this desert. He agreed his deal.”

“It’s a stormy night, and they are at a height of a big boulder, surrounded by their camels. Even those giants that could stand two mountains on their back shudders and covers toward the tent with a blazing fire instead. Strange for the locals standing guard: their giant friend has seen sand big as fingertips hurling at them, storms that could crush and devour tents and the bonfire before lifting you hundreds of feet high into the sky: quicksand which could kill you even before you notice the trap: why are they so frightened today? Surely there are something strange happening. Not could they even think of it when the soldier standing guard outside gave out the answer that they feared in heart. ‘Wolf! Prairie wolf! Arrrr...’ “

“The soldier standing guard outside falls down, with a small thud on the wet sand now with small grasses popping out. “

“ The wolf pack Roared, the camels outside whimpered and stomped their foot.”

“Mens! Assemble your weapons! Get ready to fight...”

“Just then, a great wolf jumped inside, it’s left ear shooting up behind its head, but the right one missed a big part and dropped beside its eye. Its mouth cracked opened, it’s ends extending till the dropped right ears, showing the blood stained fangs inside.”

The old man made his hands into a claw-like shape, wavering it about before the children: Most were scared and fall back, bumping into the children behind, which were also scared and moving back aside.

“What happened next?” A small girl asked in small voice, trembling hard. The children beside her nods, staring up at the old man. “What happened? No more than what you could think of, with Zhang Qian and his followers (which, include both the locals and the soldiers, the old man added.) escaped, but still a number of their group were eaten. They reach the city of Dun Huang Far west, then after a decade staying there, comes back to our country, The great Han. Now, follow me and thanks him, for it is him that brings us the grapes in your bowl, the Buddhist you believe, the horses that your parents rides, and many other things that your parents don’t have when they are small.”

The rows of children turned facing toward the west, and in a Buddhist way thanked great hero Zhang Qian.

After the story, all the children left, and the old man turned to have a sip of tea.

“Father, there is something that I wanted to ask, something that I don’t understand very much. Why does Zhang Qian wanted so much to reach the West, even if it might cost his life? While he knew that even if he reached the west and came back to our country, he wouldn’t get much. All that power and riches he could also get if he accepted being the Mongolian prince. Why does he decided to continue his journey, not for wealth and power, why does he do that?”

“You sound just like your big brother. Everything done just for power and wealth; not noticing the hidden path laid before you.” the old man said, face darkening.

“I didn’t show your brother that path. He has his own opinion; he thought he discovered the truth; but it is not all that he has uncovered. Your brother thinks that the reason why people do things is of greed, is of greed and desire. Deep down inside, we all are animals motivated by greed, the only things different between us and monkeys is that we don’t only have the desire to survive and full our bellies, we have the greed to become rich, to become famous: to become different than what we just are. Your brother believes in this way of surviving, hate everyone and everything that acted to be noble, everyone and everything that wore an ugly mask, trying to hide the truth that they are simply greedy. All those beautiful house and colorful decorations are just anesthesia

that we made to lied to ourselves... to make us not noticing the truth. Are we not? With a sentence of our beloved emperor than wars would start, millions of men killing other men that he has never seen in his whole life, just for a sentence that the emperor said. Just for a sentence from a man same as every man else! Isn't that madness? We were taught to be good to each other by Buddhism... and what does people do, you say? Killing he or Her's family or best friend, for an ounce of silver... That is what we could do..."

Just then he saw the shocked face of his son.

"Sorry... I'm sorry... Did I say too much? I'm sorry..." the old man left, staring at the empty bottle with only the tea leaf left inside.

His son stood there, still staring at the place his father just yelled about.

New Stories of the Silk Road

HD Beijing School, Li, Elsa – 13

The sun was burning in the sky, the wind was howling around, and the sand is flying into their face. XuanZang was walking in the Silk Road with Carron Guide heading to the north. They haven't drink water for 2 days and their food left is not even enough to feed a tiny mouse.

"What should we do now?"

"Find a place with water and food so we can go on and live."

"But were in the dessert and how come there is food or water?!"

"Don't be so excited, I believe that we can find....."

Before XuanZang could finish, Carron guide rushed forward and jumped into the sand and started to eat sand.

"Sorry, what are you doing Mr.Guide?"XuanZang asked him while he slowly stood up and brushed down the sand on his clothes.

" oh, I am very sorry, I thought there is a small river in front, but it was just illusion. Let's continue to go."

" OK then"

So the two of them started to walk again with some more tiredness. Some hours later, the sun started to sit and it hanged on the side of the desert shining up a big wall that is yellow and brown.

" is that a city?"XuanZang asked.

" I'm not sure about that. I guess yes. ... oh no wait, I guess it's really a city a city with slides and water! There is guides in front of the big gate that reflects shiny yellow lights!"

" oh wow finally! I feel like I'm alive again!"XuanZang shouted with happiness and excitement that Carron guide had never seen. Even though there is still a long way from the spot to the gate, but they still walked in a rush. Half an hour later, orange sun shine spread on the desert and also on their bodies, making small shadows on the desert.

"Finally! Water! We're saved! Alive!"XuanZang exclaimed happily. There was a city just not far away from them that seems very busy, the lights were all lightened up spreading beautiful colorful lights. The wall around the city is brown and yellow, the sun shines on it and reflects bright yellow reflections on their eyes. The two of them started running faster and faster, just like they've only started and has forgotten all of the tiredness. The sand flied behind them making a beautiful silk after they passed. As they reached the city, the gate opened them slowly. They rushed inside the city and went strait towards the water.

" Well this might be the happiest day after the day that we found food beside a old house!"said Carron guide .

"Me two!"

After they finish drinking water, the rest in a kind people's house.

But when they woke up the next morning, People were gone, even the guards that opened the door for them the day before.

“ Where is everybody?” asked XuanZang

“ Gone.” the guide answered with sadness.

“ But what can we do now we have no help and we don’t know the route!”

“ We have a map and we’re ... still alive?”

The two of them moaned with hopelessness and sadness. But what can they do ? Run? Stay? Stop and go back? They’re almost at the end of the whole Silk Road so they could only go forward instead of going back.

“ OK I guess we should go now, or than if we couldn’t find a place that is safe to sleep tonight ,we will be done.”

“ let’s go then.”

So they started their challenge again.

So they walked for weeks, in the morning when the temperature is okay, in the middle of the day when the sun is making them melt, at evening when the weather is same as the morning, at night while the temperature is super low. Weeks past, the two of them got thin and even though they had this word many times in the middle, it’s black around their eyes, and their food box is empty even you look from the bottom to the top, is still empty.

“ Why did I started this?” asked XuanZang

“ Well maybe to challenge yourself and make yourself better?”

“ I guess so.”

To save energy, they stopped talking, but their stomach started talking, or shouting, and it continued for hours.

“ I always thought that the Silk Road is not that long and not that hard, but I guess I won’t think so now.”said XuanZang after hours of silence.

“ When you finally finished this challenge, you’ll think that you’re a very brave person.”

“Maybe.”

Even though days past with tiredness and pain, but with their strong volition, they’re still insisted and survived.

“Ummm, Mr. guide? Is that illusion or real?”

“ What is real?”

“ look, I guess I see a gigantic wall built sideways some kilometers in front of us?”

“I can’t see anything that you were saying”

“ But I feel that it’s real, there is really a wall built sideways some kilometers in front of us!”

“That is how you feel, not what is real. And how come you see a world that is some kilometers in front of us?”

“ No it’s just there! I see it! Look! Right there!” he said as he pointed front.

“ I didn’t see anything, XuanZang, I believe that it is your illusion, or if you want me to believe in you, I guess you’ll need to describe the wall that is built sideways some kilometers in front of us.”

“ Well, is his grey and yellow, built by bricks, and I see a big door in the middle of it.”

“ But all of the walls looks like that, stop kidding me, I’m not a three-year-old child anymore.”

“ ummm.”

“Oh it’s there! I see it ! I see it!”

“Yes yes!You finally saw it!”

“Actually, no.”

“ But I’m not joking!”

“ Okay?”

“Fine.”

Hours past, the morning came with the sunshine.

“ Wait XuanZang, I really see it this time!”

“ You saw what?”

“ The wall! The wall that you said yesterday!”

“ No I was just kidding.”

“ Just look! And you’ll see!”

“Oh I saw it!”

“For real?”

“Yes!”

Just like XuanZang said, there is a gigantic wall that is built sideways to them. And again, they walked in a rush, but this time, faster, and less worried.

The sun was burning in the sky again when they reached.

“We reached the end!”they exclaimed loudly!

“WE REACHED THE END!”and again!

THE. END.

New Tales of China's Silk Road

HD Beijing School, Li, Eric – 14

In 2025, China decided to construct a signal tower in the Pamir Plateau for the goal of nationwide coverage of 5G signals. The Pamir Plateau was comprised of several mountains and valleys, having a typical alpine climate, which means the temperature was low till minus 20 degree Celsius with strong winds. Over a hundred thousand people live there, while not having access to the internet. The Pamir Plateau was also a significant station of the Silk Road in the past.

The construction team was leaded by Shilei, an elite in building. The construction was harsh and the process was full of different kinds of obstacles, breeze often blows components down and Heavy-duty truck can't drive in the mountain for the pass to the station was too steep and rugged. Minus 20 degree Celsius temperatures froze cables solid decreasing the efficiency of electricity transmission substantially, also disabling regular artificial construction for the low temperature and mighty wind. Worse of all, native herdsmen viewed the tall steel tower at far distance with suspicion. After communication, the team understood that they were fearing it would disrupt their grazing grounds and traditional way of life.

The team adjusted their construction plans, adding wind-resistant shells to the equipment, strengthening the support as well as the framework of the station, and buried cables deeper underground to avoid disturbing the locals' pastures, all of which aggregated construction difficulty.

After a month of tough and arduous work, the 5G internet station was finally complete. On its first day in operation, information was uploaded to the customs systems to China in real time. What used to take two days using mail now took just two seconds by the internet. The signal also reached a rural school nearby, allowing students to attend online classes with peers in local cities including Urumqi and Almaty, as well as big cities.

The team displayed how phone and internet works, teaching them to use short videos to record their grazing lives and check market prices for cattle and sheep online. Gradually, the suspicion among herdsman turned to acceptance.

"Now I can video-call my son studying in Urumqi every night," said an elderly herdsman, a smile creasing his weathered face. The old man asked the construction team to visit his home, so the team head toward a house for polite.

"I really appreciate what all of you build, thank you. I fact, I want to share you my story of the silk road."

The old man spoke Slow and steadily, "thousands of years ago, my family was a rich merchant that travels on the Silk Road, it really means a lot to me and every generation of my family. Every generation told the next stories of our family on the Silk Road, and you can see what it means to us. But later, as countries the Silk Road passes by collapsed, our family settled here until now. What I want to say is I had seen what you have done, and I can see how difficult it was. There are breeze, cold weather, and dissatisfactions and demands of us, the herdsman. The process you have gone through was like the journey of the Silk Road, there are obstacles, troubles, and difficulties for you just like storms, robbers, and mountains my ancestors had encountered. Thus, thank you for what you have done. In addition, as internet becomes available, I found that it brings what the Silk roads bring. Now we can trade with others on the internet, I noticed it enables everyone to learn from each other, and most importantly, connecting each other."

Shilei was inspired by what the herdsman said. He wrote "the Silk Road ends; internet have no borders" to commemorate this moment.

This 5G base station has become a "new Silk Road" on its original route in the new era. It no longer conveys silk and spices, but conveys information and opportunities that are much more precious than goods.

New Tales of China's Silk Road

HD Beijing School, Li, Kevin – 14

A gentle, ancient melody drifted on the desert breeze. Charles adjusted his sunhat and squinted at the distant sand dunes. "Can you believe we're actually standing on the Silk Road?" he called out to his friend Peter. Their history teacher had organized this trip to the Gobi Desert, hoping they'd "walk where Tang Dynasty travelers once walked." But honestly, neither of them expected it to feel this real. Everything changed when they wandered away from the group to check out some old stone pillars half-buried in the sand. The pillars had faded carvings—camels, traders, and some odd symbols. When Peter reached out and touched one of the pictures, a powerful gust of wind whipped up out of nowhere, swirling sand around them in a blinding, golden cloud. Charles's phone beeped and died, and he felt a weird tingling sensation on his skin. When the dust finally settled, their world had completely transformed.

The modern tour buses were gone. So was the distant chatter of their classmates. Now the air smelled sweet, like flowers and roasted grain. Just ahead, a caravan of camels loaded with silk and spices plodded slowly along, led by men in long, loose robes and fur hats. A woman riding a donkey gave them a friendly smile. "We're... we're definitely not in the Gobi anymore," Peter whispered, his phone now just a dead piece of plastic in his pocket. Before panic could set in, a group of people emerged from a nearby tent. Their leader was a tall man with a thick beard named Kevin, who approached them cautiously. Charles and Peter used hand gestures to explain they were lost. Kevin's expression softened. "You are far from home," he said in a deep, calm voice. "Sandstorms often bring strangers to our path. Come, join us. We are heading to Dunhuang soon. Perhaps you will find your way back from there."

The next few weeks were a whirlwind of new experiences. Kevin's tribe, a welcoming group of nomads, looked after them and taught them all sorts of practical skills. They showed Charles and Peter how to ride horses. At first, Charles was so nervous he held the reins in a death grip. But after a few days of practice, he could trot slowly across the green grasslands at sunrise, feeling the cool morning breeze on his face. Peter, who used to depend on his phone for everything, learned to navigate by the stars when night fell. He even figured out how to tell time by watching the sun's position during the day. Every day, they traveled with the tribe. They'd pack their simple belongings onto camels and move from one grassland to another. The food was basic—mostly flatbread baked over the campfire and wild berries they picked along the trail. At night, they slept in big, cozy tents. They never felt lonely, though. In the evenings, the tribespeople would gather around the fire, singing old songs and sharing stories of their journeys. After almost a month on the move, they finally spotted Dunhuang in the distance. It was a bustling town with sturdy mud-brick houses. The streets were packed with traders from everywhere, selling silk, spices, and handmade goods. Kevin took them to the famous Mogao Grottoes. Inside, Charles and Peter were amazed by the bright, detailed paintings on the cave walls. They saw scenes of gods flying through clouds, travelers leading camels, and stories from ancient times. They'd seen black-and-white photos of these murals in their history books. But seeing them in person, with colors so vivid and alive, was a completely different experience.

That evening, as the sun dipped below the horizon and turned the sky a brilliant orange, Charles and Peter made their way to the edge of Dunhuang. What they found there made their hearts skip a beat. Right there in the sand, half-buried and waiting, was a group of old stone pillars. They looked exactly like the ones that had whisked them away to the Tang Dynasty in the first place. Peter moved closer, his eyes scanning the weathered surface. Then he saw it—a faint carving on one of the pillars. It was the same camel pattern he'd touched back in the modern Gobi Desert. "Charles, look at this!" he said, his voice full of excitement. "I think if we touch this, it might take us home." But before they did anything, they knew they had to say goodbye to Kevin. They found

him sitting outside his tent, carefully mending a leather bag. When they told him they were leaving, he just nodded slowly. Then he reached for a small woven bag and filled it with dried apricots and raisins. "Take these with you," he said, giving Charles a gentle pat on the shoulder. "They'll keep you fed on your journey. I hope you make it back to your own home safely." Charles and Peter thanked him over and over, their eyes getting a little misty. Then they hurried back to the stone pillars. Peter took a deep breath and reached out to touch the carving. Immediately, that same powerful wind kicked up, whipping sand around them in a thick, swirling cloud. This time, though, they didn't panic. They just stood there together, holding onto each other and waiting. When the wind finally settled down, the first thing they heard was their history teacher's worried voice. "There you are!" he said, sounding both relieved and concerned. "We've been looking everywhere for you two. Where on earth did you go?"

They blinked, and just like that, they were back on their modern field trip, standing right beside those ancient stone pillars in the Gobi. All their classmates were huddled around them, looking pretty relieved. Their phones buzzed back to life, flooded with missed messages. Charles reached into his pocket and pulled out the woven bag Kevin had given them. The dried fruit inside was still there—a real, tangible piece of their adventure. Peter shot Charles a grin, and Charles grinned right back. They didn't tell the others a thing. Some adventures are just too special to share with everyone. But they both knew the truth. They hadn't just walked where Tang Dynasty travelers walked. They had lived it. And in the process, they'd made a friend they would never, ever forget.

New Tales of China's Silk Road

HD Beijing School, Li, Summer – 12

“Don’t you feel any longing for this land?” Asked Kublai Khan, the Mongol Emperor of China.

“Yes, I did, after staying here for 17 years and learning of this wondrous place.” Marco Polo answered.

Before him stood the emperor, his face adorned with a smile that held a ruler’s pride and a flicker of genuine, almost paternal, regard, “So why do you still want to leave this land, I assure you, as long as you are willing to stay and continue working for me, I can give you wealth and luxury.” The emperor’s voice seemed to be calm, but his fingers absently traced the carved dragon on the golden shiny chair of his arm on the throne. There was then silence spreading through the air, Marco Polo stood there, memorizing this life around this place.

The air froze at this moment, and the vast hall grew urgently quiet. Marco Polo saw Kublai Khan’s smiling face of pleasing, he memorized that furious face from three years past...

It was a sunny afternoon, bright sun rising up the sky, lighting up the whole kingdom, just like she lit up Marco Polo’s heart. Her name was Tana, and she was half Mongolian and half Chinese. She was elegant and especially her long, smooth, dark black hair with intricate ornaments. Her appearance filled Marco Polo’s otherwise ordinary days with surprise and anticipation. But now, the sunny day seemed to be too bright and dazzling, blurring his vision and making him extremely irritable and uneasy. In this moment, all the beauty and happiness of his trip turned into ashes. The emperor’s expression gradually became ferocious, and his eyes sharpened, like a sharp but invisible knife, slowly pointing to Marco Polo’s heart. “Please, my king, she could really make my normal trade day some fun” The king was still quiet “I promise that she will not make my work undone, please!” He bagged.

“It is just a joke putting an Italian with a Mongolian, and I am unwilling to change our tradition because of you! I gave you lots and lots of money and food, I am trying my best to give you the best and make you feel comfortable while working, but what did you do for all of this?” Kublai Khan questioned Marco Polo with anger. Marco Polo answered with silence, because it was his first time of seeing such an anger of the emperor. “This will be your last day working with me, tomorrow I will send you back to Italy and we will no longer meet each other, it is such a disappointment of you!”

The king left in a huff with Marco Polo standing in the same place three sturdy guards dragged him by the arms, pulled him out of the palace, then slammed the palace doors shut, leaving him alone in the desolate wilderness of the desert.

On and on he walked, trying to get out of the desert. As despair began to spread through his body, he felt a distinct pain in his throat because of having no water for a long time. That pain was like a knife cutting through his body, his breath quickly became faster and more eager, making himself harder and harder to breath, his eyesight shut down and become black.

But just then, a strong and hopeful voice came from over the side, bigger and bigger, it’s her: Tana! She ran up and pick Marco Polo up to make him sit up with anxiety and careful voice. She gave Marco Polo a whole bottle of milk and water, waiting for him to be fine. Sonly, Tana hold Marco Polo tightly and slowly walked to the edge of the desert, disappearing in a moment.

They walked along the desert for a long time and reached a big and old cave. Tana ran inside, “Look, the modest, retiring, virtuous young lady with a basket of flowers and vegetables that she has picked, that’s me!” Tana said, with a quiet and soft voice pointing at the drawing on the wall of in small cave. Marco Polo walked near to the wall, glared at it and said “See, that is me, that young lady in the corner wanted to reach you.” Your absolutely not as handsome has he is!” She joked, with an innocent smile laughing at me.

Her face and soft voice of happiness was craved in Marco Polo's head. "That is Guan Ju from the ancient China in 'The Book of Poetry' It is a story about a young gentleman loving a young lady" Marco Polo exclaimed, trying to make his voice low like a gentle man. "Hey, you know a lot about this!" Tana ridiculed.

She then quickly walked to the other wall picture next to Guan Ju and a winding small road then appears in their eyesight. It was like a beautiful landscape picture but even more than that. In the beginning of the desert road, two businessmen stood together taking a communication and seemed to success and were all very satisfied about what they got from others. Then, years after years, a man with wood and papers on his hand appears near a small river near by the desert. He squatted quietly to the side with his attention completely focused on the pile of pup on his hand. Finally, he seemed to figure the question out and started to cheer near by the water. Looking forward to the picture, hundreds of black enormous rats surged like the Changjiang river with an astonish speed. Soon, diseases speeded to China, India and a lot of other Asia countries, in a moment, the world was like a gigantic jail, keeping everyone inside with hopeless and sadness. Looking forward, this was not only a road, but it is also a role of history with wars, trade, disease and culture spreading. It is a road going towards the present, the current and the future.

Tana smiled and walked along to the other wall pictures.

The cool silence of the cave pressed around them, scared and complete. Marco's finger pressed on the painting near the Guan Ju birds. "My grandfather painted this, he was a businessman just like you, traveling all around the world." Tana turned to Marco, her eyes seriously flickering, "This road, Polo, is not just a road made of stone and bricks, nor just a geographical land road, but it is a road of choices and decision of your whole life....."

In a shutter, Marco Polo woke up from his imagination, He stared at the king and answered, "No, there is nothing than her, after this work, it is me all to her." He then bowed deeply to the emperor and strode from the hall with a heart strangely light and his own for the first time. He quietly but strongly said to himself "My new life has now begun, for this time, I am going to be myself and do things that I like!"

The Way to the City

HD Beijing School, Liang, Martin – 12

On a hot summer day, lakes were dry, no trees standing on the side of the road. I'm walking on the hot road to find my caravan and tell them to start our journey from Dunhuang to Antioch." Hey, it is time to start our journey. Let's go." My teammates stood up and slowly walked toward our goods on the carriage. We are going to Antioch to exchange goods with the local people. I'm a new caravan and had only learned the strategies of how to guide a caravan on the right way and not putting them in danger. My master taught me teamwork in a caravan is very important for the team, but I didn't recognize the importance of what my master taught me. I'm looking forward for our journey to the Antioch, and I would like to see something interesting such as some animals that I had never met before. I'm 23 years old and I felt very excited about our journey.

In my team there was four people with me, one who looks like he has a lot of energy and have a spear in his hand I think he is a hunter, another one in my team is a thin tall man who I think knows a lot of knowledge, the third one in my team was a tall man who was always looking at his pocket that have medicines and I think he is a doctor, and the last one is a man who was old but he always have a small puppet in his hands. On our journey I walked quickly in front of the caravan and every time when look back to check where they were, my other teammates were always having a long distance between me and them. I was very annoyed about their speed because I want to find a cave in the desert for resting tonight. By the time it was night we stopped and rested in a cave we just found by an oasis. Outside the cave the desert seems like a beast that will eat us without a second. My caravan was all tired, we had not eaten anything for a long time through our journey. I asked: "Who can go and hunt for some meat?" the strong man stood up. He picked up his spear and walked into the desert. My other teammates were not sitting on the ground they stood up and went out to look for some water around the oasis. I asked a few people to stay and protect our goods with me. When most of our teams were outside, we built a simple stove for cooking. However, a group of thieves found us they waited outside with swords that had chilling edge waiting for the time to kill us and take away the goods.

I saw them and woke up my teammates who were having a nap on our horse. He was scared but I told him to be calm. We picked up some oil on the ground and spilled it all over the entrance of the cave. If the thief step in, we will through our torch on the ground and make a fire so our teammates may see the smoke and quickly come back and rescue us. They walked closer and closer and my heart was pounding faster. Sweats made my cloth wet. I held up a torch and decided to through it when I saw the thieves' face. I stood up but my teammate told me to hide behind our carriage.

My teammate told me to calm down and listen carefully to what was happening outside, and I heard three footsteps which meant there were three thieves outside the cave. I shouted to them: "What do you want?" no reply. They walked into our cave, and I told my teammates not to through our torch on the oil because I had a better method. They walked in and looking greedily at our goods in the box." Run!" I shouted and ran out of the cave. When all of my teammates escape from the cave I through the torch on the ground and used the fire to stop the thieves from escaping.

Few minutes later, my teammate finally came back, and we told him what had happened in the time he is away. He was very angry and picked up a wood trunk slowly walked closer to the cave. When the fire finally went out the thieves escaped from the cave and there are many holes on their cloth. They sat on the ground and breath the fresh air outside the cave, but my teammates had already been waiting outside. He used his tree trunk and hit on one of the thieves' head, but the other thieves quickly started to attack him. I was shocked about how quickly the thieves react to our attack. We worked together and at last we knocked of the thieves left. We had our dinner after we arrested the thieves that was laying on the ground and the foods my teammates found seems so delicious. Sitting on the sand of the desert was cold but when I looked up into the sky, I felt so relaxed and the tiredness was washed away. I thought the night sky is very beautiful just like a drawing an artist had made. After we had a sleep, we continued on our journey to Antioch.

In this accident I found that it is very important to work as a team. And I found that teamwork is must in a team, without any member of your team you may not success a goal. In the continue journey our team worked together and after a month we arrived at Antioch with full of hope we traded with the citizens that live in the city and earned a lot of money. I left my team since we finished trading with the local citizens. And decided to return to my own country Han Density to wait for my next caravan to lead to different places.

New Stories of the Silk Road

HD Beijing School, Liu, Cathy – 13

Long ago, in a lovely and prosperous city of China, there lives a beautiful princess named Yong An. She is the role model of all the young girls in the dynasty. She has long, beautiful hair decorated with expensive jewelry, and a red hand-drawn flower in the very middle of her forehead. She always wears long traditional Chinese dresses.

“Yong An, it’s time to wake up!”

“Okay, I am coming!” My maid Ban Xia helps me dress and does my makeup. Today I am going to see General Huo, so I must be quick. I need to arrive before he leaves to fight the Xiongnu.

I hurry into the carriage. During the ride I feel very nervous, because it has been a long time since I last see him after he returns from the battlefield. Now he must fight the Xiongnu again.

“Princess, we are here,” says the groom.

“Princess, the Emperor wants to see you,” the eunuch says.

Why does Father want to see me? Is he in the tower? I am shocked, but I still follow the eunuch to the palace.

“Yong An, I am sorry to say this, but I must tell you something. The Western Regions’ envoy says that if we want peace between the two lands, we must send a princess to marry the Western prince. It will be either you or your little sister, but she is not yet an adult.” My father looks more serious than I have ever seen him.

“But Father, I can’t! I already love someone. I love the general, not the Western prince!” I say with tears on my face.

“You must go before tomorrow.” My father leaves after saying this, leaving me alone in the huge and frightening palace.

After a few seconds, I slowly stand up and walk into the garden behind the palace. When I am little, I often hide here to watch the general practice sword dancing. He is tall and handsome, always wearing a white war robe and a red cloak. When he stands beneath the peach blossom tree, the wind lifts his cloak and reveals his majestic long sword.

I sit on a rock and take a necklace from my sleeve. This necklace is from him. Three years ago, on my fifteenth birthday, I come to watch him practice. After he leaves, I accidentally find this exquisite necklace on the ground. I think it belongs to him, so I take it as a secret birthday gift. My heart beats fast as I remember.

Tears fall from my eyes. I cannot believe Father makes such a decision. I can barely breathe. My head feels heavy, and everything goes dark. The last thing I see is a man’s face.

When I wake up, I am in my bedroom. I do not remember how I return. I feel too weak to sit up and fall back into sleep again.

A loud sound wakes me. I open my eyes and realize I am in a carriage. I suddenly sit up.

“Miss, you are awake?” my maid asks.

“Where am I?” I ask.

“This morning, Master orders me to take you west while you are asleep.”

“What? How far have we traveled?” I cry. I do not want to go. Father sends me away without even telling me.

I gently pull back the curtain. Outside, people wear veils, and girls wear light pink gauze that sparkles in the sunlight. Boys wear simple linen clothes, looking gentle and neat. Everyone looks happy, but I do not feel the same.

“What are you looking at, Miss?” Qing Yun asks. “You look unwell.”

“Nothing... I am hungry. I want to eat.”

We enter a small inn. Dirt and sand cover the floor, and the tables are made of rough stone. A strange smell fills the wooden room.

“What is that smell?” Qing Yun asks. Suddenly a small creature runs past me.

“Aaaaaa!”

“Well, where does this beautiful princess come from? How pretty she looks!” Three fat men sit in the darkest corner of the room, laughing loudly. I ignore them and look at the menu.

“Lamb, mushrooms in milk, meat in bread...”

“What are these? Are they poop?” Qing Yun shouts.

“Oh, such a brave little princess, but she cannot even eat our food!” the men laugh.

“Stop it!” I quickly pull Qing Yun outside. “Do you know we represent our country here? What you do is dangerous. We are not on our own land. If we fight them, do you think we will win?”

“No...”

“Then do not do that again.”

“Okay...”

Night falls, and they find a small, old house for us to rest.

I take a bottle of wine and sit on the doorstep, lifting my head to watch the moon. It is large and bright. Its silver light spreads across the land. It is not as strong as the sun, but it is more gentle and poetic. I wonder if he sees the same moon in China.

I want to go home—to laugh with my friends and watch his figure move through the trees. I cannot stand the food, the drinks, the weather, or the people here. Maybe my maid is right. We do not belong in this place.

New Tales of China's Silk Road

HD Beijing School, Munro, Miles – 14

Long long ago whispers an ancient method to unlock eternal freedom. Guitu was a high school senior in the application season, he didn't acknowledge the grades he got in school which made his parents and everyone he knows have no such expectations for him. He failed all of his exams and almost got expelled for the amount of classes he had skipped in one semester, all he cared about was what lay hidden in the margins.

It all started in history class, where Mr Zhang was talking about ancient Chinese Myths. Guitu was sleeping as usual until Mr Zhang threw a piece of chalk right on his forehead. Mr Zhang asked him: "what are your plans for the future? You're clearly not going to university." Guitu said that "he'll find a way eventually". Everyone doubted him, including himself. Mr Zhang said to Guitu, stories say that there is a way to unlock eternal freedom, but it's too risky, thousands of people have failed and it still remains a mystery. Mr Zhang's words deeply intrigued Guitu, for the first time he felt a hint of hope. But how must I achieve eternal freedom? Asked Guitu. You have to start your journey by climbing the great wall and find a key hidden at the end of the wall. Be aware of the Different insects coming at your way, once a person was bitten by a poisonous spider and unfortunately had to end his journey. After achieving the key you have to continue the rest of your journey on the silk road, it might sound easy but obstacles will come at your way when you least expect it. Last you have to climb the wall of eternal freedom and insert the key you found at the very top. After the first time Guitu actually acknowledged what Mr Zhang said he began a new chapter to his life, Pursuing eternal freedom.

For his whole life Guitu wasn't an adventurous person at all, he would never take a risk for something, but here he is now, packing for his journey. Guitu had hesitated, the supplies he needed for his journey he was not able to get, so the only way was to steal. Gathering the supplies was difficult enough, can you imagine actually going on the Journey? But he knew that this was his only way, he wouldn't make anything out of the life he had now, being a student that failed all his classes. As he took his first step out the door, his journey had officially begun.

Climbing the great wall felt endless, Guitu had been climbing for hours but yet still no progress. Guitu stops climbing. He sits on a step, breath ragged, and simply listens. He hears the wind through the watchtowers, a sound like ancient signals whispering gently to his ears. It told him the wall was not a staircase to be conquered, but instead a story to be read, each step at a time. There he witnessed his first test of the journey, It wasn't about strength, but about attention.

Guitu stood up, not to climb faster, but to walk with purpose. He stopped counting steps and started observing his surroundings. The patterns of the stones looked like an ancient map, while the shadows of the trees felt like giant sundials along the way.

As the sun began to set, the tourists' noises faded away. He was alone on a deserted stretch. He found a place to spend the night, He set up a tent and lit up a candle, but he forgot the most crucial thing of all, he forgot to spray insecticide. Later at midnight he felt an itch on his face. When he tried to scratch it he felt something rather hairy. He woke up and in front of him was the biggest spider you would ever see in your entire life. Guitu panicked, he remembered Mr Zhang's words but forgot to spray insecticide. Guitu rushed out of his tent, took the insecticide from his backpack and then sprayed it all over his tent. That scene you just witnessed was Guitu's first test of bravery throughout the whole story. Even to this day Guitu still sprays insecticide all over his room to prevent insects from coming in.

For days he dealt with the never ending staircases but reaching close to the end he found a secret chamber hidden. He tiptoed towards it, peeked inside and there it was, the key lying on the floor. Guitu felt suspicious, how can it be that easy? I just go grab the key and that's it? Guitu threw a rock near the key and a pile of stones fell from the ceiling. He discovered that if something touches the ground, a pile of stones will instantly fall. This

was probably where a lot of people got stuck at. After achieving the key successfully Guitu was on his way to the silk road.

The Iron key felt like a dead weight in Guitu's pocket as he stood at the edge of the Gobi desert. He took his first step off the paved highway and into the wilderness, the air already simmering with a dry relentless heat. The first lesson of the road was silence, It was a heavy, complete quiet that pressed on his ears, broken only by the mournful whistle of the wind. Throughout the journey, Guitu found a method, he would describe the scenery to himself, it was like he himself became his own physical companion.

As he was walking through the silk road, the weather betrayed him. The desert sun was a merciless, blazing eyeball, baking the moisture from his skin within hours. But by afternoon, the horizon darkened. A wall of dust, taller than any city building was coming Guitu's way. There was no shelter anywhere in the silk road, all he could do was crouch low, wrapping his thin jacket around his face as the world dissolved into a howling, brown chaos.

He walked for days, thirst became a constant feeling, hunger was a dull, hollow ache in the stomach. As he was walking he saw a pond straight ahead, he rushed towards it took a sip, but he didn't taste any water, it was just a mirage. Instead he put a scoop of sand in his mouth.

As he kept walking, he saw an enormous piece of architecture. It was the last step of his Journey, The wall of eternal freedom.

He gathered all his materials, while he was looking through his backpack he found a note, It was from Mr Zhang. It turns out that Mr Zhnag was one of the challengers to try and achieve eternal freedom, but didn't end up succeeding. Guitu climbed the wall with all his might, he used every bit of strength to get to the top which he did. He inserted the key in and came out a piece of paper, On the paper it wrote these words "It wasn't about the treasure, its about the journey". Guitu realized that if he put all his might and tried constantly towards something, then he will eventually succeed.

New Stories of the Silk Road

HD Beijing School, Shi, Billy – 12

One day, Xuan Zang was walking alone in the big, hot desert on his trip to Western Heaven. The sun burned down hard, and the sand under his feet was very hot. Suddenly he saw a man lying still on the sand, looking dead.

Xuan Zang quickly ran over. The man lifted his weak hand and gave Xuan Zang a scroll. His voice was quiet: "Please help me! Take this to Dung Huang and give it to a man called Fish." Since Xuan Zang was going to Dun Huang anyway, so he nodded. "But where is Fish?" he asked. But the man just smiled and closed his eyes—he died.

Xuan Zang sighed and held the scroll tight. He decided to keep his promise, even if he had to slightly changes way. He fixed his bag and walked on. He didn't see a person hiding behind a sand dune, watching him with sad eyes.

On the next day, he kept going. But then he ran into some soldiers who wanted the scroll. He ran as fast as he could, and the scroll slipped from his hand into the sand. He didn't notice it was gone until he stopped to rest.

Xuan Zang turned back to look for the scroll, but the wind had covered the spot with sand. He searched for hours but found nothing. When he was going to leave he got triped over by something, the scroll! he Was filled happiness but also frustrated that he had found in the sand for hours but just found it when he was going to leave.

Finally, after walk for one whole month, Xuan Zang found a small village not far away, right in front of his eyes. Since he had completely run out of food and felt very hungry, he quickly walked over and went to beg for some food to eat. Because Xuan Zang was going to the Western Heaven to get holy books, the kind villagers welcomed him warmly and gave him plenty of delicious and tasty food. They also asked Xuan Zang stay for the night at their homes.

The next day, Xuan Zang continued his long journey, as well as a big bag of food and fresh water. He walked the entire day through the hot desert, with the burning sun shining down on his head, and everything just went as usual. But when night fell slowly and everyone was fast asleep—including Xuan Zang—because he can't get used to the weather change at the dessert. the magic scroll lit up suddenly and sent a red light streaking straight into the dark sky. The light was a dark, scary, blood-red glow that lit up the quiet desert for a short time. When the red light faded away completely, he quickly left, his heart beating fast with great fear. Some soldiers soon discovered the clear footprints Xuan Zang had left behind in the sand and chased after him at once. After an hour of nonstop walking and running, Xuan Zang was tired out and exhausted, so he decided to take a short rest under a small rock by the road. But when he woke up from his nap, it was already the next bright day. Moreover, Xuan Zang could faintly hear some strange noises coming from far behind him. And the sound Xuan Zang heard was not from other people, it was actually the soldiers who were right behind Xuan Zang, still chasing him. Even though Xuan Zang ran quite fast, the soldiers were even faster, so they easily caught Xuan Zang in the end, and decided to go back and hand him over to their cruel master.

When they were halfway on their way back, Xuan Zang saw another army of soldiers hiding quietly in the thick bushes, making a little bit of soft sound. This hidden army was not there to save Xuan Zang—they were after the magic scroll too. Since Xuan Zang was caught by the Black Sand Troop, the Iron Claw Battalion had to fight them hard to get Xuan Zang and the valuable scroll. Xuan Zang used this chaotic chance to run away quickly, and he disappeared soon into the dessert. When the fighting was finally finished, the surviving soldiers had just realized that Xuan Zang was already gone. Suddenly, they heard a low sound in the dark shadows behind them and then, all the remainders fell down dead. And that shadow kept on followingXuan Zang. Days went on, but

even Xuan Zang could notice that it had been weird. When Xuan Zang entered a narrow, lengthy canyon, he already felt a vague sense of unease. When he reached the middle of it, armies appeared both in front of and behind him. They captured Xuan Zang effortlessly and prepared to take him back to present him to their master. At that moment, the man who had been hiding in the shadows emerged again. Holding a broadsword, he charge alone into the entire army. With a few swift strokes of his blade, he quickly cut down several soldiers. After a fierce fight, he eliminated all the enemies, yet he himself was severely hurt. Xuan Zang immediately took out his medicines and bandages to help this man. Luckily, the man had not sustained any fatal injuries and soon was able to stand up.

Xuan Zang was surprised the the man had save him but also not for the scroll that everyone was fighting for, so Xuan Zang asked him why did he save him for no reason. so the man said" You know Tim (the man who died in the dessert), I'm his sevent, Alex. But Xuan Zang had completely no idea who Tim is so he ask Alex who that is. "You don't know him? His is the most powerful warlord in the whole world! And you're telling me you don't even know who is?!" Alex replied in amazed and uncertain. "Then why do you help him? The scroll. And just asking do you know what is this scroll? And what does it do?" "No. Can you tell me?" Xuan Zang asked." That scroll you've got can control the whole world's soldiers, and if the scroll is taken by some bad people, the world is going to be in a great danger. so that why, sir wants to give it to you Xuan Zang, but not letting other people get it. Actually sir know a lot about you and liked you very much." said Alex sadly but also cheerful at the same time. "Then if he can control the army then how could he got killed or murdered?" Xuan Zang ask confused. "And that is why i am following you and protecting you, since the person wanted to get the scroll, then he must get it from you!

And the soldiers which want to kill you is directed from the guy. Also looking at sir's injury, i'm pretty sure that he got murdered from behind with a kunai, which is probably a ninja." Alex told Xuan Zang secretly. "You can just kept on doing what you are doing, and i will protect you from behind."

So Xuan Zang kept on his trip and quicker this time to Duang Huang. it was feeling much secured when there is a strong friend behind him, with Alex protecting Xuan Zang was almost there like 1000km to go (two days) that night Xuan Zang couldn't sleep so he sit up in the cant and started memorizing the buddhist scripture. But Xuan Zang realised that it has been a bit too quiet for nights in the deserts.

So Xuan Zang called Alex over. But luckily alex was there. Xuan Zang ask Alex if he thinks it's a bit weird tonight, and what should they do?

Since the whole day alex was paying great attention at protecting Xuan Zang and fighting the soldiers, so he slept immediately without even noticing the odds of the dessert. But after Xuan Zang reminder Alex quickly knew that it is a bit too quiet at nights in desert. Usually, there is a lot of insects and bird's sound, but today these only wind and sand. So alex suggests that they move now and find another place to rest or maybe just keep on walking. They quickly packed their bags and started their boring and tedious journey at night, Just as they solved after they left 2 minutes the soldiers walked out from their hiding spots and sign, because of their anti-detection silks are so good. And one of the soldiers said, "Why can't we just kill them and bring the scroll back?" another one said "Don't know, but Boss said so." Xuan Zang and Alex walked until sun rise and found a little village not far away, because they were so tired and frustrated, they quickly find a man's house and told he what happened and soon fall asleep.

TO BE CONTINUED.....

Ethan and Bolt's revenge caravan

HD Beijing School, Sun, Kimi – 11

In a sunbaked village clinging to the Tianshan Mountains' foothills, 12-year-old Ethan lived in a mud-brick hut with his sick father Mustafa and loyal golden retriever Bolt. Mustafa, once a seasoned Silk Road camel driver, lay bedridden with a stubborn lung disease—local herbs did nothing, and the only doctor who could help demanded gold Ethan didn't have. Their savings were drained, their goats sold one by one for medicine, and Ethan's mother's absence left no heirlooms to trade.

Each night, Ethan tended to his father, wiping his fevered forehead with cool cloths as Mustafa whispered tales of his travels. "Remember the oasis with date palms taller than watchtowers?" Mustafa would say, his voice thin but warm. "Silk softer than clouds, stars bright enough to touch." Ethan would cling to these words, asking, "Will we see it together?" Mustafa would brush his cheek, saying, "Bravery isn't fearlessness—it's doing what's right when you're scared. Love is courage with nowhere to hide."

One evening, Mustafa's cough worsened, leaving him gasping for breath. Ethan squeezed his hand, tears burning: "I'll get the gold, Dad. I promise." Mustafa smiled weakly: "Take my old knife—grip it firm but gentle, only to protect. Follow the North Star; it will guide you home, just as it guided me."

At dawn, Ethan packed flatbread, water, and the worn knife, then hurried to the village well—where he'd heard a caravan led by Karim was heading west for Antioch, needing extra hands. Bolt trotted beside him, sensing his urgency.

Karim frowned when he saw Ethan: "You're a boy. Sandstorms, hunger, Xionnu raiders—you'll die." "I'm strong!" Ethan insisted. "I tend camels, carry loads, use a knife. My dad's dying—this is his only chance." Karim studied his determined face, then nodded: "Stay close. Keep that dog—he might sense danger." "His name's Bolt," Ethan said. "He'll never leave me."

A curly-haired man named Jamil clapped Ethan's shoulder as they set off: "I left my 10-year-old in Baghdad for school. The Silk Road takes much, but gives back if you're brave." The caravan—50 silk-laden camels, 20 armed men, Ethan, and Bolt—plodded west, bells ringing softly.

The first days were peaceful. Karim taught Ethan to read the stars: "The North Star never moves—your father was right to trust it." Jamil warned him: "Xionnu attack at dawn or dusk. They fear dogs—Bolt's barks will warn us." Bolt wagged his tail, as if understanding.

A week later, they entered the Gobi Desert. The sun blazed, sand scorching underfoot, and water grew scarce. "Ration carefully—no water for two days," Karim ordered. Ethan shared his canteen with Bolt, whispering, "We'll get through this together." That night, Ethan worried aloud about his father. Jamil reassured him: "Fathers fight for their sons. Your dad's holding on for you—love is stronger than any medicine."

On the tenth day, arrows hailed from mountain cliffs. "Xionnu!" someone shouted. Camels panicked, raiders on horseback charging down with swords. "Defend the silk!" Karim yelled. Jamil pulled Ethan behind a rock: "Stick to me—watch my back!"

A horned raider lunged at Ethan. Bolt barked, leaping at the horse's legs. The raider fell, and Jamil shouted: "Now!" Ethan gripped his father's knife and stabbed the man's leg. Another raider grabbed Ethan from behind—Bolt bit his arm, and Ethan rolled free. "Behind you!" he yelled to Karim, who sliced the enemy's sword away.

After an hour, the Xionnu fled. Three men were wounded, two camels dead. Jamil bandaged Ethan's cut arm: "You fought bravely." Ethan trembled: "I was scared, but I couldn't let Dad down." Karim patted his shoulder: "Bravery is fighting even when you're afraid. Your father would be proud."

That night, Karim told the men Ethan's story. They passed him extra bread and spices: "For your father," one said, handing him cinnamon. "It eases coughs." Ethan teared up: "I couldn't have done it without Bolt... or any of you."

The rest of the journey was tough but safer. Bolt found paths through snow-capped mountains, his nose sniffing out hidden trails. At an oasis, a merchant gave Ethan dates: "Tell your father a stranger wishes him well."

A month later, they reached Antioch—bustling stone streets, markets filled with travelers. Karim sold the silk and handed Ethan a heavy pouch: "Enough for your father's medicine—and more. You earned it." Ethan hugged Jamil goodbye: "I'll tell Dad you said hello."

Ethan and Bolt raced back, following the North Star. When they reached the hut, Mustafa sat up in bed, cheeks pink, eyes bright. "Ethan!" he cried. Ethan hugged him, pouring out the gold. "I'm home, Dad! Bolt saved me, and the caravan men helped so much." Mustafa cried: "My brave boy. I knew the stars would guide you."

The doctor arrived, and within a month, Mustafa walked again. Each night, Ethan told stories of sandstorms, battles, and kind strangers. "Bolt's a hero," he said. Mustafa patted the dog: "Loyal, just like you."

Months later, they joined Karim's caravan again. "The Silk Road gave us a second chance," Mustafa said. "Now we'll help others—carry medicine, share food with lost travelers."

As they set off, Ethan looked up at the North Star, Bolt at his side, father beside him. The wind carried the scent of silk and spices, and he smiled. The Silk Road had turned silk into gold, but it had given Ethan something far more precious: courage to face fear, loyalty of friends, and a father's unshakable belief. No matter where the road led, he knew he'd always find his way home.

New Tales of China's Silk Road

HD Beijing School, Tan, Chacha – 14

The Silk Road is more than an old path on ancient maps. It is a living legacy of connection, where every caravan, trader and traveler left a small story waiting to be made into something new. This timeless route is a treasure chest, where fact and fiction mix together, and its past can be brought to life while celebrating its busy, ever-changing present.

Imagine standing in a sunny market in Samarkand, surrounded by the smell of cumin and saffron floating through the air, and the loud chatter of traders from a dozen different lands. A teen apprentice, who has the simple job of watching his master's piles of colorful silk cloth, leans against a wooden stall and starts talking to a girl selling painted clay pots. She tells him stories of her grandma, who once joined a camel caravan and traveled all the way to Chang'an, carrying bags of dried fruit and hand-woven carpets to trade. In return, the apprentice shares how his family has kept their silk-making skills alive for generations, boiling silkworm cocoons in hot water and twisting the fine threads into shiny fabric. This is the heart of the Silk Road—ordinary people swapping not just goods, but dreams, memories and little pieces of their lives. This small, warm scene can be turned into a vivid story, using real facts about Silk Road trade and adding the gentle feeling of strangers becoming friends. Outside the market, you can walk the dusty roads with camel drivers, who sing folk songs under the starry desert sky to pass the time on long journeys. You can also peek into the cave temples of Dunhuang, where ancient artists painted bright pictures of travelers, gods and dancing figures that still amaze us with their beauty today. These stories don't need to be about famous kings or powerful emperors; the most touching ones are always about everyday people.

We can also look around us to find the Silk Road in today's world. We can visit a local museum to see old porcelain bowls that were carried on big ships along the maritime Silk Road, their surfaces decorated with patterns from China, Arabia and Europe all mixed together. We can talk to a cook at a nearby restaurant who uses spices like cinnamon and pepper—spices that first came to China along the Silk Road hundreds of years ago. We can even learn about modern Silk Road projects, like fast trains that carry toys, clothes and electronics from China to Europe in just a few days, or online shops that help craftsmen from Silk Road countries sell their hand-made jewelry and blankets to people all over the world. These real-life stories show that the Silk Road never went away—it just changed its form. It is now a huge network of trains, ships and smartphones, still bringing people from different cultures together just like it did hundreds of years ago.

The Silk Road is full of endless inspiration. It teaches that no matter how far apart people live, they can always find ways to connect and understand each other. It reminds us that culture is not something fixed and unchanging—it grows and becomes richer when different people share their stories, food and traditions. All we need to do is pick up our pens, open our minds and start weaving new tales for this timeless road.

New Stories of the Silk Road

HD Beijing School, Wang, Ann – 11

Xuanzang sat in his room in the Sandstorm Kingdom palace. He has been trapped in the palace for five days. Just then, a pretty girl poked her head in from the hallway outside.

“Good morning, Xuanzang,” the girl yawned, “remember that our wedding is in three days and I will come after lunch to give you the clothes you will be wearing at it”

“Thanks,” Xuanzang said unenthusiastically.

The girl drifted away, leaving him in his misery. *Why did I get taken by a seductress pretending to be a princess in my first week of travel?* Xuanzang thought. He thought back to when he first stepped into the desert, full of hope of what he could learn.

When he walked in the Sand Hill Maze for the third day, he was already bored of the orange and yellow sandy pillars forest and its emptiness. As he wished he could leave that lifeless place, a vicious sandstorm blew in from behind every pillar, and swept him up in a mini tornado, and out of the maze.

The next day morning, Xuanzang woke up with a blazing sun shining in his face, on the top of a huge sand dune. A bright, elegant and large city below caught his eyes. It took him nearly all of morning to get down and arrived at the gate of the city at midday. After he got into the city, he started looking for a place to rest and eat. Just a few minutes after he got in, a red carriage decorated with golden dragons, and hung with billowing pale pink curtains and strings of pearls jingled towards him. He stepped aside respectfully, clearing a path for it.

“Stop the carriage,” an airy voice called from inside.

The coachman pulled on the reins and all four of the white horses stopped.

“Who are you, and where did you come from?” the same airy voice from earlier asked.

“I am a monk from the great Tang Empire in the land of the east, going to seek Buddhism scriptures in the west,” Xuanzang said. He figured that the person in the carriage is either a royalty or an aristocrat from the decorations and number of horses, so he bowed.

A little gasp slipped out of the carriage, and a door on its side swung open. The shoulders and head of a pretty girl with raven hair, pale skin, and large brown eyes popped out.

“Really?” she asked. At his nod, she said, “Come in, you must stay at our palace to rest!” and popped back inside.

He was reluctant to go in, but the coachman said in a whisper, “Never disobey her, or you will be punished in unthinkable cruel ways.”

Xuanzang sighed and climbed into the carriage. The door slammed shut behind him. The inside of the carriage is even more glamorous than the outside. A golden seat with fluffy silk cushions rests on a velvet carpeted jade floor. Colorful dragons and phoenixes are carved in the walls, along with jewels and pearls. A heavy scent of roses fills the space.

The girl was wearing a long, flowing pink and white dress, and gesturing Xuanzang to sit next to her.

“I haven’t introduced myself, have I?” she asked.

He nodded. Xuanzang has a feeling that he shouldn’t go to the palace with her.

“I am Viola, princess of Sandstorm Kingdom. I’m looking for a husband, and you are the perfect choice,” she said, “no, isn’t an answer.”

Xuanzang thought, *how can I seek the scriptures of Buddhism while I'm trapped in a palace, and I don't even want to marry and be king.* He sulked the rest of the way to the palace.

His stay at the palace would have been enjoyable if not tied to the thought of a marriage without his agreement, as anyone would. He lived in a room nearly as big as his house back in the Tang Empire, split into three spaces. A bedroom, a bathroom, and a living room. Princess Viola visits him every day for two to three hours, to discuss their marriage plans, which is actually her talking relentlessly and Xuanzang trying to act as though he is concentrating on her words and excited by them. Those hours are usually the worst part of his day.

On the second day, he overheard princess Viola talking to her most loyal maid when he was wandering around the palace in the afternoon. He isn't interested in their conversation at first but stopped to listen when he heard his name mentioned.

"When is your wedding with Xuanzang scheduled?" asked the maid.

"Six days from now, and eight days from the blood moon. All ingredients except the branch and moon light should be prepared before the ceremony," said the voice of Viola.

"So the ingredients are: a cup of rain on a sunny day, fifty grams of star dust collected in the darkest night, twenty grams of diamond dust from the deepest mine, mist from the forgotten isles, ink from the oldest squid in the ocean, flames from a phoenix's resurrection, the life liquid of ten people of different ages, blood of a Buddhism monk from the east that is related to the maker, half a fruit of the death tree, ice that once trapped a body, a piece of bandage from a mummy, light of the blood moon, and a branch of a Whisper tree picked at a full moon," the maid said, "what a long list to make an immortal potion."

"That is a complicated potion to make, even for a powerful seductress like me. At least I memorized how to do it," Viola sighed.

Xuanzang had heard enough information and went hurrying back to his room. It was already dark outside when he arrived. *So, he thought, she is a seductress and is planning to use me in a potion. I must escape soon, but how?* Questions and plans swirled inside his brain until he fell asleep.

He spent the next two days planning an escape but coming up with nearly about nothing. On the third day, he got a tiny start.

After lunch time, Viola came into Xuanzang's room, a pile of red fabric in her arms.

"This what you will be wearing at our wedding," she smiled. Her expression said, "like it or not."

Viola laid the wedding robe onto his bed. Gold and silver threads weave between the red fabric, sewing rubies and pearls on it. It was a truly magnificent robe. She urged him to try it on and he did, not wanting to cross her. When Xuanzang changed into it, Viola gasped. She had thought it was pretty when no one is wearing it, but it was even nicer on him. They chattered away (to be more accurate, Viola chatters and Xuanzang was still thinking about escape plans while pretending to listen).

After some time, Viola decided to leave.

"Can you visit me after the day after tomorrow?" he said.

"Why?" Viola asked.

He thought quickly, "I want to make a surprise for you, so I won't want you to spoil it. I won't answer if you knock," which is true, since his escape would be a surprise. He didn't mention it will be a bad one though.

"Sure," she said, looking happy.

Xuanzang waited for a long time, before his door opened. A girl at about fifteen with light blue hair braided into a long plait, deep blue eyes and wearing a flowing gown that reminded him of ice and snow steps in.

“Good to see you, Lynx,” he said, rising from his chair, “please lock the door behind you.”

“Good to see you too,” Lynx replied, bowing. After she straightens up, she asked, “why did you requested me to visit you?”

“I will tell you if you answer the following questions correctly,” he said. At her nod, he continued, “you are a member of the Snow Tribe from the north west, you goes to the market to sell and buy things for Viola, and you dislikes her? Please answer truthfully.”

“Yes, yes, and I do not dislike her, I hates her.”

“You have passed. Sit down, and I will tell you my plan to escape this place,” Xuanzang said.

He explained his plan to her quickly, finishing only five minutes after they started.

“Good plan,” Lynx said, “you should spent the night in my room. If we leave tomorrow morning at six, we need to be quick.”

Acting according to their plan, Lynx told her best friend Daisy that they are escaping, and needs her to cover them up. Daisy always goes to the market with Lynx, so after the time they usually comes back, she is going to tell Viola that Lynx is learning new sewing and weaving techniques and won't come back until the next day.

At about six, Xuanzang was dressed in a cheerful looking yellow gown with makeup and a veil, Lynx wearing a blue gown. They each carried two baskets, filled with their usual clothes, weapons, and a lot of food, all covered with beautiful fabrics.

When they passed the palace guards, the guards asked, “Off to buy new clothes for the princess?”

“Yes,” Lynx answered. Xuanzang only nodded.

“Why is Daisy so quiet?” the guards seems to be a bit suspicious.

Lynx hesitated, “We didn't sleep much yesterday, we are up all night to prepare for princess Viola's wedding,” she added a yawn at the end.

The guards gestured them pass. They walked into the city, then into the vast desert and rising sun.

New Stories of the Silk Road

HD Beijing School, Wang, Ava – 13

Dry land, burning sun; my feet are worn out. I'm in the first camels' group to set out on the journey. At first, I didn't know what the journey was about, but if there is a second chance, I will DEFINITELY refuse; you can't imagine how hard the journey was. I'm bought by the caravan, carrying a heavy load of goods for no reason. The first time my feet touch the sand, I felt shock, It was not like the stone, it's soft and thin, the strange smell made me curious and excited. If you want to know my story, please keep reading

We started from Xi'an, Passing through Xian Yang and Bao Ji, it headed for Tian Shui. Steps across the plain, seeing the soft stream, I started to realize the meaning of the journey. The leader of our team was called Zhang Qian, he made plans to lead the team. He said that the original intention for the journey was for transactions but also to connect different countries.

The road became hard, the wind blow like thorn on my face, it feels hurt. But luckily, when I couldn't hold on, the post station will appear. We rest on the grassland, the tiredness suddenly gone. At night, the camel rider light a bonfire, they seat around and start talking about the soldiers on the frontier and some difficulties that may be encountered on our way. They said that there were caravans who was attacked, that made me pretty nervous about the journey ahead.

When the sandstorm arrive, I knew we were arriving to the Yu Men and Gua Zhou, the sun shines fiercely, the sand beneath my feet boiled, sand blew into my eyes, I couldn't see anything, I could only move forward by feeling. We walk together like a ball, but the roars of other camels lighted up my hope. I gritted my teeth and walked forward, using up all my strength.

I don't know how long I walked, but I smelled the scent of the oasis, tiredness turned into desperation and joy, the post station in Dun Huang was very crowded, full of merchants and goods, like spices and jewelry. My owner changed my pack to a new one and brush my hair, I finally felt relax.

After a week in Dun Huang, we set of to our last destination, Kashgar. Kashgar was very popular, people from everywhere trade things with each other, shuttling through different mall, the baggage that I carried was finally gone. Looking at the hustle and bustle in front of me, I finally know what the journey meant to be, it's to connect everyone in the world, working together, understand the cultures. At the way back, there were new thing in my bag and something that I've never seen before. When I arrived, the Chang An city was a lot more different, it was prosperity and flourish.

Now, I'm already old, there were new camels walking the path I walked. Suddenly looking back, the sand, the hills, the burning sun. I will say, I'm wrong, it is my honor to be a part on this journey. I, no , we started the Silk Road story, and it still continuing.

New Stories of the Silk Road

HD Beijing School, Wang, Claire – 12

“Hey, kids, come around,” the man with a big beard stood in the shadows of the trees in the garden, beckoning to the young children playing with the flowers. The kids with their fuzzy blond heads, bounded like joyful lambs towards him.

“Come, do you want to hear a story?” the man had a deep, steady voice.

“A story?” a little girl opened her eyes wide.

“A story about what?” an older boy pulled his tight collar.

“A story...about a princess, a princess from the mysterious eastern kingdom,” the man didn’t have a loud voice, but somehow, the children felt like voice was echoing in the garden.

“Princess, stop furrowing your eyebrows, smooth your dress and keep looking at the front. Careful with the headwear!” the old nurse hurried over to the princess. She touched the golden pieces of jewelry on the young girl’s elegant braids.

The princess was Tang dynasty’s most beautiful woman, loved by her subjects and her father. But that day was when the princess sat on gorgeous palanquin and set off for Dunhuang to be queen. Her eyes and nose were still pretty red after her crying. Her black eyes gleamed with tears.

The two kingdoms had a peace treaty. The emperor saw how war was eating his kingdom. His people are hungry and there isn’t enough money to support their warriors. He sent messengers to ask for peace between them, and they agreed, they gave the emperor enormous amounts of jewelries and money. After the emperor used the money to restore his kingdom, the king asked for repayment. He wanted the princess to be his queen.

The emperor had no other choice. He realized that the large amounts of money and goods were actually the bride price for his daughter. He agreed to give his dear daughter to them. The empress was devastated. She locked herself into her palace and refused to eat and drink. The emperor looked as if he had aged overnight. The princess did not want to leave her kingdom either. But this time, she was forced to leave.

The poor princess rode over deserts and dunes, they walked on the hot sand. The princess was worse than others. The hot weather made her feel like she was about to vomit. Beads of sweat fell down her face, which was white as paper.

Suddenly, the team was attacked by a group of young men carrying eagles and hounds. Arrows flew at the alarmed crew, cries of pain and shock echoed between the dunes. The princess’s mare was startled, the poor thing had an arrow in her thigh! She shot like a rocket towards a mist of sand. The princess fell off and rolled in the fuggy sand. She was stunned. She attempted to crawl to a safer place, but the sand was too loose. The young man that had curly dark brown hair and long braids with colorful beads in front of the group whooped in a foreign language, then raced towards the beautiful princess. He picked her up and held her in his arms. The princess struggled and screamed. Nobody was left to save her. She cried and cried until she fainted.

When she woke up, she was lying on a comfortable bed inside a white tent. While she sobbed, an old woman entered the tent. She gently patted her back, then helped her up. She fetched a bucket of warm water and a soft towel. She gently dipped the towel into the water, then cleaned the princess’s face and body. She gave the princess new clothes and hot mutton soup, then led the princess to an enormous white tent with jewels on it. It has been a long time since the princess met the prince and the king. She realized that although the prince is young and bold, he is kind and loving to her. She eventually realized her love for the prince. She met a lot of people in the tribe ; they were all kind and helpful towards her. She learned the foreign language of the people, so she can finally communicate with others. The princess lived joyful months within the tribe, making friends and learning new techniques. She learned to take good care of herself and follow a daily routine. She found out that the people were Tibetans, the ones who often attack her homeland. But she found out why. Their princess was lost, she was the king’s sister, but they recently found out that she was taken to their kingdom and was married to a prince, princess Tang’s brother. They wished to get their princess back without war, but the

emperor couldn't understand their language and some other traitor ministers told the emperor that the people wished to attack their kingdom, then the thirty years of war begin with misunderstanding. She wished to go back to her homeland to tell her parents that she is safe and tell them about the mistake between them. But she couldn't go back.

But one sunny morning, a merry man came to the tribe. He looked different from the people that the princess had ever seen in her life. He had thick, curly brownish red hair, and a huge, fluffy beard. He wore clothes that were nothing like the clothes they wore. The man spoke a funny language, one that nobody had heard. But the man brought a young boy wearing a floppy hat with a feather on it. The boy knew our language, so he told us what the man meant. The man's name was "Marco Polo". He was a foreign traveler from a distant country, far across the sea. He asked if the princess knew other kingdoms in this land.

The princess was overjoyed and ran to the prince. She told him about her plan. The prince agreed without a second thought, he also hated wars.

Before their journey, the tribe celebrated the end of war between the two kingdoms. They feasted on lamb and beef, Marco seemed to enjoy the food, he drank two jugs of wine and asked for more! The people had a lively night.

The group began their journey the next morning. They rode on fast horses, stampeding across the green plains. The princess sat behind of the prince, holding fast to his waist, feeling the wind blowing past her face. She suddenly felt free. She felt that she belongs to the great plains, belong to the kind tribe, belong to her dear prince. She laughed, her laugh ringing in the plains.

After days of travelling they finally reached the gates of the princess's kingdom. The guards realized that this was their princess and let the crew inside. The people turned and stared at them. Some seem to recognize the princess and waved at her. The princess smiled and waved back at them. They led them towards the throne room. The emperor and empress were sitting on the golden thrones. They looked tired and gloomy. When they saw their princess, the couple jumped up. The emperor blinked back tears, then hold the empress in his arms. The royal family rejoiced! Father, mother and daughter hugged and cried. They have missed each other so much. Finally, after lots of hours of talking, the group finally sat down to talk about the circumstances.

The emperor knew that he had mistaken the Tibetans, and decided to stop the fights between, and, because his princess found true love there, let her live with her prince.

"Now, the story is finished, dears, are you little children satisfied?" the man stood up, his face still in the shadows. "Please wait, sir!" a boy with the blue eyes ran out, catching the man's sleeve. "May I ask for your name, sir? I loved your story!"

The man stepped onto the road, his face shining in the moon light. "My name is Marco, Marco, Polo."

The boy stopped to rub his eye, but then, the man disappeared.

"Remember, these stories of the mysterious Eastern kingdom!"

New Stories of the Silk Road

HD Beijing School, Wang, Ethan – 12

I am Kadir, a Sogdian merchant. I care about others when they need help. I lost my parents when I was young, and I traded goods for survival. My people have traded goods across deserts for hundreds of years!

On a cold winter day, wind and sand stung my face as I rode my camel, Zara, through the Gobi Desert. I was drained and bored. My little mobile shop—strapped to Zara’s back—was caked in sand. Inside, I carried silk scarves, spices, baked flatbread, and water skins. We needed shelter from the sandstorm, so when I saw a small cavern, I guided Zara inside. The wind roared outside like an angry tiger!

I sat on the cave floor and pulled out flatbread and water. I ate quickly—trading makes you hungry! When I finished the last bite, Zara nudged me with her nose. She was walking toward the deep end of the cave. “Wait, Zara!” I called, scrambling to follow. Suddenly, a loud “boom” echoed—like a rock falling. We froze, then tiptoed forward. I felt a cold breeze across my face. I was scared. In the dim light, I gasped: a big metal statue of a smiling man stood there! His eyes were closed, and he looked so calm. I was touched by the details of the statue. The cave walls were covered in luminous cave art, too.

I grabbed a small flashlight from my shop (Sogdians always carry useful things!) and shone it on the walls. The paintings showed the smiling man helping others: giving food to hungry travelers, petting scared sheep, and sitting under a tall tree. Next to one painting, someone had drawn simple symbols: a heart, two hands passing bread, and a face with no frown.

Zara nudged a wooden box on the ground. I opened it gently—inside were scrolls with pictures and easy words. The scrolls said the smiling man was Buddha. He taught people three important things: be kind, share with others, and never fight. One scroll had a picture of Buddha stopping two boys arguing over a toy. It said: “Treat others how you want to be treated—with kindness!” Another scroll said: “Sharing your goods makes everyone happy, even in the desert.”

We stayed in the cave for two days while the sandstorm raged with thunder and lightning flashing in the sky. I read the scrolls over and over. As a Sogdian, I trade goods, but Buddha’s teachings made me think: trading isn’t just about getting things—it’s about sharing, too! I remembered how I’d given a silk scarf to a poor family last month, and they’d given me dried fruit in return. It made me feel warm, even in the cold desert.

When the storm stopped, I rolled up the scrolls and put them in my shop. “Let’s share Buddha’s teachings, Zara!” I said. We rode west, toward a village I knew from trading—Oasis Town. When we arrived, the villagers looked sad. Their wells were running on fumes, and some were yelling at each other over water. I unpacked a few silk scarves and hung the scrolls on a tree. “Come see, friends! These pictures tell about kindness and sharing—things that help everyone!”

Kids ran over first, then their parents. I pointed to the painting of Buddha sharing food. “Buddha says if we share what we have, no one goes without,” I told them. A woman with a baby said, “I have extra rice—let’s cook it for everyone!” A man said, “I can dig a new well with my tools!” Soon, everyone was working together. They shared water, food, and tools. A little girl gave me a flower and said, “Thank you for telling us about being kind!” The villagers traded me fresh dates and cheese, and I gave them small silk scarves as gifts. It was the best trade ever—kindness for happiness!

A few days later, Zara and I were riding through a narrow canyon. Suddenly, five men jumped out—bandits! I jumped with fear that the bandits might hurt us. They had big sticks and scowls on their faces. “Give us your silk, spices, and scrolls!” yelled the leader, a man with a scruffy beard. Zara stepped back, nervous, but I remembered Buddha’s words: don’t fight anger with anger.

I took a deep breath and held out my hands. “I’m a Sogdian merchant—I trade, not fight,” I said calmly. “I have flatbread, dates, and cheese to share. Please, take half.” I pulled out a bag of food. The bandits stared. One young

bandit looked at his feet and said, “We’re hungry... our camp has no water or food.” I smiled. “These scrolls tell about Buddha’s teachings—kindness and sharing. They can help you, too.”

The leader took the food slowly. “We didn’t want to be mean,” he said quietly. “We just needed to survive,” I told them about Oasis Town. “The villagers share with everyone—go there, and they’ll help you. But promise to be kind, too.” The bandits nodded. I couldn’t believe that I was actually influencing bandits! They put down their sticks and thanked me. “We’ll try,” the leader said. They rode toward Oasis Town, and I hoped Buddha’s teachings would guide them.

I patted Zara’s neck. “We did well, old friend,” I said. As we rode back into the desert, the sun warmed my face. I thought about the cave, the smiling Buddha statue, and the kind villagers. As a Sogdian merchant, I’ve traveled many miles, but this journey was special. Buddha’s teachings weren’t just words—they were like magic. Kindness and sharing made the desert feel less lonely, and trading with kindness was better than any silk or spice.

That night, the sky was beautiful with stars and constellations shining like they were watching us. I sat under the stars and drew a new scroll. I painted Zara, me, and the villagers sharing food and goods. I wrote in simple words: “Kindness is the most valuable trade.” I knew my journey as a merchant would continue—there were more villages to visit, more goods to trade, and more people to share Buddha’s kind teachings with. With Zara by my side and Buddha’s words in my heart, I was ready for whatever the Gobi Desert had in store.

LOVE

HD Beijing School, Wang, Mariella – 11

I was born in a family that was full of love. My name is Cassie. I have gold hair, and I like wearing the khaki color shirt and a white trousers. I was born in 2014/05/22. I kinda like the family, I have a big family with many relatives, most of them were the nobility and the landed gentry, they are nice to me.

I went to a international school when I am 6 years old, and then because of a problem I went to another school. I do not like going to school at first. I have no friends and this kind of situation persisted until grade 4 finish. I got so impatient that I waited until fifth grade.

In fifth grade someone new came to our school.

I had no feelings for him at that time. I can not even see him between classes. I just knew that his name is Aric.

There is a important thing to say, I get to know a teacher. she teach me mathematics, she is the best teacher that I have ever seen in this school.

In a blink of an eye, fifth grade ended, we had summer vacation. at that time, I can not believe that I am going to sixth grade.

Maybe it is destiny. I was siting beside Aric in sixth grade, we have classes together, our relationship getting closer and closer. I will chat with him every morning, and sometimes I will ask him with the math problems that I do not know how to solve.

Actually, he is not really good at learning, he often does not hand in or do his homework. I do not know why, I begin to ask him that if he did his homework or not. sometimes he thought that I am restless, he will chase me in the hallway till the class begin. He is very abstract, we always play in self study class, sometimes we will use pencil to build a castle, or saying how the math homework took the time from us because of it is too hard for us. Math means to us that it is time. We have common ground, we both hate mathematics, we both do not like English classes, we hate homework, we like listening music, we both have problem with our PE teacher, and so on.

But one day, he abnormally did not come to school. I thought that he is sick, so I did not care, but after one week, he is still not here. I asked my teacher. My teacher said that he transferred to a new school. I was stunned. I suddenly do not know what to do. I thought he will stay in this school forever.

After this day, I told my mom that I like Aric, and I told my mom that he transferred to another school.

A miracle happens. My mom say to me:

‘If you want to go find him, I could go with you. But you need to make up for the missing works.’

It is a miracle. I always thought my mom want me to be happy but could not miss works because of I like someone and need to go find him.

‘Okay!!!! Wait for me to pack up the things.’ I said with a big big smile.

I pull out a backpack, and put in two bottles of water, a greeting card, some color pencils, my tablet and some gifts.

‘Are you okay?’ My mom asked.

‘Yes!’ I said.

My mom first made a phone call to my teacher.

‘Hi. I want to ask if you know where Aric lives?’

‘No, sorry. But I did know that he lives a little far away from school.’ My teacher said.

‘Thanks!’

‘Oh! Maybe I could go ask the school bus staff or the driver! They might know, they always send Aric home.’ I said.

‘Yeah! That is a good idea!’ My mom shouted.

‘But we need to go home first.’ I said.

‘Why?’ My mom asked.

‘Because the staffs is getting off work now!’

‘Oh! I forgot that!’ My mom said.

We went home and I slept well because I think that I have hope again.

The next morning....

‘Oh my god! Wake up, you are gonna be late!’ My mom said.

‘Okay, okay. I know that.’

I put on my clothes and go to school.

‘Why are you here? Your mom said to me that you would not come to school for one month.’ My teacher said.

'Oh,I would not come here tomorrow,I come here to take some things.'
 'Okay, come,the class is about to begin.'My teacher said.
 I waited till school is over,I went to the school bus and said:
 'Hi,I want to know where Aric lives.Oh,and can you take my mom on the bus too?We need to talk to Aric,please.'I said to the driver.
 'Of course,come.'The driver said.
 Not far away,I saw my mom.
 'That is my mom.'I said.
 I shouted to my mom and she walk in to the bus.
 After 20 minutes,we arrive to Aric's house.We got in and knocked the door.
 'Hello?Is there somebody in this house?'I asked.
 'Yes!'A man said.
 'Is Aric home?'I asked.
 'No he is not at home.He went to HANGZHOU.'The man said.
 'Thank you,we will come back.'My mom said.
 We went home and pack up the baggage,my mom book the ticket to HANGZHOU.
 The next day,we arrive at Hangzhou at 9pm.
 'Maybe we could first sleep and then go to find Aric.'My mom said.
 'Yes, of course.'I said.
 Tomorrow.....
 'How are we going to find him in this huge city?'I said worriedly.
 'I think we can find all the school in hangzhou,and then go ask one by one,we have many time for looking Aric.'
 'It will be a difficult task.'I said.
 'We could make a goal, what if we ask 10 schools today?'My mom said.
 'This is a very good idea! 'I said.
 'Let us begin this task!'
 'NO'
 'NO'
 'NO'
 'NO'
 'NO'
 'NO'
 'NO'
 'NO'
 'NO'
 'NO'
 'NO'
 'It is okay,we did not find Aric.We could start again tomorrow.'My mom said.
 The next day.....
 'Well,we could have a bigger goal,how about we ask 12 schools today?'My mom asked.
 'I think we could start now, oh wait, mom,we could separate .'
 'What do you mean?'My mom asked.
 'I mean that you could go ask 6 schools,I go ask 6 schools.'I said.
 Ummmm, okay.But be careful.'My mom said.
 'Excuse me,is there a student in here called ARIC?'I asked a teacher in the school that I am visiting.
 'YES.'
 I was really suprised by the word she said ,I thought I would have no harvest today.
 'Thank you!!!!!!!!!!'I shouted.
 'Moooooooooooooooooooooooooooo!!!!'I found the school where Aric learn!
 'OOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO,I will come to you now.'
 I and mom wait for him till he came out from the gate.
 'Oh my god!Why are you here?'Aric asked.
 'I LIKE YOU.'I said nervously.
 'I like you too. When I heard that I am transferred to a new school, I felt the sky collapsed.'
 'I never thought that you like me too.I thought we are just friends,it really shocked me when you say the words.'I said surprisdly.
 'But how are you two going to be together?'My mom asked.
 'What if you give me your phone number? 'I said.

‘Alright,’Aric said.

We went back to the hotel,I still can’t believe that he also like me.

‘I think that we could go home tomorrow,what do you think?’My mom asked.

‘Alright, and I need to write my homework when we goes back.’

New Tales of China's Silk Road

HD Beijing School, Wang, Ruby – 12

Chapter 1: The Secret Plan

My name is Mei. I am twelve years old. I live in Changan, a very big city in China. My family has a silk shop. My father and uncle make the most beautiful silk in the whole world. The silk is smooth and shiny. It has pretty colors like red, and gold.

Every month, my uncle takes the silk on a long trip to sell it. He goes on the Silk Road. From stories I've heard The Silk Road is not a real road made of silk. It is a path that goes through deserts and over mountains. It goes all the way to other countries! My uncle meets people who wear different clothes and speak different languages. He brings back wonderful things like glass bowls and sweet dates.

I always wanted to go with him., helping him to sell silk, and meeting people that is different from me. But my father always said, "No, Mei. You are too young. The desert is dangerous. There are sandstorms and bandits. A girl should stay home."

I felt sad. I looked at the silk in our shop. I loved its beauty, the silk was bright and colorful, but I wanted to see the world more.

One evening, I heard my uncle talking to my father. "We leave tomorrow at sunrise," he said. "This is a big trip. We are taking fifty bolts of silk to Kashgar."

This was my chance! I had a plan. A secret plan. That night, when everyone was sleeping, I packed a small bag. I put in some dry bread, a water bottle, and my favorite thing – a small jade pendant. My mother gave it to me before she got sick. She said it would keep me safe. I put the bag under my bed and tried to sleep.

Chapter 2: Hiding in the Cart

The next morning, before the sun was up, I heard the camels grunting and the men talking. I quickly put on my warmest clothes, grabbed my bag, and sneaked out of the house.

The caravan was huge! There were twenty camels. They looked grumpy but strong. The men were tying big packages on the camels' backs. The packages had our beautiful silk inside.

I saw my uncle's special cart. It was full of the most valuable silk. Its smooth and colorful. I waited until no one was looking. Then I quietly climbed into the cart. I moved some silk packages and made a little hiding spot for myself. The silk was soft around me. I was scared but also very excited.

The cart started to move! The wheels went bump, bump, bump on the road. It's a wood cart, so it has a strange sound while its moving. I peeked through a small hole. I saw my house getting smaller and smaller. Goodbye, Beijing! I was going on an adventure!

For two days, I stayed hidden. I only came out at night to drink water and eat a little bread. I was very quiet. During the day, I listened to the men talking. They talked about the weather, the road, and their families.

Chapter 3: Found Out!

On the third day, something bad happened. The caravan master, a big man named Liang, needed more rope. He came to my cart to get some.

He saw me!

His eyes opened very wide. "A girl!" he shouted. "What are you doing here?"

All the men came to look. My uncle came too. He looked very surprised. "Mei! What is this?" he asked.

I started to cry. "I'm sorry, Uncle. I wanted to see the world. I can help! I can be useful!"

Master Liang was very angry. "This is not a game! We will take you back to the next village."

But my uncle looked at my face. He saw how much I wanted to be there. He talked to Master Liang. "She is a smart girl. She can read and write. Maybe she can help with keeping records."

Master Liang did not look happy. But he said, "Okay. She can stay. But she must work hard. And if there is any trouble, she goes back home."

I was so happy! "I will work hard! I promise!" I spoke.

Chapter 4: The Terrible Sandstorm

The next part of the trip was through the desert. The desert is called Taklamakan. It is a scary name that means "You go in, but you don't come out." The sun was very hot. The sand was everywhere. My throat was always dry.

One afternoon, the sky turned orange. The wind started to blow hard. Sand flew in the air. It hurt my eyes.

"It's a sandstorm!" Master Liang yelled. "Everyone, protect the camels!"

I was very scared. Also a bit excited, it was my first time to see one sandstorm. The wind was so loud. I couldn't see anything. But I remembered what I had to do. I helped the other men pull the camels together. We made them sit down in a circle. I took a piece of cloth and covered my nose and mouth.

The storm lasted for a long time. It felt like forever. When it finally stopped, everything was covered in sand. We looked like sand monsters! But worse than that, we were lost. The sand had covered all the paths. The landmarks were gone. The guides didn't know which way to go.

The men were worried. "We are lost in the desert!" they said. "We will run out of water!"

I looked at the sky. The stars were coming out. Then I saw it – the North Star! My mother taught me about it. She said the North Star always stays in the same place. It can show you the way.

"Uncle! Master Liang!" I said. "I know the way. We need to go towards that bright star."

The head guide laughed. "A little girl cannot guide us!"

But my uncle believed me. "Mei is smart. Let us try her way."

So we started walking toward the North Star. We walked all night. In the morning, when the sun came up, we saw something wonderful. We saw the main path! We were saved!

Master Liang looked at me. He didn't say anything, but he gave me a small smile. I felt very proud.

Chapter 5: The Amazing Market

After many more weeks, we finally arrived in Kashgar. What a place! It was like a dream. There were people everywhere. They had all different colored skin and wore all kinds of clothes. I heard languages I had never heard before. The market was full of wonderful things – fruits I didn't know, spices that smelled strange and good, beautiful carpets, and shiny jewelry.

We set up our spot. People loved our silk. They touched it and said words that sounded like "beautiful" in their languages. We traded our silk for many things: glassware that shone in the sun, soft wool, and bags of tasty spices like cinnamon and pepper.

I helped my uncle with the trading. I used the new words I learned to say "hello" and "thank you" to the people. They smiled at me. I am so happy that I was helpful.

Chapter 6: Going Home a Hero

The trip home was long, but it felt different. I wasn't hiding anymore. I walked with the other people in the caravan. I helped set up camp. I told stories. I was one of them.

When we finally saw the walls of Beijing, my heartbeat fast. I was home!

My family ran out to meet us. My father's face was worried and happy at the same time. "Mei! You are safe!" he cried, hugging me tight.

I told them all my stories. I told them about the sandstorm and how the North Star saved us. I told them about the bandits and my loud pot. I told them about Marcus and the big market in Kashgar. I showed them the silver coin.

My father listened. His face changed. He wasn't angry anymore. He looked proud.

"You are a brave and smart girl, Mei," he said. "I was wrong. You can do anything."

From that day on, everything was different. Sometimes I helped in the silk shop. But sometimes, I went with my uncle on shorter trips. I was Mei, the girl who traveled the Silk Road. And I knew that no matter how big the world is, I could explore it.

New Tales of China's Silk Road

HD Beijing School, Wang, Tiantian – 11

The sun dips below the horizon, and the moon takes its place. Only a few people are still wandering the streets, drunk, shouting and screaming.

Lpacka lies unconscious on the bed of his rented house. Dim light falls on his pale face. He has classic foreign features: a high nose, big eyes and curly brown hair. He is not ugly, even with the scar on his forehead—left by colleagues who constantly bully and discriminate against him at work just because he is not Chinese. He doesn't know why as a foreign man, and have no idea about his parents, since he has memory, he is living in China.

But never mind. All this will end tomorrow, when Lpacka can finally escape the bullying and embark on his great, secret mission, personally assigned by the emperor. His eyelids grow heavier, and he finally closes his eyes.

When the moon sinks below the horizon and the sun rises, everyone acts as usual—everyone except Lpacka, who sets off toward the grandest place in Chang'an: the palace of Emperor Muzan.

Upon his arrival (it takes a long time to verify his identity), even though he is still far from Muzan, a powerful aura forces him to bow down. He feels a sense of suspect and unease.

"Do you know why I summoned you?"

"The mission."

"Correct. To strengthen relations between China and other foreign lands, I want you to go to the Western Regions as China's envoy. You will also protect the prince, who is to marry the princess of the Western Regions. You have two weeks to prepare. We will provide all basic supplies—camels, food and water. All you need to do is get mentally ready. After you complete this mission,

I will grant you whatever you desire. Do you understand?"

Lpacka nods.

A long-bearded man steps forward and hands him a feather decorated with gold and silver. The feather is a symbol of China, ensuring that no one will dare to attack the envoy or extort money from him.

Back in his shabby, seven-square-meter house, Lpacka thinks all this must be a dream. I'm so lucky, he thinks to himself simply.

Two weeks pass quickly. Lpacka returns to the palace, where a long procession is lined up outside the gate. The same long-bearded man who gave him the feather checks his identity again.

At the front of the procession are two of the strongest warriors, mounted on horses, serving as bodyguards. In the middle is a wooden sedan chair draped in red silk—that is the prince's sedan.

No one is allowed to uncover the silk until they reach the Western Regions, except for the four maids attending the prince. Lpacka is in the second row of the procession. To his surprise, even he—a nobody in Chang'an—is guarded by two warriors.

The journey begins. Everything seems normal when they are ten miles away from the city.

But something is odd: no one speaks. The air is eerily silent, broken only by the flapping of vultures' wings overhead. Yet Lpacka is so caught up in the joy of impending fortune and success that he ignores these strange signs.

The air grows drier, and the wind picks up. Lpacka wants to ask for advice on what to do, but pride stops him from speaking up.

Twenty miles out, the faint outline of the city that was visible earlier has vanished completely, as if it never existed at all.

Now Lpacka can no longer hold back his fear. He is essentially a coward—afraid to stand up for himself, afraid of making things worse, afraid of death. The desperate desire to survive drives him to wave at the warriors, whose duty is to protect the prince from harm. "Excuse me, warriors," he calls out. "Have you noticed that the city has disappeared, and that a sandstorm seems to be

approaching?”

Under normal circumstances, even if the procession members are quiet and uncommunicative, they would still respond to matters related to safety like an incoming sandstorm.

But now, no one answers his question. Lpacka is not brilliant, but he is not stupid. He starts to wonder why he—a foreign boy who has always been bullied and discriminated against—was chosen for this mission.

Suddenly, a strong wind blows directly toward the procession, fluttering the sleeve of one of the maids. Under her sleeve, Lpacka spots three tattoos on her wrist. Unlike ordinary tattoos that express one’s personality, these tattoos mark criminals. In this land, anyone who commits a crime—whether theft, murder or robbery—will be branded with a tattoo. Three tattoos mean she is among the most dangerous criminals of all. Lpacka knows that criminals should never be allowed to join such an important royal procession.

Lpacka pins his last hope on the prince. No one except the four maids is permitted to approach the sedan. Lpacka knows that curiosity killed the cat, but in this terrifying situation, he has every reason to suspect that this is an evil plot. So he dashes toward the prince’s sedan, ignoring the maids’ shouts of warning. Inside, the prince is huddled in the corner. His arm is tied together with his leg, his mouth is taped shut, allowing him to make nothing but faint whimpers. The prince has a handsome looking that is out of ordinary. But now, his skin is deeply sunken, like he has not eaten anything since the start of the journey, and there is a sense of entreaty in his eyes.

But Lpacka stops trying to help him and immediately lifts the prince’s sleeve up, and checks if there is a tattoo brand on it. Not on his left arm, nor on his right either. The prince is skinny. Lpacka first unfastens the ropes that tie the prince’s body, and then takes a bottle of water from his bag. Silence falls except for the sound of drinking.

“So, why are you here? Prince, can you please tell me what has happened? I’m just a poor man who has no idea of anything.” Lpacka starts to speak. The prince opens his mouth, trying to say something, but it soon turns into a cough.

“Lock the door and catch them!” One of the maids who warned Lpacka runs out. The other members soon yell, “For freedom!”

After that, all of the criminals run in their direction. One of the warriors, a really strong man who is one head taller than others, climbs onto a wooden carriage. Lpacka can hear the turning of a key in that dark room.

“Listen, my name is Blair, one of Muzan’s siblings. One month ago, father died, and the heir to the throne is going to be chosen from the two of us. However, Muzan forged a royal decree that he is the only heir. To make sure there is no mistake, he planned this journey. The reason he did not kill me is because that might lead to failure. And there is also a fake prince in the last carriage—he is not a criminal. When we arrive at the destination, those criminals will kill you and me, so that the secret can be buried with us. Lpacka, we must escape!”

After listening to Blair’s words, Lpacka takes some time to digest them. A plot, death, secrets—why did he, a mere nobody in Chang’an, have to get involved in all this? But fighting for survival is better than waiting to be killed.

“Look in my bag—there are different tools.” Lpacka dumps everything out: water, tape, the feather, and a knife! Lpacka praises himself so much. Even though it is only a small knife, it is enough for them to escape. For the entire day, Lpacka and Blair work on escaping. The metal lock is almost broken.

“Last cut, and—finished!” With a cracking sound from the door, Lpacka and Blair collapse onto the desert. It is already night, and the criminals are asleep. Watching the stars in the sky, Lpacka feels unreal. Things that only happen in fairy tales are now happening to him. A tear suddenly rolls down his cheek. He does not know why—maybe to celebrate their escape, maybe out of homesickness.

“No time to cry,” says Blair. It does not sound strange, because Blair might have experienced

things like this in his childhood.

There is sufficient water and food. In the first kilometer away from the team, they tiptoe cautiously. But as the sun starts to rise, they speed up. Under the sunshine, two young men are heading toward a whole new world.

Three weeks later, in the Western Regions. “Hi, I am going to be a resident here, and he is my brother.” Lpacka says to the assistant, a tattered bag slung over his shoulder. Blair’s clothes have been changed—they are too fancy. The gold and silver feather, which symbolizes peace, has been discarded by Lpacka.

“The fake prince is going to arrive tomorrow. I guess that even though we escaped, they will still come here and negotiate with the king, and lie that we are already dead. Because what they really care about is getting the tattoos removed and gaining their freedom.” says Blair. “The only thing we need to do now is hide until this storm blows over, and then there will be nothing to worry about. I am going to stay here. You can go anywhere you want, but if you want to stay with me, you are be welcomed.”

Lpacka feels sense of happiness rising in his heart. Not bad to stay here, no bully from colleagues, do not have to worry about food and living place. Now his in a new world, with a whole new identify. Not the coward Lpacka that live like a filthy rat, but a brave hero who had save a prince from political plan.

New Tales of China's Silk Road

HD Beijing School, Wu, Ken – 14

“Silk road has been one of the greatest transportation route of all time. Through out history, it is the connection between countries and large regions. But now, it is one of the most dangerous routes in the whole world. Every year, millions of goods like precious stones, currency and even buckets of gold are transported through this journey. Even though trains are used to transport these goods instead of horses, accidents still may happen.”

This is what an old trainman told me a few years ago when he finally finished his career on the train for almost 30 years. Now, years have passed and I believe the same thing is going to happen to me. I grew up in a poor family with my brother and our parents worked in a factory where they could barely afford our living. Now without any degree or university offers, I had to choose to work in the train through silk road. Even though it's tough for me to live couple of years on a train that is going through almost the whole Asia, I'm pretty satisfied by the payment. It's enough for our whole family to live a normal life and eat proper food. So of course, I accepted the job.

A month passed quickly, I said goodbye to my family and headed out to the train station to help the others carry all the cargos. I peeked inside a crack of one of the hard wooden boxes, then I almost stumbled because of the thing inside: piles of gold and diamonds are reflecting different colors of light through the sunlight coming through the crack. I finally realized why is this job pays us so much, at some point some people will start to be jealous and make crazy actions. But it won't be a big deal, the old trainman had worked 30 years on the train and he's just fine. Then I felt a shoulder tap, it's a man that looked a bit older than me who made a slight grin, he looked at me and said: “don't look at that for too long young man, you know what will happen at the end if you do, the money they paid you is enough.” I laughed and replied: “I bet a lot of people did. I'm Sam.” “Andre.” He answered. We talked along as we carried all of the wooden boxes on the train and the train horn blew as we headed out for the journey.

The first few months passed quickly with absolutely no problems. I got to meet the head administrator Mr. Charlie who always wears a metal button on his chest with a bird on it and I got to say he's a pretty nice guy. Just after he knew my family situation, he donated some money to our town and made sure families had stable food sources. Later on, I met Bill who is an old worker on the train and is reaching his 60's. He was kind of like our mentor who guides us through routines every day. Luckily, I got assigned the same room with Andre and we are now good pals. Anyways, the first few months was pretty smooth and I got familiar to the routines. As days past, I began to feel bored especially carrying these wooden boxes around every day, going through the same carriage every day and meeting the same people. So instead of just working like this, I decided to explore the last few carriages at the back of the train where normal workers weren't allowed to enter. I asked Andre who was as bored as me if he wanted to go, he refused me because he didn't want to cause any trouble. I told him that Mr. Charlie isn't in our sight these few days strangely so it would be totally safe. But he insists to stay in our room and rest for the rest of the day. I couldn't persuade him so I decided to do it my own. It was pitch dark when I got up from my bed, I grabbed my watch and through the moonlight I could see that it is around 3 pm. I decided it is time to find some excitement. I sneaked out of my cabin and it was completely silent in the narrow corridor; all I could hear is people snoring and the clock ticking inside our room. I quickly walked toward the last carriage and slowly opened the wooden door. There were several doors beside me that continued until the end of the train. The light above me shattered as I opened the first door. There was nothing in it instead of these wooden boxes that I have been looking at for the past 10 months. As I closed the door, I was feeling a bit frightened but a voice inside me keeps telling me to keep going forward. I forced my legs to move and opening the next few doors, but nothing was in there, only some meat, more cargos and also some books thrown in the cabins and piling up into a mountain. As I stood in front of the last wooden door, I thought if this was the right thing to do because nothing happened and I should have used this time to rest and prepare for tomorrow's work instead of sneaking into places that I shouldn't be in and discovering nothing. I took a deep sigh and calmly opened the last door as

the train entered a tunnel making the whole carriage totally dark again. As I pulled the door open, something fell to the ground making a thumping sound and also a slight metal sound hitting the floor. I could feel the object right in front of my legs but I could see nothing. Luckily, the train was exiting the tunnel and when the moonlight shined on the object, my eyes almost blanked out and my face starts to tremble. I stepped back and could not believe what I just saw. As my sight moves back down again, a metal button was laying silently on the ground with fresh blood on it and beside it laid Mr. Charlie who was stabbed at the back for three times. Blood was every where in the small cabin and I could see Mr. Charlie's eyes even more frightened than me. I dashed back to my room as back as I could and threw myself into my bed, still remaining it extreme frightening. Andre talked to me with a fuzzy voice: "dude, it is midnight, what in the world are you doing?" I didn't know what to do instead of trying to fall asleep.

The next day, I woke up just as usual instead today, everyone was woken up by a scream that could pierce through the sky. It was a woman called Ms. Beverly who was just about to leave the train at the next stop. She saw the door was opened at the last carriage and the body of Mr. Charlie just lied there just as I saw. But this time, every wooden door was opened and all the boxes inside them were gone. I couldn't believe my eyes, I swear to god, I closed them last night and all of the wooden boxes were in their cabins untouched. I looked at Andre and he stared me in the eyes, knowing what happened. I couldn't say a word out of my mouth, all I could do is stand there, thinking that I should alarm the others last night. Together, we carried Mr. Charlie's body into an empty cabin and cleaned all of the blood on the ground. Bill walked over to me and said: "things like that happen every year, these boxes get smashed and all the things in there gets stolen. More unfortunate, people may die just like what happened." I told Mr. Bill the truth for what I did yesterday and he nodded slightly, just as he knew what happened. Then he quickly ran to the last carriage, pulled the iron lock that is used to connect the carriages open, and in our astonishment, he smashed a mirror that covered the end of the carriage, and the boxes of luxuries were laying there silently. The train went further and further, only leaving the carriage alone in the plains with Bill sitting on top of it waving goodbye.

A year later, these stolen stones and Bill were eventually forgotten. We stored Mr. Charlie's body in the freezing room for meat and planning to bury him when we arrive back home. As the last day arrived, I stepped out of the train, wind blew by me and as I walked out of the station with Andre, someone bumped me and a metal button dropped to the ground. My eyes grew big, at that moment, I remembered Mr. Charlie had told me that he had a brother who I had never met. As I turned around, the mysterious man disappeared. Then Andre slapped me in the back, following his sight, Bill was standing in the middle of the swarm of people with the mysterious man beside him, as they left, a slight of golden reflection appeared in their huge mountain hiking backpacks. I turned around and said to Andre: "the old trainman was right, the silk road is not an easy trip!"

The Silk Road

HD Beijing School, Xiao, Kylie – 11

Chapter One: Dad's Secret Work

Hello my name is Jieyou, and I live with my dad in a wet and dark little house at Akabawada. My dad has a Shop that sells silk. He makes the most beautiful silk in the world. The silk is smooth and bright with a shiney glitter on it. There is a big Purple Butterfly on it because butterfly is Akabawada's mascot.

One day, Jieyou heard that his dad has an important work to do, that he is going to go on the Silk Road and sell the silk to their king. Jieyou thinks that his dad is busy enough and she wants to help her dad work and then her dad can look after the shop with no other people looking after it. Jieyou walked around the room and wrinkled her eyebrow thinking about this important work.

If she don't go, then her dad will be very busy and needs to use money to hire someone to watch the store. If she go then her dad will be very anxious and don't have mind to make silk.

"Jieyou come and eat lunch!" her dad Watson shouted when he is placing Jieyou's purple plate.

"Wait a minute dad. I'm coming for a second" Jieyou quickly ran to the door and slides down the stair.

Today they are eating Jieyou's favourite food. But she don't have that mood to eat these delicious food. She wants to talk to her dad about the silk road adventure or I mean the important work.

Chapter Three : To Go or Not To Go

"Dad I'm telling you about a serious thing. You need to listen to me from the beginning to the end. Okay?"

When I saw dad nodding. I start my conversation. "I've heard that you have a important work to do and it is making you very annoyed. I'm just thinking can you let me to do this work please! I'm a twelve years old big girl. I

can handle things myself and I can go with that tiger you raised. PPLLLLLAAAAASSSEE!"

"It is still very dangerous because you are going it yourself but I mean a tiger is coming too. The tiger is not very helping you when you have an accident right?"

"Why not? Dad please let me go. Please!"

"Okay. Fine but you need to make shure you are save enough."

"Thank you dad!" Jieyou run to her dad and give him a hug. After that day. Jieyou pack up her clothes. Food. And the beautiful silk which is giving to their king across to silk road. She is way to excited to go to the silk road that he accidently forget to take her tiger out side of it's cage.

Jieyou hurriedly said goodbye to her father. Then ride her tiger and disappeared from her father's sight.

Chapter Three: A Mysterious New Companion

Jieyou was extremely happy. She imagined herself riding a tiger in the breeze. The wind blew over her cheek and blew her soft hair on her face. She imagined when it is in night. She leaned her body on her tiger and had a wonderful and sweet dream.

She imagined that when she give her dad's handmake silk to the king across the silk road. What will the king give her for buying this silk with Akabawada's mascot.

Just when Jieyou thought beautifully. a big black bear rushed over and knocked Jieyou in the dirty and wet mud ground.

"UHHHHHHHH." jieyou shouted. "Who are you. Why are you knocking me down in the muddy ground."

When Jieyou pull up her head and saw a big fluffy and weird bear staring at her. She felt very scared about the bear that just appeared in front of her and she didn't go far from her home but the problem is

coming! Just when Jieyou is thinking about the scary things that will happen after. She saw a crazy thing happening in front of her.

Her tiger and the bear are talking together like best friend for ten years.

"What is happening to you guys? Are you some kind of best friend or other things.

Why are you making a funny pose like hugging each other?"

"It is because he told me that he didn't really mean to scare you. He just want to have friends. His family refuse to take care of him because he is just smaller and not very energetic then other bears. He is even not an adult bear he is only ten years old

And he cannot survive on his own in this endless silk road. He will be dead!!!!!!!" the tiger exclaimed.

"Never mind" shouted Jieyou. She is very afraid of the bear and is losing control of her manners" I don't care about his life. I only care about our silk and the my life in this cold and mysterious road without one person. You two can stay here and share your bad and horrible story's together! BYE BYE!"

The tiger and the bear stared at the little girl Jieyou leaving them and going to silk road without them. Tears streamed down the tiger's face as he never imagined their twelve-year friendship could end so abruptly. Leaning on the bear's shoulder, he reminisced about every little moment shared with Jieyou. He was utterly disappointed in her—she hadn't even left him a scrap of the meat and provisions they'd brought from home. As for Jieyou, she wasn't faring any better. Walking an unfamiliar path without a friend's help was incredibly tough for a twelve-year-old.

She vaguely sensed her earlier words might have been rash, but admitting mistakes wasn't in her nature. So, she decided to find a spot to rest first.

After a week, Jieyou discovered a place that looked very much like a castle. This should be the king's castle, the place Jieyou was heading to. Jieyou walked up to the soldiers at the castle gate and said to them, "I'm here to see your king. My father made a deal with your king, and he sent me to bring your king our local specialty."

"Wait a minute, you are not looking like a person who has a lot of money. Didn't you see the note on the wall? Poor people are not allowed to go in the castle, so go back!"

Jieyou walked up to a large tree outside the castle, pondering how she could possibly enter. She was all alone, and she couldn't possibly fight—or even defeat—the soldiers guarding the castle gates. At that moment, she felt utterly hopeless! Victory was so close, yet she was powerless to take that final step to claim it. She thought and thought—an hour passed, then two—but no solution came to mind. Suddenly, two dark figures appeared behind her. Startled, Jieyou leaped to her feet and demanded, "Who's there?"

"It's us, Tiger and Little Bear!" said the Tiger. "We tried to follow you after you left, but we lost track halfway. We had no choice but to follow our instincts. It was really tough!"

"I don't know you, just go away." Jieyou said coldly. Although she was happy inside, her stubborn personality made her appear indifferent to these old friends. When

Tiger saw Jieyou's attitude, his anger flared up. He shouted angrily, "It's your great honor that we chased after you, and you don't even thank us. You're really given a way out but refuse to take it, how thick-skinned you are."

"Okay, please don't do this, can't we be together friendly?" said the bear. Jieyou and tiger never thought that the bear would say these things, they listened and decided what they were going to do.

At last, they decided to let Jieyou sit on the tiger's back and let the bear get out the guards in front of the gate. The guards are afraid of the bear and run away. The tiger goes in to the gate and roared at the guard tagging them away from the king. At last, ten guards run up to them at up knife and sores to make them go out the gate, but the bear and the tiger is more stronger than the ten guards. They lift the guards up like soft pillows. The king saw the guards can't hold the tiger and the bear, so he told the guards to let the tiger and bear stand backwards and let the little girl on the tiger's back come toward him

“What do you want to do, little girl? Why you are using a tiger and a bear to scare me.” the king asked Jieyou friendly. “My father is a worker who sells silks, he asked me to come here to sell you our special silk with our most beautiful silver mascot.”

Jieyou handed the silk to the king and let him have a look. “ Umm, it is a good silk. Let me think, I can't use three box of real gold to buy this good silk.”

As this, Jieyou get three box of real gold and goes home with the tiger and the bear.

Her dad is very happy and very proud of his daughter.

New Tales of China's Silk Road--The creation of Mogao Caves

HD Beijing School, Xiao, Tommy – 13

The desert in the west of China is a gap between the civilizations. The sound of the swirling winds and the yellow desert sands will sweep away and trace of living things, and so will it thousands of years ago. In ancient times, one of the most important routes of trading is the silk road. Every year, traders and merchants will travel from China to Middle Asia, even to Europe.

Although this route is frequently used, there is still dangers and unexpectedness. Sandstorms, criminals, and the lack of resources will take many lives.

One kind of people will walk through this Silk Road not because of trade, they were on a mission. The monk, Le Zun wanted to spread Buddhism from middle Asia to China, and even further.

Le Zun started his trip to China. There is no one there to bid him goodbye, neither anyone on his side to protect him. There is only one single horse as a company. His shadow grew longer and longer as he walked into the desert night. A horse and a man left two traces of footprints in the great desert. They left their life's shelter to find a new civilization in the far east.

The Silk Road is like a highway. There are many kinds of residence for the travelers to shortly rest and gather resources. From little houses to large towns and villages, these will all raise the chances of living of the travelers. These small sanctuaries were like little dots of human population in the sightless desert. Minute in the yellow sands but had been there for hundreds of years.

Le Zun traveled for a long time, sometimes passing other people or chariots, sometimes passing the skeletons of animals or even humans. The white bones lie silently on the desert ground. Slowly covered by the moving sand and sliced into bits little by little by the desert winds. But travelers had saw much more than these. High profit will mean high dangers. Merchant's life could be threatened, but their benefit is also high. A monk aiming for spreading his religion, however, needed to overcome many dangers. His heart was set on spreading the light of Buddhism, yet fatigue and thirst had nearly worn him down as the sun began to dip below the horizon.

As Le Zun climbed a hill overlooking the mountains, his weary eyes suddenly caught a breathtaking sight. The setting sun cast golden rays over the mountain's cliffs, and the scattered clouds above seemed to transform into thousands of small Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, their figures radiating a divine glow. Heavenly music echoed faintly in the air, and the entire valley was bathed in a warm, sacred light. Overwhelmed with awe, Le Zun fell to his knees, tears streaming down his face. He firmly believed that this was a divine revelation. A sign that the Buddhas had chosen this place to be a sanctuary for their teachings.

Determined to honor this celestial omen, Le Zun resolved to carve a cave temple into the cliff face, a space where future generations could worship and seek solace in the Dharma. With no help but his own hands and his unwavering faith, he began to chip away at the rocky cliffs day after day. His fingers bled, his muscles ached, and the harsh desert winds whipped at his robes, but he never faltered. Local villagers, initially skeptical of the monk's seemingly impossible mission, were gradually moved by his perseverance. They brought him water and food, and some even joined him in the arduous work of carving.

After years of carving, the first cave of the Mogao caves was finally completed. Inside, Le Zun painted murals depicting the life of Sakyamuni Buddha and carved a simple stone statue of the Buddha, imbuing every stroke and chisel mark with his piety. Word of the sacred cave spread far and wide, drawing pilgrims, artists, and believers from all corners of the land.

As centuries passed, more and more caves were added to the original one. Generations of monks, artisans, and patrons contributed to the expansion of the site, carving intricate statues, painting vivid murals that told stories of Buddhist scriptures, history, and daily life, and building grand halls that echoed with the chants of worshippers.

What began as a single monk's act of faith grew into a magnificent complex of over 700 grottoes—a treasure trove of Buddhist art and culture that would later be hailed as the “Caves of the Thousand Buddhas”.

Today, the Mogao Grottoes stand as a timeless testament to Le Zun's devotion and the power of faith. The legend of how a weary pilgrim encountered a divine vision in the desert lives on, reminding the world that great wonders often spring from a single, unwavering belief. As the sun sets over Sanwei Mountain each day, its golden rays still bathe the cliffs, as if echoing the divine light that inspired a monk to create a legacy that would endure for millennia.

My Story

HD Beijing School, Xing, Jo – 12

My name is Wanli, a normal person who lives in Chang'an during the Han dynasty. Since the Silk Road was discovered, me and my friends who grew up together in a Siheyuan wanted to trade some silk and other things like tea with the Romans. Although it seemed hard, we needed to find a job and couldn't let our parents to look after us forever.

"No! You can't go!" After telling this idea to my mom, she said "The Silk Road is very dangerous, the Xiongnu might kill you and the extreme weathers are very dangerous!" My mom was very old, she always believed the story that other people said and was always controlling me.

"Mom! This time, I want to do something myself and I don't need you to tell me what to do!" I shouted.

"Okay, then I won't bother you" said my mom, who still seemed very angry.

The day we are leaving.....

Outside the Siheyuan, me and my three friends, and four camels and two bags of goods, started to say goodbye to our families.

"Bye mom! Bye!" I waved my hands towards mom.

"Come back safely! Bye!" Mom also waved her hands back "Remember to eat the food that I gave you and protect yourselves!"

"Yes, I know!" I said, and we got on the camels and started going west.

"We might earn a lot of money!" one of my friend, Sichou, said. Sichou was a fun person, but due to his leg was injured when he's small, he could just walk with a cane. Now his cane was put together with the goods. "Yes, I hope so" I said.

I forgot to introduce my other two friends. Tuoling, he was a strong man and when we needed help, he always helped us to fight with other people. Yingwu was very smart, and was also my best friend. He always knew how to solve math problems and was the smartest in the four of us.

We were now walking at daytime and at night we asked if we could live in the houses beside the road and sometimes we just slept on the ground, or if we were lucky, then we might live in some inns beside the Silk Road.

Our plan was to first reach Dunhuang, then the Pamir mountains, Parthia, and finally Rome, our destination.

After one month of going towards Dunhuang, the scenery beside the road become to change dramatically. The fertile plains changed into Gobi deserts, which was really new to us. The Gobi Desert seems endless, and small rocks are everywhere on the ground. The wind is always blowing, making the sand to blow into our eyes.

One day, we saw the entrance of Dunhuang "Finally, we reached our first stop!" Sichou said. "Yes, and now, I'm going to assign our tasks!" Yingwu said "Wanli, you're going to buy some food for us, Sichou and Tuoling, you two will go to buy some thick clothes, because crossing through the Pamir mountains is very dangerous and it could be very cold. I am going to buy food for our camels. After that, let's meet here!" "Wow, you came here fully prepared!" I said.

So we split into three teams, and I started finding food shops. That wasn't hard; when I turned onto the next street, I saw a food stall. "Are there any vegetables, or meat?" I asked "Nope," The person said, "There are only 'Nang'" "What is a 'Nang'?" I asked, "A type of food, you didn't know that?" The person said.

I went to some other shops, but there iwa only 'Nang', and it was not early, so I just bought some of it. Nang was a piece of pastry that was very flat, and apparently it could last for a very long time and was very suitable while trading. I tasted a bit of it, and it tastes amazing.

When I went back to the place that we said, my friends were waiting for me. That night, we slept in a hotel and we left Dunhuang the next morning.

After one day, we reached Yumenguan, the boundary of our country. "After going through Yumen uan, our trade will officially start!" Tuoling said. "Hope that we could successfully reach Rome and finish our trade" I said

Days passed very fast, one month seemed like a day, and we could see the scale of the Pamir mountains. We soon reached the mountain. The mountains were enormously huge, and we could hardly see the peak of them. "Are we really going to cross this mountain? Are you kidding me?" I said, "Yes, this is the only way to go" Yingwu said. "But the earlier people have made marks, and we could follow them!"

We started our journey of the Pamir mountain. At first we could follow the marks easily, because they were very significant.

But things began to change after a few weeks. We begin to lost the direction of the marks and also, when the altitude got higher, the clothes that Sichou and Tuoling bought in Dunhuang were not warm enough to let us go through the gigantic snow mountains.

One day it was cold and freezing, and also, the Nang that I bought before was running out. We were walking beside a high cliff, and I said "Where are we? I felt that I was going to starve!" Yingwu was about to answer "Well..." "Ahhhhhh!!!!!!" Sichou and his camel suddenly screamed and fell off from the cliff edge and disappeared in the abyss.

It all seemed so fast that I didn't realize what happened, Sichou...was dead? Suddenly, many feelings came to me, sadness, shock, regret... what would his mom feel when she heard this? My other two friends were also very sad. The last second Sichou was talking to us and now he was dead?

That night we slept in a cave and I found the food that mom made for us, while tears fell down from my face. Could we still succeed? What if we never had never started? I missed my mom.

The next day things were back to the way they should be. We started to find the marks, and the mountain descents.

We reached the bottom of the Pamir mountains, and the next stop was Parthia.

What happened next, well, I can't remember very well, all I remembered was that we were all in a very heavy mood. And after one month, we reached Parthia.

The first thing that comes to our sight is the high red walls of the city, we come off the camel's back and leads them and went in the city. When we went in the city, we smelled the scent of lamb meat and I was drooling, Yingwu and Tuoling's stomach was growling, so we went to eat some food.

When we just sat down, a Persian merchant sat beside us. "Hello, I've been watching you guys, did you come from China?" The person said "My name is Ali"

"Yes, we are from China." Yingwu answered. "May I exchange silk with you? That special fabric is very popular now!" Ali asked. "Of course!" we gave Ali some silk and he helped us to pay the money of our food. We chatted together and made friends. When we were going to leave, Ali gave each of us a bronze pendant.

That night we slept in the city and rested. The next day, we started to go towards Rome.

The journey also took one month, and we passed many oases so we didn't get hungry.

Finally, we reached Rome, our destination. When we passed the door of Rome, I realized that we had succeeded. Within the scent of breads and olive oils, we cheerfully exchanged silk, tea, and porcelains with the Romans, and they gave us gold, gems, spices and glassware We made may friends and this day was really unforgettable.

After one week we started going back, which took half of a year. We used our old route, and at Parthia, we met Ali!

Six months later.....

Leading the camels, we reached Changan. We could see the wall of Changan and the lights.

“Mom! We are back! We succeeded!” I shouted towards the Siheyuan. Mom heard that, and they all ran out to see us.

“Where is Sichou? Where is he?” Sichou’s mom asked, and we told her the truth “No! Sichou! My son!” she cried and said “Please tell me that isn’t true! Please!” We were all very sad so we made a grave for Sichou besides the river. After that, we showed the goods that we exchanged to our mom.

Days became normal again but something had changed, as we learned a lot of things during this experience.

Mystery Box

HD Beijing School, Yang, Kayson – 12

One hot day, as I walked through the dangerous desert a big area of moving sand where killing people and tiredness were everywhere—I found a person lying in the sand. I ask him do you need help , but he did not answer me I asked him: “who are you”. It was Marco Polo, his lips dry and his breath weak, almost dying from the desert’s hot weather. With his last bit of strength, he gave me a heavy, carved wooden box. “You must take this to Dunhuang,” he panted, his hand full of blood. “It’s a very important mission—you have one year to get there.”

At first, I was confused and angry, why did I have to carry this box, I am just a traveler with no connection to his big journeys? But Marco Polo’s request, full of desperation and trust, made me agree. He handed me a bag of coin—dried bread, a water bottle, and some silk cloth to trade—and warned me seriously: “Never open the box. What’s inside isn’t for people to see.” After that, he sits there doing nothing, and I set off alone on the long journey to Dunhuang.

At the beginning, I foolishly thought the trip would be a fun adventure. I dreamed of seeing busy animals, trying strange and tasty food, buying fancy small toys, and making friends with other travelers on the Silk Road. But reality quickly ruined my ideas. After three weeks of walking, a group of men wearing weird “military” clothes suddenly attacked me and my friend at a narrow path. Their eyes showed greed as they demanded I give them the box. “You’re not real soldiers,” I said angrily, holding the box tight. “I’ll never give it to you.”

Because I did not give me the box, they grabbed my friend—Yaysen, a young camel driver who had joined me to stay safe—and put a sword at his face. “Give us the box, or your friend dies,” their leader shouted angrily. I felt very angry, but I remembered what Marco Polo’s told to me. With a sad feeling, I turned around and ran, listening to Yaysen fearless shouts away in the back. I felt guilty, but I knew the mission was too important to stop.

Weeks passed, and the boring desert started to make me less excited. I became tired and more and more curious about what was in the box. Marco Polo’s warning kept playing in my mind, but curiosity was too hard to forget. One night, as I camped under a sky full of stars, I open the box. A bright golden light burst out, flying into the night like a shooting star, lighting up the desert for miles around. I was shocked and confused, staring at the now—light box. When I looked inside again, I found only a small, old glass bottle with strange symbols carved on it. I opened it carefully—nothing came out. I felt relieved, thinking I hadn’t done anything.

The next morning, an old man with a face wrinkled by years of desert winds came to my camp. He told me a scary story: “When I was young, I was a caravan leader and was given a similar box. someone attacked us, wanting the box. To save my brother, I gave it to them. When they opened it, a burning light came out—so bright it lit up the sky. In a second, the group fell to the ground, dead. I never knew what the light was, but I knew it was a power we couldn’t understand.” His words made me scared, and a bad feeling settled over me.

The next day when I was walking to the city Diecy but in the path I saw a woman with a kid in the path because I am a kind person so I ask her do you need some help :‘I was trap in this place for one month we had not eat food for 4 whole day I was a little worried about them, but I thought there only few day to transport the mystery box to Dunhuang .

I had only a few food left If I gave them my food I will be hungry for many days but, if I do not give them any foods they will be hungry for even more day , so I decide to give them half of my food to them She thanks me ,It was raining I ask he if I can go to her house to stay for a while because the rain is becoming more and more bigger. In told him about the mysterious box. But suddenly I thought if some thing Marco Polo told me that never tell anyone about this I was thinking I had told this lady what if he is a guy that want to take this box, or maybe he will tell the military to kill me again so I made a hard diction I took my sword of and kill her I

was sad but I have to do this for my own safety

Days later, I reached a famous dangerous town called “The Dickey” (DIECITY)—a lawless place full of murderers, and people who had been kicked out of their homes. The town was a full of broken mud-brick houses, and danger was everywhere. To get to Dunhuang, I had to walk through its five-mile stretch of chaos. By then, my supplies were all gone, and I had no weapons to protect myself. The people there held simple but deadly weapons—swords, slingshots, and poisoned darts—making every

Under the cover of night, I searched for food scraps in the town’s back streets, barely avoiding groups of guards. I moved quietly, using my cleverness to get away from possible attackers. When night came, I got out of The Dickey, tired but alive, and kept going on my journey. Later on I keep walking I meet another guy he is also transporting food I ask him where is he going he said his is also going to Dunhuang I sad maybe we can make friend together then we talk play and eat food together late o we walk to our journey After months of suffering, surviving, sandstorms, hunger, and the deadly fear of being chased—I finally saw Dunhuang’s in the distance. My legs shook as I stumbled toward the city gates, where a person wearing a hood was waiting for me. Without saying a word, I handed over the box. The person nodded, and as they turned to leave, they whispered: “You’ve done what you should done. The box’s secret is safe—for now.”

As I watched them disappear into the crowd, I thought of Marco Polo, of Yaysen, and of the mysterious light that had happen at the night. The journey had been very hard, but it taught me the importance of loyalty, how dangerous curiosity can be, and the courage needed to keep a promise—even when things seem impossible.

The Treacherous Journey

HD Beijing School, Yang, Kevin – 12

Standing on top of the sand dunes, just outside the city of Dunhuang, I could feel the wind blowing into my face. The wind was so big that it lifted sand up and into the air, the sound of the sand ruffling against the sand, a *sha sha sha* sound, vibrated from the ground. The smell of cooking food, which was rice and vegetables from Luoyang, wafted from our camp.

My name is Ban Chao, a general in the Han Empire. In my hand, I hold the imperial edict coming directly from the emperor, with the order to talk the tribes of the west into opening a safe passage for us to trade. This must be done with the upmost importance and speed, for it will greatly strengthen the Han empire and we will be greatly rewarded. I felt that this job was needed to be done, I am a bit scared and somewhat excited. I am scared is because we don't what dangers we could run into, and I am excited is due to the fact that we could see new sights and meet new people.

Me and my team of advisers and soldiers were setting off the next day, so today we're preparing the food and the water that we need on the journey; and tonight, we must rest, because of the fact that we have a long journey in front of us. My wife was very sad that I need to leave again, but she does understand the importance of this journey and hoped me a safe journey.

The next day, a lot of people from the city of Dunhuang came to see us off, they believed we would succeed, also they gave us gifts, such as food, clothes and other things to keep us entertained, with their gifts and their needed to leave again, but she does understand the importance of this journey and wishedencouragements, we felt more confident that our journey will succeed.

On the first day, we were just traveling, we could see magnificent sights while we traveled. In the morning, the desert was not that hot, so it was an ideal time to be traveling, now there is no wind, the sand staid still, the only problem was that we often sunk into the sand, we have to use our full strength to walk. Then at noon, we found a place that was relatively warm, and the sand was packed—so that we didn't sink into the sand, we took out the food that we have prepared and started to eat. After we replenished our energy, it was the cruelest part of day, the afternoon. People have always said that 2 o'clock to 3 o'clock is the hottest part of day of all, it was as if you were in a giant oven, and this oven were cooking and roasting you. Imagine this, you were in the desert at 2 o'clock, the sun was beating down on you, every part of your skin that haven't been covered soon grew red and hot, after a while your skin would get sunburnt, and you would feel terrible, but luckily no one on our team got sunburn.

On the second day of our journey, we finally reached one of the tribes, which was called the Qiang tribe. We asked to speak with the tribe leader, he was a large man, with a huge beard and long hair, he face was lined and scared due to the years of fighting and hunting, his muscles bugged, I instantly felt intimidated by him, we could not imagine how did he become chief. We told him that through giving our traders a safe journey their land, they too could also become prosperous and powerful. After hearing what we said, the chief of the tribe asked what we would give him, we showed him the gold and silks from China, he was fascinated by these new things, he told us that he would think about it and tell us his decision tomorrow morning.

The next morning, he told us that he would agree with our terms, we gave him a part of the gold and silk in thanks, and in response he gave us some wool and a part of their food to try, we was very excited by this because we have never tried their food before and another reason was we were incredibly hungry, and we continued to watch them cook the food that we were going to eat. The food was sheep meat cooked over a strong fire, and after they finished cooking, they sprinkled salt and other stuff, such as spices to make the piece of meat taste better, we tried it and was amazed by its taste, we noted down the recipe and continued on our journey.

The next few tribes that we encountered soon also agreed to our terms, we exchanged gifts in a manner of trust, and the whole thing went smoothly, until we encountered the last tribe that we need to talk to.

It was the tenth day into our journey, and if we talk this tribe, which was call the Di tribe, into agreeing with our terms, we can finally go home, but the tribe leader is very stubborn, he won't agree to let a safe path through. He says that if he agrees we will lead an army to destroy his tribe and his home, we told him over and over again trying to convince him that we won't attack his tribe, and he finally relented. The tribe leader invited us to a feast, as a bonding of trust, we ate and drank, the food was mainly cow and sheep meat which the tribe cooked in their own traditional way, cooked slowly over a small fire, while adding salt, a hint of spices and seasoning, it tasted divine. The drink was wine, which the tribe got from passing traders before. We gave him our gifts, a large quantity of gold and silk, and to our surprise he offered one of his children for us to take back to the Han Empire and learn our customs, we first told him that we can't agree to this, but the tribe leader insisted that we take him, we felt that we can't insult the tribe leader, so we relented and told him we will take his child back in a few years. We slept peacefully and happily tonight.

The next day, we set off with the child on the long way back to Dunhuang, without the need to stop and negotiate with the tribes, we actually went quite fast, on the way we could see all the tribes we have visited before, we stopped at some of them to replenish our food and water supplies.

After four days of constant traveling, we finally arrived back at Dunhuang, everyone in the city came out to greet us back home, they showered us with flowers and greeted us as if we were heroes coming back from a victories battle. At night, the whole city gathered in the city square to celebrate, we ate food, drank wine and other beverages, told stories of our journey to other people, and also shared the recipes of the amazing food we had ate on the journey. Tonight will be a wonderful and sleepless one.

The next morning, I stood on the city walls, looking out into the desert, one hand holding the letter to the emperor, and the other I held a pigeon. At the other city gate, a horse drawn carriage that I have arranged carried the Di tribe child to the capital city of Changan. I strapped the letter to one of the pigeon's legs and told it to fly to Changan, to the emperor, telling everyone of the great news that there's a safe and secure route to trade.

Impacts of New Silk Road

HD Beijing School, Zhang, Nicolas – 13

The Silk Road, a trade route that was started in the Han dynasty, attracting thousands of merchants and traders to come. It was used a whole of one and a half millennium and was ended in the Ming Dynasty of China. It helped cultures spread through and influenced the whole Afro–Eurasian region. After leaving for more than 5 centuries, it is back. The New Silk Road, also known as the Belt and Road Initiative, is a project made by China to build marketing commercials with the whole Eurasian continent. It is a great plan and starts a cooperation among countries. There will be a lot of advantages in economic, geopolitical, and environmental, but what also comes with it is risks and challenges that China need to face against.

Firstly, economic regions are highly impacted. The New Silk Road could both help nearby countries and China itself. This project boosts the trades of energy sources and goods. For example, the China–Kazakhstan oil and gas pipelines and the China–Russia Far East Natural Gas pipeline all played important roles. This also helps to make more land ports that are in regions of Northwest to appear and develop. For example, Xi'an is a core hub of the New Silk Road trade, and it has gotten a great grown (17.2%) in its total import–export volume. This raises the GDP of all the nearby countries and China itself.

Secondly, in Industrial and Enterprising regions, the BRI also contributes to a great growth. For example, among the pressure of the opening of a lot of foreign markets, it comes the increase in the steel and cement production, promoted advantage industries. Companies like Haier has opened new factories in foreign countries. The great change would also cause the transitions of companies. What will come very positively is the amount of profit that you will get. Most of the companies has either maintained or became better in the year of 2024.

The last aspect of impact it has on is the environment. It attempts to build a sustainable environment together by the project “Green Silk Road.” This promotes the export of new sustainable energy technologies like photovoltaics and wind power. This helps to build a way to help the other developing countries to develop while also protecting the environment. But what comes with this is the great challenge of the costs of these types of technologies. Another problem of this is that there will be more pollution caused while building those huge infrastructures.

As mentioned in the last paragraph, as there are profits and great positive impacts on Earth, what also comes with this is the risks and dangers inside of this. The first challenge is the huge costs as mentioned already. Oversea projects are hard to maintain and will cost a great prize, which may not even succeed and earn profits. Secondly, BRI projects are full of debt risks, which do doubt if this is worth the cost and money that we have paid.

The other problem that should be mentioned is the technical and management risks. The technical standards in different countries are different, which means that things that could be done in your country can't be done in others. For example, in different countries the charging power is different. Also, the laws will also be a problem for the projects to get presented.

In conclusion, The New Silk Road gives many positive impacts in the fields of Economy, Industry& Enterprising, and building a green environment. But what also comes with it are the risks of causing pollution while doing the project, the debt risks, and the technical and law difficulties. To summarize, The New Silk Road has is risky, but it does bring lots of products if succeeded. We do not know to the future, so why should we not try to make it better and greener.

From Code to Community

HD Beijing School, Zhang, Nono – 14

Near Kashgar, the desert never stays quiet for long. One morning, when the sky was wide and blue, May believed she still had time to finish her fieldwork. She stood on a low hill, holding her tablet, guiding a drone across the dry land. This data was important for her research paper, and she was already behind schedule. Her professor kept sending short emails, asking for results. The pressure followed her even here, far away from the city. Then the wind suddenly changed. Sand rushed into the air like a wall. The drone shook, lost its signal, and disappeared into the yellow storm. May ran after it, but the wind pushed back. When the storm finally slowed, the drone was gone. She searched near some old mud walls, angry and tired, afraid that weeks of work were lost.

While digging in the sand, a local teenage boy appeared. His name was Kasim, speaking a little bit of English and pointed toward a cracked earth wall nearby. Together they searched again, and soon they found the drone stuck inside the broken wall. It was damaged badly. As May pulled it out, something else fell to the ground. It was a small copper box, old and heavy, hidden inside the wall. Curiously, they opened it carefully. Inside was a piece of silk, folded many times, covered with strange lines and symbols. May froze for a moment. She had studied enough to know this was not decoration. It looked like a coded map, possibly connected to the Silk Road. Her heart beat faster. This discovery could save her paper. Kasim stared at the silk too. He said the symbols reminded him of stories his grandfather told, about nomads, long journeys, and secret signs used to survive the desert. Sitting beside the wall, they talked and quickly understood that neither of them could solve this alone. They made a simple deal. Kasim would guide her through the land and help explain the symbols using local knowledge. May would help Kasim make a report, using her technology and academic support, to oppose a planned data center project that might damage local water and land. Their reasons were different, but their path joined.

The silk showed only one clear destination, not many. They traveled together toward that point. The journey was hard but focused. At night, May worked on her tablet, scanning the silk, zooming into details, and running algorithms to compare patterns. Sometimes the software gave confusing results, and she complained quietly, feeling the limits of pure data. During the day, Kasim watched the land. He pointed out small changes in soil color, wind direction, and plants. He told stories passed down in his family, about how travelers find water, how they avoid deadly storms, and how trust between strangers once meant survival. Slowly, May noticed that when she combined Kasim's stories with her data, the symbols made more sense. The code was not abstract. It was deeply connected to the land itself.

After several days, they reached a small valley hidden between low hills. It looked unimportant at first, but there was fresh water flowing gently, and green plants grew around it. The air felt calm, almost protected. May checked her analysis again, comparing the silk with their location. The truth became clear. This was not a treasure map. It was a survival guide. The silk marked places where water could be found, where people could rest safely, and where fair trade could happen. It showed paths built on cooperation, not control. The Silk Road, she realized, was never just about silk or gold. It was about shared knowledge, mutual trust, and helping each other stay alive in a dangerous world. Kasim nodded when she explained it. For him, this knowledge had always existed in stories. Now it was written in code and data.

Excited and proud, May worked late into the night. She combined everything into a simple digital model, a 3D map people could explore and interact with. It felt clean and powerful. Without much thought, she sent it to her professor. The reply came quickly. He praised her work and called it groundbreaking. But then his message changed tone. He said he had already contacted a company. They wanted to build an "immersive Silk Road experience" in the valley. A data center would be constructed first to support it. Kasim read the email silently. His face became serious. May stared at the glowing screen, then looked outside at the quiet valley. The real land

was alive and fragile. The digital version was easy to copy and sell. She understood the danger clearly now. If she followed her professor's plan, she would turn living history into a product. She would preserve the road in data, but destroy its soul in reality.

May made her choice quickly. Instead of replying to her professor, she logged into a global open cultural heritage database. She uploaded everything that she has collected, including the data, the images, the decoding process, and her notes. She labeled it clearly as public domain and named it "Silk Road Survival Code." The response spread fast. Archaeologists, historians, and local communities all around the world have quickly noticed the project and began to discuss it. Under the growing public pressure, the data center project was paused. With the report May helped him prepare, Kasim applied for a small cultural heritage protection fund and became a community guardian. A few weeks later, May received an automatic notification. On the project page, new contributors had appeared. An Italian scholar added research from the Mediterranean side. A Japanese programmer improved the interaction design. On the world map, small lights showed visitors from across the globe. May finally finished her paper, which titled "From Code to Community: Reconnecting the Silk Road Spirit in the Digital Age". She understood now that this road was not ending. Its real journey of exploration had only just begun.

New Tales of China's Silk Road

HD Beijing School, Zhang, Peppa – 11

Once upon a time, there was a cavalry troop from Huns. They were very good at fighting, almost everyone have bravery and combat experience. It seems that they have merged with the bow and arrow, and they shoot very accurately. But after a fight, something different happened...

It is an afternoon. Army of two sides arranged their soldiers. As the captains waved their flag, the battleground was in chaos in a moment. Arrows, knives and swords crashed into each other. That cavalry troop came to the left side of the enemies. Their task is to launch a surprise attack and help the main army. Just before they take action, ten enemy soldiers blocked their way. They handled spears and shields, and charged to the troop. Each cavalryman turned backward and run to split up forces. There was one that run very quickly and did not come back. He thought that he did not have enough power to defeat them, so he ran away.

After they finish their combat, the commander found the cavalryman that ran away.

“Why did you do that

when the troop is in danger?”

the cavalryman wanted to make excuses, but the commander did not listen. He said seriously,

“You are out of this troop. You’re not coming back.”

The archer went away from the Huns. He walked and walked, finally he has an idea: if I can do a big thing, maybe the troop will let me back! But where can I find things to do? He thought.

Finally, he had a solution. There were many traders on the silk road, protecting traders is really a big thing. He thought this is a good way to prove himself. As he thought about this, he started his action.

The next day, he started to find traders to go with. But he has a problem with finding one that was fit for this task because almost everyone wants to do their work properly and did not want to be interrupted with it.

“Do you need protection with your trading?” the archer asked hopefully.

“No, thanks.

” the trader spoke crisply, rejecting the archer’s suggestion.

The archer was sad. He did not really know what is the feeling of being ignored. But now, he must face the fact. His emotions filled his brain. He slowly walked, every step was heavy, seemed like he will fall down in the next second.

He didn’t realize that how long did he walked. As he went past a tree, he sat down beside it and closed his eyes, and went to sleep.

As he opened his eyes and stand up, his thoughts turned more clearly. He started to think for solutions. But he can't find a way to solve this problem. A trader appeared and the archer thought that it is a good chance and asked the trader,

“May I protect you?” The trader nodded his head. “Our trading team was attacked by some robbers. We do not want it to happen again.

” But he asked:

“Can you fight and shoot

well?” this was an important question because they want someone that was good at fighting to protect them. So, the archer did not go with them. He knew that if he wanted to be safe, he would need to learn more about how to fight. He found a quiet place in the mountains, chose a cave for his shelter, trained his shooting skills, and he practiced every day. Other than this, he learned how to use a sword from a soldier. From now on, he turned into a self-disciplined man with an aim of proving himself.

After he finished his training, he went back to the place that he met the traders. They asked:

“How much

did you improve on shooting?” The archer did not say anything. He shooted an arrow to a tree nearby. Everyone saw that the arrow cutted through a leaf swinging around! The trader was surprised that he improved so much on this. The archer didn’t show his sword skills because he wanted to keep it as a secret for dangerous situations that might be coming. He knew that it might save his life. His journey had just started.

Following the trader's team, the archer started his way to their destination. At first, he was a bit curious about the journey, but as long he went, he slowly lost his interest. His curiosity came from the landscape beside their way, but after some days, he saw that on the way, almost everything is same. There was a moment that he wanted to give up. But at last, reason replaced his impulse, he firmly thought that it is important, he must persist.

Another conflict came quickly. Although the archer decided to persist, he was very afraid. He doesn’t know what are going to happen and where are he going to. Fear occupied his mind quickly. He was thinking about danger that was on the way.

After weeks, they arrived a new place—Dunhuang. It is in a very dry, sandy land. The ground has many hills of sand. Nearby, there are rocky hills and small mountains. They are brown and dry. In the middle of the desert, there was a piece of green. This was a place with water, trees, and farms. It was a bright spot in the dry land. The sky above Dunhuang was clear and blue and the sun was very strong.

They went into the main city to trade. The market was loud. One of those traders went to a man who had carpets made of wool.

“Your carpets are wonderful,

” he said, looking at it,

“I have good silk from China to trade.

”

He looked up and smiled.

“Okay. Let’s trade for one of these carpets.

”

The trader gave him silk and got a thick, warm carpet.

Nearby, another trader showed green stones called jade. The trader in the group liked the jade and traded some of his silk for three stones. He was happy with the jade.

The traders also stopped at a farmer's stall selling sweet melons. They bought three melons with two coins, and they liked how they smelled.

Throughout the whole process, the archer didn’t say anything, because he was so exciting—he had not seen this scene.

After trading, the group was a bit tired. They rested for the night in a house, feeding their camels. In the morning, the archer woke other traders up and asked them:

“Who were you trading with yesterday?”

One of the group said:

“Other places’traders,

”he yawned,

“Why you woke us up so early?” The archer

said sorry to them and they started their journey again. They left Dunhuang. Their camels carried carpets,jade, and melons as they went west on the silk road.It is a happy day. The traders got more goods from other places, changing with their silk. The archer turned

familiar with the process during those days. As they pasted a mountain, three robbers stood in front of them. One of them shouted:

“Robbers! Don't move! Give me all your things or your life!” The archer

turned brave during the journey. He shot an arrow to a robber. The rest of them ran away.

After hours, the group saw that there are hundreds of people running to them. The archer saw that the person in the front is that robber! He quickly ran away from them. While running, he discovered Turpan's camp. He was afraid at first but his bravery was stronger. He went into it and give hand signals to the leader of them. He understood it and arranged their soldiers. They went back to where the traders was. No time to think, they started a fight.

The Turpan soldiers saw them coming. They got ready. They wore strong armor and helmets. They had swords, bows, and arrows.

The fight began. The soldiers shouted and charged forward. They shot arrows at the robbers. The robbers tried to fight back, but the soldiers were better. They pushed the robbers back. The robbers saw they could not win. They turned and ran away. The soldiers and the archer rescued the traders.

After a long time, the group arrived. They got many goods. The archer changes himself during the journey.

As he went back to the Hun's camp, everyone knew his brave and speed, and vote him to be the new leader of this army. From now on, he became a new self.

Friendship

HD Beijing School, Zhao, Iris – 12

As the sun sinks below the endless Gobi Desert, painting the sky in amber and rose, a Buddhist monk in plain yellow robes walks slowly along the ancient Silk Road. The wind slices through the air, lifting clouds of sand, and his wooden staff taps softly against the earth. For days, he has walked alone, seeing no other travelers. He once believed deserts were empty places—until tonight.

As stars appear, the road narrows. Locals call this place the Critical Point, where shadows stretch unnaturally long and stories of lost caravans linger like ghosts. The monk remembers a warning from the last village: a cruel merchant who haunts this road, wielding power over sand and shadow, twisted by loneliness and greed.

Suddenly—hooves.

The pounding grows louder, steady and relentless. The monk clasps his hands and whispers a prayer. When he opens his eyes, a tall, gaunt man rides toward him. His faded indigo robes are patched and trimmed with cheap gold. His face is tight with restless anger, and his hands twitch eagerly.

“Hello!” the merchant barks. “I guard this road! None pass without my permission!”

The monk tries to step aside. The merchant slams his fist against the saddle.

“I’m talking to you!”

“What do you want?” the monk asks calmly.

“Your coin!” the merchant snarls. “Buy my wares—or you’ll never reach the next oasis. This road is mine!”

The monk murmurs, “So the villagers were right.”

“What did you say?” the merchant snaps. “You think you’re better than me? You monks always judge!”

He pulls out a truncheon carved with strange symbols and swings it through the air. The sand dunes melt and twist into monsters—clawed beasts, swirling shapes with burning eyes. They crawl toward the monk. He grips his staff, heart pounding.

Then voices echo in the distance.

Six travelers approach on camels loaded with sacks and crates. Their robes are thick and dark blue. A bearded man with bright eyes leads them. A guide in a yellow hat walks beside the camels, blowing a soft whistle.

“Turn back!” the merchant shouts. “This road is mine!”

But the sand monsters hesitate. The travelers’ calm presence weakens the spell. One monster collapses into dust when a camel steps near it.

“What’s happening here?” the tall traveler asks.

“A monk, strange sand creatures, and a merchant who blocks the road,” the guide says.

“Who’s talking about me?” the merchant snaps.

“No one!” the guide says, though some travelers chuckle.

Furious, the merchant waves his truncheon again, but the monsters shrink.

“I’ll return with something worse!” he yells, galloping into the dunes.

The monk bows to the travelers. “Thank you. That man is dangerous.”

The tall traveler smiles. "I am Marco Polo. We travel to collect stories."

"The merchant has haunted this road for years," the monk explains. "He uses magic to scare lonely travelers."

Unseen, the merchant hides behind a dune, listening.

"I'll come back when they sleep," he mutters.

That night, as everyone rests, the merchant creeps toward their camp in a dark cloak. He raises his truncheon.

"There's someone there!" a traveler cries.

The merchant slips away.

The monk stands, scanning the darkness. The wind carries faint footsteps fading into the dunes.

"Stay close," the monk says. "Fear is his only weapon."

A growl echoes. New monsters rise—bigger than before: a scorpion of stone, a sand snake, a dust wolf. The travelers gasp. The monk chants softly. The creatures hesitate.

The merchant steps forward, sneering.

"My creatures don't fear prayers!"

He snaps his fingers. The scorpion lunges. Marco Polo swings a metal flask, striking its claw. Sand scatters.

"Fight back!" Marco shouts.

The guide throws a rock. Another traveler jabs with a stick.

The monk keeps chanting. The wind weakens. The creatures tremble and dissolve into sand.

"No!" the merchant screams. "Stop!"

His magic fades. He stumbles back, staring at his empty hands.

"How did you do that?" he asks.

"Your power comes from anger," the monk says. "Peace breaks curses. What do you truly want?"

The merchant's voice cracks.

"I just want someone to stay with me. This road is lonely. I thought if I controlled it, people would have to notice me."

The desert trembles slightly. A child cries, but the merchant barely notices.

"Loneliness is a cruel curse," the monk says gently. "But you don't have to face it alone. Let go of greed, and people will walk with you."

"Really?" the merchant whispers.

A sudden gust lifts him into the air.

"I'll be back!" he shouts. "But I'll try to change!"

The wind carries him away. Silence returns.

"Thank you," the monk tells the travelers. "I couldn't have done it alone."

"That's what travelers do," the guide says. "We help each other."

They build a small campfire. The monk draws a circle in the sand.

“Differences don’t matter if our hearts are open,” he says. “We are strong when united. Friendship is the greatest treasure.”

One traveler nods. “We almost forgot that.”

The night deepens. The fire glows warmly. Marco leans against a dune. The guide mends his yellow hat.

At dawn, the dunes glow gold and rose. A cool breeze carries the scent of an oasis. Tiny desert flowers bloom around their camp. Birds soar overhead, singing.

When they leave, their shadows stretch long behind them. In the distance, a faint trail of dust marks where the merchant went—this time, not a threat, but a new beginning.

The desert remains vast and quiet, but no longer empty. Under the morning sun, it feels full of possibility, where even lonely roads can lead to friendship.

New Tales of China's Silk Road

HD Beijing School, Zhong, Zoe – 13

Note from the archivist: Finally! I've finished my project for my ELP. Conducting my very own research on the Silk Road was no easy feat, and I am praying to every god that I get a high score.

Attached below are a series of diaries I have collected during my study. Although, of course, they reflect the economic prosperity and the cultural connection between civilizations at that time (had to copy that from the assignment requirements), there's something more to them.

I'm not sure what.

Journal of Ah'San, Junior Clerk, Chang'an

Seventh day of the third month

Six caravans headed west today, chasing the sandstorms of the Taklamakan Desert imbued with a golden hue. Four returned to the city, muffled sobs of relief and joy heralding their arrival. My instructor once told me that the Silk Road is the spine of the dynasty. I suppose it is; numbers and profit do not lie.

Each leisurely afternoon, I gaze outside and watch the caravans come and go. There are thousands of them, perhaps. Thousands of men depart Chang'an, tears and sorrow permeating the air. Perhaps thousands more return from faraway lands with a faint accent.

So many insipid travelers, headed on a dangerous road.

Today was no different, though someone caught my attention. A new interpreter arrived from the western regions, though I couldn't make out exactly where. His name is Aman. He speaks our tongue, though occasionally pauses to ruminate over a phrase or translate something in his head.

"Where are you from, Aman?" My pronunciation was likely embarrassingly wrong. "From the road," he said with a half-smile.

I like him. He does make my day considerably less boring.

Diary Entry of Aman, the One Who Speaks Many Tongues

Ninth day of the third month

Dear Diary,

I'm collecting my thoughts, as I have always, before retiring for the night.

The court hired me to translate for some foreign dignitaries— I arrived a few days early in Chang'an.

They think I translate every tongue, every dialect, every accent.

Perhaps what I truly translate is intention.

Journeying on the Silk Road, I encountered many people. Girls with their soft locks hidden in head scarves, boisterous boys with their shirts untucked, merchants who dealt spices and camels and herbs.

Once, a Persian merchant swore his wares were flawless and of the highest quality. Yet that earned only upturned brows and muffled scoffs. To the Chinese merchants, his claims were arrogant and his boasts ridiculous.

I soften, calibrate, and translate such statements.
“My wares are the best in the world,” the merchant said.

“He says his wares are truly excellent in quality” was the translation.

Meaning, intention; they work to ensure trade is smooth on the Silk Road.

That clerk — Ah’San, I believe — assumed that the road exists only for goods and profit. I was not eager to correct him. He is younger than I, a little eccentric, and stubborn in his opinions.

On the seventh, I watched him organize his files into neat folders before blowing out the candles and escorting me to an inn. Chang’an was alight with a thousand stars, each lantern akin to a planet in the night sky. I bid farewell to him in my mother tongue. *May the road remember you.*

A Diary Entry Written by Lan Yan, Daughter of a Merchant

Exact date unknown, at an oasis west of Yumen Pass

Dearest Diary,

Mother and Father have always emphasized being eloquent and being capable of recording expenses. That way, I can marry into a noble family.

I suppose they have a point. We are only merchants, after all; our caravan is dilapidated and our travels endless. The Silk Road is the silver string twined ‘round our fingers. It leads us to the promise of a great unknown, maybe riches or maybe rags.

Today, bandits attacked at dusk.

I remember everything.

The sky, enveloped in a sheer layer of smoke from a bonfire, twinkled with half-visible stars.

Camels screamed like untuned instruments, only synchronized in fear.

That interpreter —Aman— dragged me behind the cart, his hands shaking yet his face betraying no emotion. My hands, charred and burnt and blistered from accidentally touching a fire, barely managed to clasp his.

Later, Aman bandaged my burned hands with a scarf. I stared at his eyes, bottomless and earth-toned, framed with thick lashes. The one who had saved our caravan. The one who had saved my life.

He said nothing I had expected a hero to say. He didn’t monologue about his gallantry like the heroes in one of my novels.

“Breathe,” he said simply. I followed his command, the scent of the distant desert and the relief of being alive flooding my senses.

He escorted me back to my family’s tent. In hushed whispers, we exchanged farewells, and it was both bitter and tender— he was off to his next destination. Just like nearing an oasis in the never-ending desert, in a sense.

I have nothing to remember him by. Not a farewell gift, and the makeshift bandage he gave me has been tossed carelessly to the wind. Only a poem.

*If silk is what we sell
Then fear is what we carry
Songs are scattered to the wind
And wares are lost to floods.
Camels escape their tents
Death looms over us*

*As a shadow follows its owner
When we die
Will anyone remember?
Only the road
The road will remember you.*

A Tattered Scroll Written by Gao Shun, Caravan Guard

Exact date lost to time, at an oasis west of Yumen Pass

The desert forgives no one.

My blade doesn't let anyone go. I have killed bandits for a fraction of what these caravans carry, and I have buried their bodies in the golden sands.

A few days ago, I almost lost a girl.

Lan Yan's a clever one. Don't let her be humble and tell everyone that the interpreter saved her; nay, it was her quick thinking that saved both of their lives. She told Aman to hide behind the cart and distracted the bandits long enough for me to track them down.

Yet even her quick thinking almost couldn't save her. I was almost too late, too.

The bandits fought with a ferocity akin to that of the wild beasts they lived alongside. They were swift as snakes and rabid as wild dogs. I've never seen their blades before— must be some sort of desert technology. Slash, cut. Screams from everyone and everywhere sounded from every direction, from thieves and my bosses. I gritted my teeth and attacked and parried without thought.

I do not recall what happened after that. Battles become a blur once you exhaust all of your energy and instead depend on sheer willpower. Funnily enough, that's when I'm most powerful.

I blinked and saw I had won. Lan Yan and the others emerged from behind the carts, shaking, bruised, and bandaged.

At night, we retired to our tents and bid farewell to Aman. It was nice, watching him protect that smart one.

He gave me a slip of paper. Words I can barely understand. Something I swore to toss away but instead hid in my armor.

I had long forgotten the faces of the men and animals I had buried under the sands. I don't understand anything on this paper, yet I worry that it remembered for me.

Diary of Aman, Interpreter of Many Tongues

Nineteenth day of the fourth month

Dear Diary,

Something is lost every time I translate.

When I speak Chinese, my mother tongue's harsh consonants soften and fade into soft, rounded vowels. When I try to reignite my mother tongue's fire on my lips, the edges of Mandarin linger like an afterthought.

I am always carrying ghosts. Ghosts of other languages.

I've been traveling around the country for a while, picking up jobs here and there.

Today, I arrived in Chang'an for the second time this year. Nothing has changed— or maybe I'm not familiar with the city enough— the lights are still dazzling as ever, and the streets are packed with decadent nobles. My client Zhang'li watched caravans come and go with me. Instead of asking me to translate, he pressed a cup of osmanthus wine into my hands and watched me with a sympathetic look. "The road has been unkind to all of us," he said.

They believe the Silk Road is built of silk and silver, contracts, and numbers recorded in an orderly fashion in one of Ah'San's ledgers.

But I am older now, and perhaps that makes me wise.

The Silk Road is built on translated words, unfinished promises, and people who vanish in the sands.

Today, I will leave Chang'an and head to Dunhuang.

*If anyone remembers me
The one who translates
And tries to fill the void between cultures
Then let it not be by name
May the road remember us
As ones who listened
To stories lost to the wind.*

New Tales of China's Silk Road

HD Beijing School, Zhu, Julianna – 14

During the Han Dynasty, China was a powerful empire. However, the vast deserts remained mysterious and dangerous, for no one could pass through them without experiencing extreme drought and thirst, and many died trying to uncover the secrets of the lands beyond the deserts. The emperor hoped to find allies to fight against the hostile tribes called “Xiongnu” at the time, and therefore ordered Zhang Qian, who was one of the bravest and most competent official under his rule.

“Oh, my dearest wife,” Zhang Qian exclaimed, “I promise you I will not die on this mission. I will come back for you, my dearest love.”

“My husband, what are promises to the merciless nature? I can only pray for you to serve the Emperor with honour, but if you sense great danger that seeks your life, remember that a strategic retreat is also a duty... and my only hope.”

Kisses and tears cannot cover all of their sad feelings, but time is cunning. Zhang Qian set off with a group of honoured warriors, carrying vital supplies, the emperor’s trust, and his wife’s worries. They wandered in the barren desert, and it was cruel: every day the sun was burning into their skin, cooking up their insides, and making the once heavy water supplies run out in big swallows. The night, however, was cold like ice. The wind blew hard, carrying sand into the men’s eyes, noses, and mouths, making it nearly impossible to walk properly, not to say that after a long day on the horse, they were all exhausted already. They soon lost their sense of direction due to their dizziness.

They were soon in the middle of nowhere, with no water and no idea how far they would have to walk further with the exhausted horses.

In the meantime, a very young and beautiful goddess was very bored with life in the sky, which was filled with parties and luxurious food. She decided to check on the earth, which seemed to contain endless thrills according to her sisters. She flew down from the sky, with light and colourful fabrics falling with her, and music accompanied. She found a desert, with men who seemed to be lost and barely surviving.

That was right, Zhang Qian and his men were near losing all hope, for the horses were dried out, the supplies were down to an extremely low level, and they were too dizzy in the sun to tell which way was north.

The goddess flew closer, and realized that although the leader’s face was covered in dust, he had brilliant black eyes, deep and shining with resilience. The goddess felt a strange feeling coming up from her heart. Seeing the man so handsome, she decided to go even closer and help this man.

Zhang Qian blinked hard to clear the sand from his eyes, for he thought he saw something with magnificent colours and glowing light coming toward him. His ears captured the faintest of music that felt warm and welcoming, but also sacred.

“Is this my end?” he thought with an unclear mind, “Who is this?”

“Hello, my brave leader of this expedition. I heard your prayers and came to free you from this desperation.”

“What?” Zhang Qian was bewildered, but what his eyes gave away. In front of him was the most gorgeous woman he had ever seen. She had silk-like black hair, with jewellery decorating every inch of her body save her face, which needed no other decoration: she had sparkling brown eyes, a cherry of a mouth, and skin that was pale but radiant. He was astonished and petrified.

“I am a goddess. I heard your prayers and came to free you from this desperation.”

Although Zhang Qian was still sure that this was probably an illusion, he could not be impolite to a goddess, especially one who was so beautiful.

“Hail the goddess——!”

To his surprise, the men could see her as well as he could, and so:

“Hail the goddess——!”

“Hail the goddess——!”

“Hail the goddess——!”

“Please, my all-mighty and beautiful goddess, please, help us!” Zhang Qian pledged.

“If you walk that way, you will find water and shelter soon. It will only take a few days.” The goddess pointed west

“Oh, my goddess, thank you!” Zhang Qian felt hope surging up again, “My goddess, I know I may be asking too much, but my men and I have run out of food and water, if only...”

“That can be done quite easily.” The goddess lifted her hand, and instantly the bottles were full of water again, and the luggage was filled with bread and fruits. Zhang Qian felt himself relieved and less exhausted, and when he looked around, he found his men refreshed as he was and looked ready to go.

“Oh, thank you, my goddess! Thank you, thank you, thank you! My thanks will never be enough for your help!” Zhang Qian knelt on the sand with his men, and again and again they thanked the goddess.

The goddess, having enjoyed the small spectacle, waved a dismissive hand. “That will be enough. You may rise. You have a few days to travel.”

“I... I have taken a fancy to you. If you follow this path and succeed, will you remember me and return to find me?”

Zhang Qian was surprised. He nodded after fully comprehending what the goddess had just said:

“Thank you, noble goddess. Your kindness has saved our lives. I promise I will remember you, and I will repay you,” he said sincerely. The goddess was overjoyed.

“That’s enough for me,” the goddess smiled, and seemed like she was glowing from the inside, “Tell me your name.”

“Zhang Qian.”

“Zhang Qian.”

Then, for a moment, she seemed to be wrapped in a blinding glow, and then any trace of the goddess was gone.

After walking for several more days, Zhang Qian and his men arrived at a rather strange land. The people there looked very different from the people Zhang Qian was used to—they had strange blue eyes, golden and red hair, and all had a tall nose with a hook at the end, which was weird to look at.

“Hello?”

The local people were interested in them, and circled them.

“Sorry, I can’t understand what you are saying.”

“What?”

“Can’t understand. We. No.”

After some confusing conversations full of waving of hands and pointing, Zhang Qian and the local people finally were able to understand that in front of them were some outsiders who knew nothing about the Han dynasty and a bunch of people who had come a long way to here and were exhausted.

They greeted Zhang Qian and his men warmly, offering them food and wine. Zhang Qian realized with excitement that he had found a way to connect with the people outside the Han Empire. He stayed there for a while, learning about their customs and products through pointing and touching. He also found that they had many goods that were rare in China, such as big and shiny grapes that tasted even better than they looked, and very fine horses that had muscles enough to sustain a couple of miles without resting. In return, he gave them some of the silk-made clothes they brought along, which were all still in fine shape somehow. The local people were very fascinated by the excellent craftsmanship and the smooth texture.

This was the very start of the Silk Road, which became famous around the world and brought the Han dynasty endless wealth and prosperity.

Zhang Qian went back to his hometown as a hero, with the emperor's great reward, he and his delighted wife lived happily ever after.

However, the goddess who once saved Zhang Qian's life was forgotten in the endless life of wine and money.

She was confused: did he not promise her that he would remember her?

She went into his dreams one time.

"Hello."

"Hello?"

"Do you not remember me, Zhang Qian?"

"Am I dreaming?"

"Yes." The goddess was getting impatient, "Have you not promised me that you will return to find me?"

"Well, I have done so. But I'm in so much happiness now."

"But you promised me!"

"Oh my goddess, my beautiful goddess. What are promises to my heartless nature? My wife is..."

"Stop. That is quite enough. Go...goodbye."

The goddess felt heartbreak. She was too kind to harm Zhang Qian as her sisters suggested, and really, what's the point? She went back to where she first met Zhang Qian, and cried heavy tears that rained on the sandy desert. Her tears became rivers and lakes which turned the desert into green lands and shelters for those who pass by. She cried and cried, and finally she ran out of tears.

The Silk Road remained prosperous and full of life, but her heart went silent.

New Tales of China's Silk Road

HD Beijing School, Zou, Moonko – 12

A Zao stood close to the backs of the people in the troop, he had no idea where they were heading, he was only, after all, one of the few weak and lost young men hidden in the shadows of the crowd. He saw the buses and cars passing by, with their voices whizzing through the wind, nowhere did they let a single gap for a blade of grass or vine to slip through. The air was all hasty, with smoke and dust that filled the air. Isn't it so strange? Thought A Zao, why shouldn't the sky be a mirror or a pond of fresh water? He looked around, squeezing his young body between the soulless crowd of people, even weirder, did he notice, that the people did not care if the sky was a blob of gray or not, instead, they shrugged whenever he asked, and kept on scurrying towards the distance, towards nowhere.

The crowd was so dense he could hardly breath that he had to stop in front of a glass door on the side of the street, but no one else seemed to need any rest. The sun was ever so scalding in between the buildings, in a moment, it exposed in A Zao's eyes. He stopped at a glass window, panting heavily. He felt his head dull and dizzy, staring into the glass, his body spun and swirled, through an unknown space mixed of darkness and light. Whispers hissed in his ears, pushing him to somewhere else, elsewhere from the smudgy, crackling world.

He had been swirling for a while, with his eyes closed tightly, but he heard the wind blowing, someone calling, and the rustling of something he couldn't tell. The world was clear for a moment, and stopped spinning. He breathed and opened his eyes.

The sand was dancing in A Zao's eyes. He coughed, with the wind whizzing past his ears, whispering in his ears and the sand upon his steps. He held a map in his hand, but he could only recognize a small part of the words, two lines: Chang'an, Silk Road. Looking into the distance, he felt the sun rising as it lit up the road, and he realized then, that he was on his way along the Silk Road.

His mind rose with panic, after all, the people were all strangers, different from the world he knew, wearing pieces of fabric that were fixed into some whole but dilapidated clothes. They were passing by without even noticing his young figure in the middle of nowhere. He had to get away, somehow, he thought, at least to one place on this road where he knew, which would have to be Chang'an. But mean while, he knew nothing of where he was, nor when he was.

He searched through the bunches of people, "Hello, do you know...", his voice wavered in the wind, blown into specks of dust growing faint and weak. Again, no one seemed to hear him. He must have travelled to some time back into the ancient times, but it was meaningless, he discovered, as people were only doing what they knew they had to be doing, instead of thinking about what the world could really be like despite what they see since that time he travelled to.

From somewhere behind him, a large, rough hand reached towards him, suddenly covering his view. "Hush," A scruffy voice ran through his ears, "you don't belong here." A Zao struggled in those strong and powerful arms to let his eyes take in the view from a gap between his arms. The man looked around in anxiety, and started running rapidly towards a ship's deck.

The people and camels blurred in the speed, in a moment, carrying him onto what he recognized as a pile of wood stuck together, its shape similar to the cruise ships he had seen, only, smaller and made of wood and a piece of cloth tied onto a pole. But his eyes were caught by something else on the ship, green and wildly shaped, with spots of orange and pink inlaid within them.

"Shhhh..."

The hand came again into A Zao's view. Then, all black.

A Zao had no idea how long he had been fainting, but he woke up when the ship bumped abruptly to a stop. He blinked and sat up, and nearly yelped when he saw an old and wrinkled face beside him. "You were staring at the plants the other day, weren't you?"

"P...lant?" There was an absolute silence between them.

"You don't know what a plant is, you wear some odd clothing and you don't know how to look at a map?" The man muttered, "I've no idea where on earth do you come from kid."

A Zao searched in his brain of what he saw lately, "...What was that thing on the deck...that day? Where are we?"

"At sea, young man, don't you see?" He sighed, "Well, we're arriving somewhere soon."

"Where..." Before he could finish, there it was, a land surrounding him, all green like the green he saw on the deck, only that's it was a entire land of the green, something the man called "plants".

Bits of sand spattered onto his skin from the blue and flowing liquid, "Sea," A Zao murmured, "plants..." He did not know any of them, queerly, yet somewhere in his mind, the words echoed back and forth between the walls of his heart that was so unfamiliar. He took a step off to the ground, touching the soil and grass and the wooden deck. He gasped, staring into the scene, his mind immediately a space of blankness. He was frozen there, viewing all the green and blue, brown and orange, all rushing towards him like the sea beside his feet.

"Here you go, 200 taels of silver, they won't be dying very easily will they? They can find their way back to living if they are about to?"

"Thanks, I'm sure they will grow well on your land with good light and soil. They are quite unbending."

They can find their way back to living. In his world, the words must have vanished before anyone could say them. But somehow he knew them all, in a place deep inside him, in all of the human spirits, the unyielding and indomitable spirit, only that they had disappeared then. He ventured through the plants, the sea, and the land, through all the things he once knew, yet could he take them back to where he came from? To where the world was about to collapse under the architectures and a burning land? To the mind of human where they have lost their soul and spirit they once have had? Could he have taken the colours back to a gray world?

He could have known what the world once was, but what could he possibly do? He wished he could overturn the palette of the world, and let the green fill the world. But that was that he couldn't change...Vacuously, he scooped up the seeds from the ashes and embedded them into the past.

The Envoy of Silk and Sand

Kowloon True Light School, Fung, Sin Yu – 12

Once, in an age when empires rose and winds of war swept across the steppes, a journey began that would shape the destiny of nations. For years, the fierce Xiongnu rode from the north, striking fear into the heart of Han. To seek allies beyond his borders, Emperor Wu of Han summoned a loyal courtier—Zhang Qian—and entrusted him with a mission both perilous and profound: to journey west and forge bonds that might shield the realm.

As the drumbeats of farewell echoed through the capital, Zhang Qian's mother stood at their doorway, her eyes shadowed with worry. "My son," she whispered, holding his hand as though to anchor him to safety, "achievement matters less than endurance.

Learn from the road; grow from the hardships you meet. That is the true triumph." Zhang bowed deeply, yet his tears betrayed him. He carried with him her blessing and the emperor's seal, stepping into a world vast and unknown.

Through scorching deserts and frozen passes he traveled—across sands that devoured footprints and mountains that scraped the heavens. The days burned; the nights froze. Fever overtook him more than once, and weariness laid heavy on his shoulders. But each time despair threatened, he heard his mother's voice echo within: Be steadfast. Learn. Endure.

When at last Zhang Qian reached the western realm of Xinjiang, the fragrance of foreign spices filled the air. The emperor of that land received him in a grand hall of gold and jade. Laden with gifts—silk, fine wine, and pork cured in Han's traditions—Zhang spoke of peace, of friendship, of shared prosperity. Yet the Xinjiang emperor's face darkened like a brewing storm.

"You bring treasures but not understanding," he thundered. "How can one trust a stranger who knows nothing of our ways?" His wrath condemned Zhang to lifelong imprisonment unless he could prove his sincerity.

Months passed in a dim cell, news of insult and dishonor rippling back to Emperor Wu. Diplomatic words failed; pride fanned into flame. Swords were drawn, banners raised, and soon fields between Han and Xinjiang were strewn with the fallen. Han's armies faltered, and in the silence that followed defeat, the Xinjiang emperor came to Zhang's prison.

"Your nation is broken," he said coldly. "Will you still cling to loyalty? What would you ask before death?" Zhang met his gaze. "I would ask for forgiveness to reign where pride once did. If men could see beyond borders and forgive each other's faults, no child would weep for a father lost to war. Let my mother know I am grateful—for I have done the work I was meant to do."

Something deep within the emperor stirred. In Zhang's calm, he heard truth. And so, against counsel, he ordered Zhang's release.

When news reached Han, the emperor rejoiced. From that fragile peace bloomed a bond between Han and the western lands—a bond of trade, wisdom, and trust. Silk and horses crossed deserts, ideas traversed mountains, and the Xiongnu threat waned. Generations later, storytellers still speak of Zhang Qian, envoy of the Silk Road, whose courage transformed conflict into connection, and whose journey carved the first path between worlds.

A Dream on the Silk Road

Kowloon True Light School, Kwok, Yin Lam – 13

I have always been fascinated by Chinese history—especially the glory and grandeur of the Tang Dynasty. Ever since I was a child, I’ve dreamed of walking along the Silk Road, witnessing the caravans, and seeing how this golden thread once bound the East and West together.

Yesterday evening, I was reading a book about the Tang Dynasty. But as the candle flickered, my eyelids grew heavy. The lines on the page began to blur, and before I knew it, I had fallen fast asleep.

When I opened my eyes again, I was no longer in my room. Instead, I stood beneath the sunlit skies of ancient Chang’an, surrounded by swirling dust and the hum of traders. The air was alive with voices—Persian, Indian, Arab, Chinese—all mingling in a melody of commerce. I had truly traveled back in time! Yet as wonder gave way to shock, I realized that history was not as peaceful as my textbooks described. The crowds pressed close, the markets roared with life, and fear crept in beside my excitement. Still, I couldn’t resist the urge to explore—to make the Silk Road even better for the world to come.

But I was alone in this unfamiliar time. I wandered along the outskirts of Chang’an, searching for shelter and a friendly face. After hours of walking, I stumbled upon a small village. The villagers eyed me curiously, whispering among themselves. I tried acting normal, though my nerves betrayed me. When I asked about the Silk Road, they told me it was thriving—but not without troubles.

Determined to help, I began to think of ideas. If only I could meet Emperor Taizong himself! I asked a regional officer for assistance, and although he was intrigued, he warned me that the Emperor trusted few.

At last, the day came. Standing in the grand hall before Emperor Taizong, I felt my heart race. With trembling hands, I presented my ideas: opening more trade routes, expanding beyond silk to include spices, herbs, metals, and goods from faraway lands like India, Persia, and Arabia. I suggested a new kind of money system—letters of credit—to ease trade. I even spoke of the future: the printing press, the compass, and globalization.

The Emperor listened in silence, his face unreadable. Then suspicion darkened his gaze. He accused me of being a spy and ordered my arrest.

In prison, despair nearly consumed me. But I refused to give up. Using what I knew of history, I deceived the guards and managed to escape. To survive, I disguised myself as a street vendor in Chang’an. From my stall, I observed the world around me—the powerful merchants, the corrupt officials, and the struggles of ordinary traders.

It was then that I met General An Lushan—a clever man with both military strength and a merchant’s mind. At first, he doubted me, but one night I revealed the truth: I was from the future. Instead of laughter, he met me with awe. “You’re really from the future?” he asked. When I shared my vision, his eyes gleamed. “Then let’s make it happen.”

Together, we worked to reform trade. He used his influence to open doors, and I shared knowledge from the world to come. We improved roads, encouraged new routes by sea, and introduced tools from the future—a printing press and even an electric car I had somehow brought with me. I showed Li Chunfeng how the press could spread books and ideas, and I used the car to assist travelers, even helping Xuanzang on his journey to India and Jianzhen on his voyage to Japan.

I met merchants and scholars from every corner of the known world: Persian traders who bartered gems and spices, Arabian thinkers who shared ancient sciences, and Indian monks translating sacred texts. Each encounter deepened my awe for this web of human connection.

Years passed, and Chang'an flourished more than ever before. The markets buzzed with voices from every land, and the Silk Road became a river of wealth and culture. Farmers prospered under Li Chunfeng's new calendar. Books spread through the empire. The printing press and my car changed daily life. China became richer, wiser, and stronger.

Then one morning, everything blurred. My ears rang. I heard a familiar voice calling—my mother's. I blinked, and I was back at my desk. The book on the Tang Dynasty lay open before me. It had all been a dream... or had it?

On the table beside me was a small coin—strangely shaped, marked with Persian letters I couldn't read. I held it tightly in my palm, smiling. Maybe history and dreams were not so far apart after all.

Marveling Marco

Kowloon True Light School, Lau, Po Hei – 14

On his deathbed he said, “I did not tell half of what I saw, for I knew I would not be believed.”

On the soft green grass, he screamed, “Where am I?!”

The Venetian merchant scanned his surroundings, eyes squinting at the unfamiliar view in front of him. People surrounded him, taking pictures of him, his unique red headscarf, his long red coat that draped over his body, his pointy brown shoes. Slowly, he stood up, sliding between the bodies of the people in front of him to get out of the crowd. But still, the people continued to follow him, the cameras flashing behind him as he walked with no idea of where he was heading.

His feet had brought him to a tall quadrangular building, with stairs leading to the entrance. There, he stood reading the sign next to the building, as people surrounded him. Sighing, he asked, “Where am I?”

“You’re in Jianfu temple, sir.”

“And where is that?”

“Xi’an, Shaanxi, sir.”

A moment of silence as the Chinese man curiously eyed the European.

“Can you show me around?”

Stunned, he scratched his head, hesitating whether or not to bring a weird-looking European tourist around the temple.

“Uh...sure.” He reluctantly responded.

“My name is Marco Polo. What’s—”

“WHAT?!” The man screamed, his eyes wide as saucers as he looked at the European in front of him, confusion and concern written all over his face.

The man took Marco Polo’s hand in his, dragging him away from the crowd of people, out of the temple. The people watched confusedly, a modern Chinese man and a weirdly-dressed in antique clothes European man walking hand in hand.

Far away from the crowds of people, the man dumbfoundedly asked, “Didn’t you die, like 700 years ago?”

Marco Polo’s jaw was on the floor, he was speechless. He looked around him, it seemed like he was still in ancient China.

“Tell me, what year is it right now?”

“2025.” The man pulled his phone out, showing him the exact date and time.

Marco Polo was in a state of complete disbelief, he had come back alive after 701 years, standing in an ancient temple in China. Pinching his arm, he realised that this wasn’t a dream. He was in a new place, in a new environment, and practically in a new world. Who knew what this new world would bring to him? Taking a step back, he took a moment to gather his thoughts.

“You still want me to bring you around?”

The aromatic smell of spices filled the air, the restaurant was packed with people as they walked to their seats. The man, whose name is Andrew, ordered for the both of them. Soon, two hot bowls of thick, wide noodles covered in spices and hot oil were placed in front of them.

Marco Polo picked up his chopsticks and slurped up the comedically large noodle, eyes lighting up as he chewed. The flavours bursted in his mouth, the flavours tingling his taste buds. He let out a hum of approval, enjoying the noodles that Andrew had told him were, “Biang Biang noodles”.

After inhaling their noodles, Andrew had started planning their itinerary for the day.

The two men walked along the road, heading towards the Shaanxi History Museum. Marco was astonished to see cars zooming past them and massive trucks carrying goods. Using camels to transport and trade items had seemed like a distant memory. Observing the people, he realised that in this period of time, people were

constantly on their phones, taking pictures, messaging people, searching things, while, back then, all he had was a manuscript, ink and a compass.

Arriving at the “treasure house of China”, Marco Polo rushed into the museum, already entering the exhibition halls.

“What’s this?”

“What year was this made in?”

“How did they find this?”

Marco Polo observed each unique piece of artifact and relic, admiring the beauty of them. Andrew followed behind him, making sure he wouldn’t touch anything. The last thing he wanted was to see him get arrested.

Marco hummed an old tune as he exited the doors of the museum. Andrew and him both walked towards their next stop, the metro station. Andrew was excited for Marco Polo to experience the fast modern transport of China, he walked with a slight lilt to his step and a grin on his face.

A gust of cool wind blew through the bustling streets, causing the European man quickly to wrap his coat tighter around his body. His eyes narrowed, observing the smiling man next to him as they walked.

“Something wrong?” said Andrew, his eyebrow raised, noticing the tight grip Marco held on his coat.

Marco stayed silent, giving a faint shake of his head, biting on his lower lip as if he was restraining himself from speaking.

“THUD!”

The loud sound caused Andrew to jump out of his skin, his eyes scanning the floor for the cause of the sound, spotting a glossy, shiny, brown-ish weird-shaped cup lying on the ground.

Marco exhaled deeply, the sound bringing Andrew’s attention back to the stunned man standing next to him.

“What is th—”

“An agate cup with gold inlaid beast head.” Marco calmly said, his hand hurriedly reaching for the shiny object, tucking it back into his coat.

“How’d you—”

“I took it while you weren’t looking.” He said matter-of-factly, he raised his right hand up, showing him the fresh red scars on his knuckles.

“But why—”

“I wanted a souvenir.” casually said Marco, acting as if they hadn’t walked past the souvenir store when they had entered. Andrew slapped a hand on his face, frustration and anger apparent on his face as he thought about what he could do.

“You—”

“Well—”

“STOP CUTTING ME OFF!” Andrew shouted. The people nearby stared at them concernedly, their gaze locked on the weird European man and the red-faced Chinese man.

“Ahem,”

“We need to go back and give it back to them immediately. Even if we get punished.”

Marco took a deep breath before sternly replying,

“No.”

In the comfort of Andrew’s home, Marco sipped on a glass of water, pretending as if he didn’t steal a precious artifact worth millions of dollars from the Tang Dynasty. Andrew groaned into his hands, slumping into his chair, while Marco blankly stared at the man in front of him, contemplating whether or not he should say something. Standing up, he placed the cup on the table in front of them, disrupting Andrew from his thoughts.

“Return it.”

“No.”

Andrew slammed his hands on the table, standing up as he faced the man opposite of him.

“I’m not returning it, and I’m leaving to go somewhere else.” Marco seriously said, his face stoic and attitude unwavering.

“You’re kidding me!”

“There is NO way you’re going to be able to go outside with that in your hands!” exclaimed Andrew.

“Well....”

On the sidewalk, Marco Polo stood there with his red coat swaying in the wind, the long bell sleeves flowing in the air. He clutched onto the small beige backpack Andrew gave him. Inside stored the agate cup, a few hundred dollar bills and a bottle full of water.

“I don’t know where you’re going but, good luck.”

“I don’t need luck, all I need is this cup.” Marco confidently said, a wide smile plastered on his face.

“Are you trying to embark on another Silk Road journey?”

Marco chuckled at that, before his smile slowly faded when he saw the taxi coming towards him.

“Guess this is goodbye.” said Andrew, in a somber tone. Marco only replied with a hum and a nod, stepping into the modern transportation vehicle.

The driver looked in the rear view mirror, his eyes squinting at the sight of the brown haired man before stepping out of the vehicle.

“Get out.” The taxi driver aggressively said, his posture upright and stiff. Marco furrowed his eyebrows, confused but obliged. Suspiciously eyeing the man in front of him, his fight or flight response was triggered. Slowly, he took a step back, figuring it would be best if he turned around and ran.

“Ouch!” Feeling a stiff, hard body against his back, he looked behind him to see a man with a blue polo shirt and a black cap. In a blink of an eye, the European man was in handcuffs and in the back of a vehicle.

“The agate cup with gold inlaid beast head has been found, currently arresting the suspect.” Marco sat there, dumbfounded by the turn of the events. I mean, what did he expect?

Did he expect to get away with no punishments? To run away freely? To create another Silk Road, just for fun?

Andrew watched him through the window of the police car, hands in his pockets and chest held high.

He leaned over, staring into the eyes of Marco as he whispered, barely audible to anyone else besides him,

“I don’t think you’re real, sir.”

The Journey I Slept Through

Ning Po No.2 College, Lai, Tsun Yin – 15

The bell rings. Instantly, chatter fades as everyone prepares for the next lesson, Chinese history—the most exhausting class yet. Since I'll probably fail no matter how hard I try, I'd rather just sleep through every session. The teacher starts a new topic, The Silk Road. What does that even mean? Is the road made of silk? I don't get why it's called that or why we need to learn it. I lay my head on my desk, ready to drift through the lesson.

I was peacefully sleeping until the unpleasant heat and the sound of flapping wings in the background woke me up.

A faint voice echoed in my head, "Hey, you, wake up already!" repeatedly.

My eyes slowly opened, revealing the world around me. There was a whole desert right in front of my eyes. I slapped myself in the face to make sure I wasn't dreaming or hallucinating. Then, the owner of the voice that woke me up appeared right in front of me. It was fairly large, about the size of my head, resembling a red, pheasant-like bird, and didn't seem threatening. It had five different colours of plumage, including red and orange in a gradient, and was constantly wreathed in warm flames.

"Hey, what are you doing staring at me and saying nothing?" said the bird.

"Who are you and where on earth am I?" I replied, still confused.

"Oh yeah, I haven't introduced myself yet. I'm Zhuque, also known as the Vermilion Bird, and right now you're in the Taklamakan Desert in China. I was just trying to escape from danger and found you lying unconscious on the ground."

Cluelessly, I responded, "Strange, I was just in a classroom..."

Before Zhuque could answer, we saw hordes of men approaching on horseback, armed with sharp blades and armor made of hardened leather and metal scales.

Zhuque screeched and said, "It's the Nomadic raiders! They tried to capture me because I'm one of the four Chinese celestial animals."

Zhuque and I were outnumbered, with nothing but miles and miles of sand around us. Arrows were being shot at a trajectory to hit us. They were about to land, and I thought it would be the end for both of us until Zhuque vigorously flapped his wings, knocking down all the arrows. The Nomadic raiders were about to strike again when a wall of swirling sand appeared from afar—the sandstorm was approaching at full speed. Upon hearing a loud war horn, the Nomadic raiders started retreating. Zhuque and I decided to head north to escape the storm's path.

After what seemed like an hour of walking straight, Zhuque informed me that if we continued walking, we would arrive at the Tarim River. Along the way, we saw groups of people with camels and caravans. They wore silk robes, trousers, skirts, and boots.

Before we headed towards them, I asked Zhuque, "If you're seen by the people there, won't you be captured just like how the Nomadic raiders wanted to take you?"

"Don't worry, I have a solution to this," replied Zhuque, flapping his wings to make a crystal pendant appear around my neck.

He said, “If I go inside this pendant, it restores my mana, which is basically what you humans call energy. We also need energy to fight and defend ourselves, which is why I couldn’t protect myself from the Nomadic raiders earlier.”

Zhuque shrank and went inside the crystal. I then headed toward the line of people riding camels. One person there had a spare camel and told me to hop on so that I wouldn't have to walk this much.

“Where are you guys heading to?” I asked, my dry tongue making my words slurry.

Noticing my thirst, the peddler gave me a gourd water bottle and answered my question, “We’re heading to an oasis city nearby to pick up supplies for everyone. Not only that, but we also exchange our goods with people who are trying to generate wealth by buying and selling goods across a vast network of routes.”

Once we reached the oasis city, everyone dismounted and started walking around and exploring the city. Meanwhile, Zhuque had just woken up after regaining all his mana. We started exploring the oasis city. Seeing a multitude of merchants trading all sorts of items, I started walking around to see if there were any familiar scents. The aroma of black pepper overpowered the smell of vegetables and other spices, filling the air and reminding me of my mom’s signature black pepper sauce. I could tell that teas and spices were ubiquitous. Horses were also here, and I decided to ask the merchant why they traded horses.

“Oh, you're quite young, aren't you? Let me briefly explain why we trade horses. The Europeans bring them to us in exchange for mainly silk, as it’s a valuable material. And it’s even more valuable than gold! The Han dynasty is in desperate need of horses to mobilise their men to defend against the Xiongnu. The Xiongnu are quite superior; they have already been dominating much of Central Asia for hundreds of years, so it poses a threat to the Han dynasty”, he explained.

Zhuque, still hiding inside the crystal, said, “Ah, yes. Horses were important. Just as we were almost attacked by the Nomadic raiders earlier. They had horses, which made them superior in ground combat, as the raiders could easily rush through and kill anyone in their path.”

After some back and forth, I figured that this was the year 130 BCE, under Emperor Wu of Han, when Zhang Qian had just come back from his western journeys to expand trade routes.

The merchant then gestured towards a new section of his shop, leading me to see a book, the language written on it wasn’t Chinese, nor something I could’ve understood.

Pointing at the book, I asked the merchant another question, “What is that book about, and what language is that?”

“Ahh, yes. Tripitaka. Within the trade route, there are monks who spread texts about Buddhism to China, and I got interested in it, so I decided to read it and keep one for myself”, replied the merchant.

I walked to another store and saw all sorts of fruits. Grapes, pomegranates, melons, dates, and figs. Most of these I had eaten regularly in my daily life, like grapes and melons, and I had no idea that it was the Silk Road that had brought them to us. These fruits were harvested from the Middle East or Central Asia. Without this trade, I’d probably never have tasted these fruits!

Suddenly, a gust of wind whipped sand into my eyes. The crystal pendant burned hot against my chest.

Zhuque’s voice echoed inside my head, “Time to go home, kid!”

The oasis blurred, the merchants’ shouts faded, and everything spun like a sandstorm.

A familiar bell sound rings.

My face slams onto the desk, catching everyone's attention. My classmates start to giggle. The teacher walks up to me with her arms crossed and demands that I stand up.

"Since you finally decided to join us, help us by answering these questions. What was the significance of the Silk Road, also why does trading matter, and how does it connect to modern China?" she asked.

I answered confidently after personally experiencing the Silk Road myself, "The significance of the Silk Road lies in its economic, cultural, and technological exchanges between East and West. Merchants shared one goal: to generate wealth by buying and selling goods across a vast network of routes. In 130 BCE, during Emperor Wu's reign, the Han dynasty desperately needed horses to mobilize their men. Buddhism arrived through monks carrying texts like the Tripitaka, leaving us with cultural footprints still visible today. Even the grapes and melons we eat daily? They reached China only because of these routes."

I realized then that history wasn't just dusty dates—it was alive, urgent, and worth staying awake for. The teacher, stunned, motioned me to sit. My classmates clapped, and for the first time, I didn't want the bell to ring.

The crystal pendant, still around my neck, glowed as I heard Zhuque's words, "Congratulations—I'm proud of you. You've finally conquered your biggest weakness: Chinese history."

Echoes of the Silk Road

Po Leung Kuk Choi Kai Yau School, Chan, Ashley – 11

The day the Black Death attacked my home was the day I lost both my parents.

She was ill, he was scared — It was that simple. I was ten when I witnessed my father taking the life of his love.

But I just stood there. And when it was finally over. I left the room, back turned.

I kept that secret for years.

Then revenge crept up stalking my father like predator to prey. The Black Death struck him next.

I could've helped him. I could've stayed.

But I didn't.

Soon, the next thing I knew I was running. Away from the Black Death. From me.

I've been running for six years now. Six years of an abandoned life.

I searched for a new home. But the Black Death had touched almost everything. Soon, nowhere was safe. Next thing I knew — I was running again. That voice in my head. Everyday it reminds me.

You did nothing. You watched Father kill Mother and you did nothing. You are no better than Father when you left him to rot that day.

My lungs burned and legs ached. From the walking probably.

I was just a child then. I couldn't do anything!

I trudged on and ignored the voice. The sun was blazing and my skin was burnt. I needed to find a place to stay.

Looking up. The only thing for miles was endless sand.

Is this how I die?

Step... step...

At least I'll see my parents again.

Step...

And maybe they'll forgive me for leaving.

My legs gave away and I hit the ground with a 'thud'.

This is how I'll die. Forgotten and abandoned.

My eyes closed slowly, the last slit of sunlight disappearing from view as darkness welcomed me with open arms.

I woke up in Heaven.

Well, not exactly. It was someplace warm. Laid down on a soft mattress with a thin duvet over my sunburned skin.

Everything was sore, but better. The room was cool and felt like paradise.

“Lay down silly, you’re not ready to travel again. You’ll turn into a medium rare steak.”

Turning my head I saw a young girl, about my age, busy with dishes. She noticed me staring.

“What? Never seen a girl before?” she teased.

I struggled to speak, “Where’d... Who are... Wait, what?”

I heard a small exasperated sigh. Then the redhead girl dropped the dishes and walked up to me.

“Look. I found you laying in the middle of a trade route looking like a dead pigeon. I felt bad for the travellers who were going to trip over you. So I brought you home. I’m Erin.”

The redhead paused, then looked at me with a raised eyebrow as if she had not just told me the most ridiculous thing ever.

“I—I’m Avery— But...” I muttered back, my brain a mess, “You said you found me... where??”

Erin helped me finish, “A trading route. It’s called the Silk Road. It connects the east and west.”

A trading route?

Erin interrupted my thoughts by smirking, “Saved you ‘cause I didn’t want people to come to trade and find a dead pigeon-like girl laying there. Embarrassingggg.”

I looked at her and muttered, “Thanks for the rescue. Thought you saved me out of kindness.” Then I retorted, “But we both know who truly looks like the pigeon here.”

Erin laughed — a sound I haven’t heard for years— then she walked back towards the counter.

I smiled. For the first time since forever. I smiled. My stomach did a weird flip as I went to go back to sleep again.

The last thing I heard before drifting off was Erin’s voice.

“Sleep tight, Pigeon.”

The next few days were blurred into a routine of recovery. Erin promised as soon as I got better she would take me to visit the Silk Road. You know, this time without me getting burnt to death.

The week was the best I’ve ever had. We talked a lot. Though I feel bad for hiding my past.

I’ll tell her soon. Just... not now.

Besides, why ruin the moment? I was happy, she was happy. It’s fine.

The sound of the door stopped my thinking and I rushed over to give Erin a hug.

“So? Was today a good haul at the market?” I asked.

Erin scoffed in reply, “Well duh! You’re talking to the best bargainer for miles here, Pigeon.”

“Wow, how very humble of you.” I teased.

“You go change. I’ll go prepare supper.” I turned around when a hand stopped me.

“Hold on, Pigeon.” She said, “I was thinking... since you’re all better now. What’d you say? We head out and take a look at the Silk Road. It’s trading day today. You’ll be able to meet people.”

My chest practically exploded.

“Wait really?! No joke?”

Erin tucked my hair behind my ears and laughed, “Yeah, no joke— Oh! No need to drag me— gosh you’re stronger than you look.”

“Come on, come on!” This was going to be amazing!

We headed out, casting an illuminating glow across the land. Villagers gathered, trading, talking and having a great time.

Erin showed me around and I spoke to so many new people. She also taught me how to trade and what to get.

Time passes so quickly when you’re enjoying it. Glancing over at Erin, I couldn’t help but smile. I was so lucky she found me.

Erin caught me and walked over, “Hey, caught you eyeing me from afar. Am I really that good looking?”

My face started to heat up. Not in a bad sunburn way. But in a good and fuzzy way. I shot back, “In your dreams.”

Erin smirked and turned her head towards the setting sun. Now almost completely swallowed by the mountains. It was beautiful. I never wanted it to end.

“Hey Pigeon?”

I looked over, “Hm?”

Erin stammered through her second line. “I’m glad you fainted in the desert... I wouldn’t have met you otherwise.”

“Me too.” I whispered. Leaning against her as we watched the sunset.

That night I had a nightmare.

I was back in my childhood home. The town was wasted. Everything decaying like it took the form of the Black Death itself.

My parents were there. Their bodies marred and twisted.

“You left us. You did nothing.” My mother rasped

“Coward.” My father wheezed.

“We died because of you. Soon, you’ll hurt Erin too. Leave before you do more damage.”

I woke up drenched in sweat. Chest pounding.

Hurt Erin? But... the sickness wouldn’t follow me here too, would it?

Her words from last night echoed over and over again in my head.

“It’s called the Silk Road. It’s a major trading route, connecting east and west.”

Reality hit me like a cold wave.

That. That was why the Black Death spread. The Silk Road. It passes through so many towns. It's just a matter of time this one gets contaminated too.

It's just a matter of time you leave Erin to escape.

She'll die from the Black Death thinking I left her because I just couldn't get the guts to stay.

I needed to tell her everything before it's too late. Then I'll leave and never turn back. That way, it'll hurt less. Erin will know the truth.

Grabbing a piece of paper I started writing. Scribbles of a messy explanation.

Each word a dagger to my heart. But I wrote on.

Tears fell down as I fumbled to finish the letter.

Then finally, it was finished and I slammed the pen down.

Gathering my stuff. I needed to get out. Now. Before I get second thoughts, before I decide to stay.

I walked out as fast as I could.

Then paused.

I turned and took one last look at our home.

My head begged me to stay, to not leave her here alone.

But I had to. Not if I want to hurt her just like I hurt my parents.

Watch her rot and leave of fear.

I tried to soak up every last inch of the place. Memorizing the week we spent together.

Then I ran. Straight for the Silk Road. Erin's better off without me.

Maybe, in another world. I decided to stay and let myself love her without fear.

Everything urged me to go back. To stay.

But I couldn't. I'll lose her even worse than I am right now.

The night sky lit my path. Slowly. I left. The town, my home, Erin.

Who knows. Maybe, if fate decides it's right. I'll find Erin again.

But right now. I need to leave. I can't risk it.

I'll see her again. Someday.

And so I walked the Silk Road. Every night I looked up at the stars, finding comfort in the thought that Erin gazed upon the same sky.

I never found her again. Her absence like a shadow. Within the silence of the night, our souls remained intertwined. Connected forever, just like we are in my dreams.

October 18, 1860

Po Leung Kuk Choi Kai Yau School, Chan, Evelyn – 15

Dufu once painfully shed tears in the realization that the nation is broken, though mountains and rivers remain. But as I see the blazing sight before me – dappling, vermilion flames crumbling this home I call mine into nothing; the serendipitous clusters of violet sprawling outside withering to ashes. I hear the cries of flaxen-haired soldiers charging into the Summer Palace, and now I know my world means no more. Now I know that fire ends the world, devouring me in humanity's bitter, devious grasp. Now I know that heaven's halation is not too far away, and perhaps there will be a day where I reincarnate to reunite with the people in my country I call the blood of my very own.

The flickering of flames slithering against my waxed, concrete skin like an uninvited invasion, and perhaps my life will end with a fate suspended in eternal limbo. I feel the heat radiating from within, and I curse myself for being unable to do anything at all. The saturated colors, once carefully applied and embossed with golden paint, a painter's blood, sweat, and tears washed away with one simple flicker. Grandiose splendour, now shrouded in ash and crumbles. Flames suffocate and choke me in a wicked, thorn-like prison. I braved the ravages of time that spared me no sympathy to relish in my beauty, but alas it all comes to a tragic end.

I feel mortified that there was once a time when I was revered as a replica of the most beautiful to have existed – Yang Guifei, a beauty so captivating she could topple kingdoms and have emperors kneeling at her feet for a mere touch of her grace. I remember how vividly the children crowded around me a podium where I pooled in splendour, their silver laughter chiming in distant reverberations. I remember the strange, ethereal-looking foreigners, golden wispy hair reminiscent and sapphire-blue eyes, bestowing me with silks in their honor. I remember the pride blooming in my chest – they spun tall tales of how they traveled from the direction where the sun succumbs in its drowsy slumber, the magnificence of the unknown West, and those were the golden days of the Silk Road. How often would they be able to revel in the beauty of this mythical land of immense riches, festooned with fine silks and adorned with unearthly stones? The Silk Road spun threads of fates from the world into the Tang, distant and intrepid travellers from far away swearing language and legacy in exchange for silk, gold, and the poison still lingering today.

Time was ever so kind to me, allowing me to witness every act in the rise and rebirth of foreign connection. There came the fall of the Tang: the muse of my creator's desires sentenced to execution, leaving secluded for centuries in ash and dust. Then came the glory days of the Han, revering me for my predecessor as they showered me in praise once again. I find there is a twisted irony that with every turn of history, greed, envy, pride ignited rebellions, and I was left drowning in the compulsive intoxication of hope once more. My artisans refused to spare me the right to speak, to tell my people to stay, nor did they grant me the privilege to turn the clock every time a dynasty crumbled to ashes.

For over a thousand years, Chang'an was a splendid conservation of the East and West. Time and time again, handcrafters, priests, and emperors alike placed me into display rooms, one more extravagant than the next. All around me was the hustle and bustle of life I had ever known, and sometimes I find myself longing for the days I basked in never-ending company where I met new faces every day. I used to observe flaxen-haired foreigners coming forward to follow the teachings of Confucianism and pleading Nirvana from Buddhism, over finding myself smiling as they offered me woolen carpets embossed with gold. But I recall the day they disappeared for centuries to come all too well. The visitors who used to come to admire me were gone, and all that came after them were crowds of monks hurriedly putting away scrolls and texts, spending their days burning incense and muttering desperately to the Gods among us. It wasn't long until they left me behind in the temple for good, until I realized the end of all that I had loved had begun.

Today is the day they came.

“Take it! TAKE IT! Take as much as you can!”

The air is thick with greed and lust, a fog that seeped through the glided, golden rooftops of the Western Old Summer Palace. I look at the sea of monsters I used to call my admirers storm into the room, their spears glinting wickedly in the afterglow. “FIRE!” Their commander screams, and they reply in unison as their footsteps clank off the castle walls, firing storms of arrows straight into the chests of the loyal guards who stand besides me. Fountains of vermilion blood spray into the air, their bodies betraying their kingdom as they meet their fates in the blaze.

I watch soldiers stuff priceless statues into their knapsacks, pushing through the intricate wood and tile with a hatred burning into their eyes I had not known. Men emerge from the back doors clutching terracotta sculpture and jade lacquerware, tearing away through the delicate silk that used to drape amongst them. I cry silently for my fallen friends, a sharp contrast to their jeering laughs with a hysterical edge. My home is dying before my eyes. The painstakingly crafted Baroque cherubs shatter on the ground, the laughingly ironic death of the respect my Emperor used to contain to the West. The mahogany beams give way with a great, rushing susurrant as if the very spirit of the palace is stolen with the objects the invaders took.

And finally, it is my turn. Screams I am fated to never let out lodge in my throat as they carry me away, putting me in a carriage decked in unfamiliar velvet and scholars murmuring in a soft, incomprehensible language beyond my understanding. The new hands that secure me in the storage chest are sheathed in silk richly embellished with a golden crest. I become the mark of stolen legacy, the victim in the murder of a dream, and the unmaking of the thousand-year history of the Silk Road woven from reverence, poetry, and exchange.

They don’t place me among familiar temples and libraries, and instead mount me on a stark pedestal behind a transparent plane where I become an object of exotic possession. A small card sits beside me, its letters a tidy, foreign scrawl I soon come to recognize: “East Asian Sculpture, Gallery 33” The years I spend in the Imperial British Museum enlighten me in ways I cannot imagine. I feel the bitterly repulsive drug of desire for eternal praise, the same way those flaxen-haired foreigners poison my people’s minds with cravings of opium until they choke on the lines between life and death. I adore praise – wanted and loved it until and failed to realize I needed it until I finally acquired it. What am I without praise? What is a moth without its allure to the tantalising flame? When a group of children stop to press their small hands against the glass, their breath forming a foggy mist, a fresh wave of novelty brings along momentary relief with the harrowing thoughts of the next time I will be abandoned. They have made an addict of me, trading the roots of my history and my home with the promise of admiration.

“What are we here?” I wondered aloud, knowing only the neighbouring statues, paintings, and jewels (all figments of my past could hear me. A thousand years of exhaustion clinging to my quiet voice, and I wonder when it will all end.

“The Silk Road led us here,” the statue of the Celestial Goddess sighs dreamily next to me, “the very same threads of connection sewing together dynasties and destinities together, weave together a forbidden cultivation the foreigners weave to distort our culture for foreign, unintended eyes.”

“We have saved your beauty from fading to obscurity,” the arrogant Venus-de-Milo sighed next to me, “your country’s fate is not that far away, friend.”

My epiphany deepens with every ominous strike of the clock, woven through the long, slow hours on suffocating display. Silk wove threads of dialogue that could bend across mountains and deserts without breaking,

embroidering our shared fates with civilizations that we didn't even know existed. Those threads have been snipped, and in place spun the narrative of cultural salvation.

Every fiber in my body yearns to collapse and give in to the century-long weight of the world. The Old Summer Palace was an ambitious dream built with marble, jade, bronze, and porcelain. For years, architects and common people honored the rich and lush tapestry of Chinese history, and immortalized it through an ethereal edifice while fusing together filaments of Baroque. And no one realizes how the threads of the Silk Road become a twisted net for greed, seeking to take time itself.

For me, my fate lies here, an eternal cage for my porcelain rivulets and fabricated smile. For my people, every fragment of their identity might very well be fading to obscurity.

How could I ever let them arrest the narrative of my civilization?

The Silk Robbers

Po Leung Kuk Choi Kai Yau School, Chan, Jayden – 11

–10 years ago–

“Sir, we have a ton of jade in here! If it doesn’t make its way to Rome we’re blaming it all on you! So are you going to let us pass?” The salesman yelled over the busy streets of China. “But it’s going to be too easy for you to get robbed! If you have trouble following rules I could always call the higher ranks.” The salesman hesitated, he didn’t want the higher ranks to get involved, yet he needed to get to Rome, sell the Jade in hopes to cure his father’s disease. He couldn’t afford another wagon or an investigation, he had to come back in precisely three months to save his beloved father. “So choose, pay for a wagon or get arrested.” the guard said harshly. “Fine, I’ll pay for a wagon.” Huang, the salesman pushed his way over to the wagon dealership.

–5 years later–

Two men trudged in the heavy rain empty handed. One was kicking rocks on the muddy sloppy road, and the other had his head lowered, fists clenched. They entered the gates of China, both wearing soaked Chinese Han dynasty clothes. It had been five years since they’d been seen walking out with two wagons carrying jade. Their eyes filled with rage of what happened in the last five years, family and friends came over to fill their money bucket, but all Huang and Xing could say was “Robbers, nasty robbers.”...

–Few months later–

“They ordered five crates of silk last month and now they’re asking for more?” The emperor was getting annoyed, more and more silk orders were being requested and worst of all, they weren’t getting any money from making silk. It was outrageous, the emperor just couldn’t stand it any more, he had to find out the reason behind this. And so, the very next morning, on the bulletin board there was a notice and two men exchanged a glance and smiled as they looked at it. It read:

The king needs two men to go and find the reasons

Of why the countries are requesting so much material.

The two men were the very two who had gotten robbed trying to sell jade, Xing and Huang, two muscular bodies. And of course, it only took Xing and Huang two days to get ready for the adventure, since they were the only ones that knew the reason behind this. All they needed was a crate of jade, ropes and a horse. They pushed the wagon out just like five years ago and carried it until dark. Their plan was to pretend to sleep and lure the robbers out of their hiding spots.

In the fields of grain and ferns Musty heard the two say “Good night!” and that was his cue, he did a hand sign signaling Steamy to wait and follow his orders. Once it was precisely five minutes after they started snoring, Musty would slowly creep from the ferns of wheat and steal the wagon. Then he would get all the credit instead of Steamy. He would tell Te Mara, the head of the group, that Steamy got lost. He laughed at the thought of Steamy coming back pleading to Te Mara. It wasn’t his fault that Steamy had to be such a Bossy pants and ruined so many missions, especially the one five years ago where he accidentally woke up two men as they stole the wagons.. “Time” He thought, blinking back to reality, signalling Steamy to do the work.

Back at China palace, the emperor was frustrated, he paced around the map room, desperately trying to figure out why his materials always seem to disappear without a trace. Everytime, the people come back empty handed but the wagons seem to break into thin air. Despite this happening for five years, dozens of citizens trying to find the culprit but failing, he was confident that Xing and Huang could possibly find the people behind this and bring it to a stop.

Meanwhile, at the Silk Road, Steamy was focusing on the structure of the wagon, it was strange, not like the ones they were used to, it would make squeaking noises waking the men up, Steamy definitely didn't want that to happen. The only choice he had was moving the boxes which meant he had to climb in the crate. Therefore he used signs to tell Musty what he planned to do. Musty on the other hand didn't quite care about the plan, he instead was working on a plan of how to get Steamy in trouble. Steamy carefully stepped on the wagon. "CREACK!" and that was enough to wake up Xing and Huang. They got up and chased Musty down the dirt road. He was far, fifty metres away from the wagon. Then it all clicked in Steamy's mind, Musty was trying to run and get Steamy in trouble, he didn't even think carefully about the plan. He glared at the black dot, now running into the woods. The whole team hated him for helping the salesmen who they stole from and now was his time for revenge. A plan formed in his mind. It was perfect, considering that he would be innocent. He walked towards the entrance of China and passed the crowded market to the palace. It had been a long time since he had been here but Steamy could still remember the pointed tip of the tower, the happy times being a salesman. He really regretted being a robber, but it was the only thing he could do.

"Messenger!" The guards called out to the king in the map room, "Please don't tell me another crate of silk!" A voice rang out loud and clear. "No my Emperor, I'm Chin Feng," Steamy said, calling himself the name he used as a child, "I bring news, the culprits are in the forest!" This really caught the king's attention, he dropped the maps and stared at him, eyes widened, jaw dropped. "I guess you have to tell me a lot then." He broke the silence and pulled a chair and tea set over. Steamy told the king everything from the start, everything he knew. In no time, all of the people who were once Steamy's mates became prisoners. While Steamy was also part of the group, he was rewarded for his courage.

The Treasure of Silk Road

Po Leung Kuk Choi Kai Yau School, Chan, Yannis – 12

Xiqing was poor.

She and her family lived in the filthy slums of Western China. They were drowning in an ocean of debt.

Every day, her stomach felt empty and rumbled to no end.

Every day, she woke up to find rats nibbling viciously at her toes.

Every day, she was covered from head to toe in a thick coat of grime.

That is why, when she heard about myths of a legendary treasure no one managed to obtain in a small village located in Afghanistan from an aged merchant, she wrapped a few loaves of mouldy bread in a patched cloth, “borrowed” the merchant’s map as well as a horse and a bottle of water, and rode on the Silk Road.

The sweltering heat made beads of sweat roll down her red cheeks. Xiqing squinted at the sun as she bathed in its unbearable warmth. Its radiance seemed to mock her. Her body was sore from riding for weeks, and it was so insufferably hot that every bit of her soul seemed to wail. She took a swig of salvation from her bottle and realized that it was almost empty, so she headed to a small town in Tajikistan.

There was a somewhat clean river there, so she dipped her bottle into the water and took several good long drinks before filling it one last time and saving it for the road. Now that she was hydrated, the bright vermilion that colored her face started to fade.

“Who are you?”

Xiqing whirled around to see a dark-skinned boy staring at her curiously. “Who are you?” he repeated. “Where are you from?” Xiqing glanced at her rags, then at the boy’s. Both were torn and soiled, yet the differences in cut and style were still quite obvious. “I’m Xiqing. I’m from Xinjiang.” The boy oohed and aahed. “I’m Aziz,” he chirped. “So, where are you heading to?” Xiqing hesitated. “Afghanistan,” she said finally, deciding to trust him. “I’m looking for treasure.” Aziz’s eyes bulged like grapes. “I’m coming with you!” He squealed.

Xiqing refused.

Aziz persisted.

Two children rode horseback along the Silk Road, sweating buckets and exchanging words. After a few hours, Aziz asked for a break. The pair sat down on a large rock. The rough, jagged surface scraped against their thighs, almost drawing blood, yet they did not care. Fatigue weighed down on them like a gigantic boulder – yet, they continued engaging in their conversation. Soon, they realized how much they enjoyed each other's company. Incessant chatter and words of ecstasy constantly flowed out of their mouths.

Abruptly, a cacophony of hissing and roaring echoed behind them.

It was a sandstorm.

Immediately, they scrambled to their feet and crouched down to hide behind the rock. Aziz's hands trembled. Xiqing bit her lip as anxiety imbued her. A massive, towering wall of blinding sand and choking dust charged towards them. She suddenly felt a pair of shaking hands pressing a wet cloth against her nose and mouth. She didn't have to turn to know who helped her. A silent word of gratitude resonated inside of her. Xiqing tore off a part of her tatters and pressed it against Aziz's face.

Finally, the sandstorm passed. Aziz let out a sigh of relief. Before they continued riding west, they allowed their poor horses, who barely got to catch their breath, to have a drink of water.

The duo continued riding, but in silence.

Yet, the friendship between them felt stronger than ever.

At night, they tied their horses to a tree using a makeshift rope, hid their belongings using sand, and fell asleep under the faint, crepuscular glow of the moon.

When they awoke, they found gleaming, perilous daggers pointing at their throats, threatening to tear them apart. Two men, dressed in black garments that obscured their faces stood before them. One was exceptionally lanky and the other had thick, bushy brows. "Where is it?" one of them growled. It was a throaty, guttural snarl. Xiqing tilted her head, clueless as to what the intimidating individual was talking about. "Where is it?" the other repeated. "Where is the map?" Xiqing understood. Using personal experience and her brilliant astuteness, she wove a plan in her mind. She walked over to where her items were hidden and handed the piece of threadbare cloth she had used during the sandstorm to the men. The tall one snatched it from her and wiped the sand off it to read it with the other man. One furrowed his eyebrows and the other seemed to frown as they started to realize what Xiqing had done.

But it was too late. She had already rapidly untied Aziz's and her horses and they were about to escape. One of the men grabbed a horse's tail and it whinnied in agony. Thankfully, Xiqing struck him on the head with her bottle and they managed to get away.

After riding for a few more weeks, they reached the village at last. Following the map, they reached an ancient well. Using her bottle, she tapped each stone that composed the wall of the wellhead. Clack, clack, clack, *thump*. One was hollow. Xiqing nudged it and managed to wriggle the loose stone out. Inside the empty space, there was a petite wooden chest. She took it out and opened it. There was a thin, frangible sheet of parchment inside. Scribbled on it were a mass of cursive letters.

The riches you have gained are the wisdom and friendships you obtained on the journey here.

The two stared at each other and erupted into melodious peals of laughter.

Treasure isn't wealth or gold. Treasure is the priceless bonds spun from the golden threads of pure, glorious friendship. Treasure is the warmth enveloping you from love and care. Treasure is gaining wisdom from fruitful experiences.

The Silk Road didn't just bring traders and merchants together. It connected people. It bestowed knowledge. It granted epiphanies.

Xiqing was rich.

Footprints of the Silk Road

Po Leung Kuk Choi Kai Yau School, Chen, Chloe – 12

The last thing I remembered before the wailing of sirens and flashing of lights was us scaling the fence up outside the country's boundary.

And now, we're in a desert trying to escape the consequences of criminals.

Sweat trickled down my head as we continued trekking through the fierce sun. I saw to my right Belladonna, who was whining as usual. She was always like this, always whining and going on about how her 'model body' was *supposed* to not be put through this torment.

"SHUT UP!" I heard Moritica's rough voice tear through my thoughts as Belladonna rolled her eyes.

"Ugh, you wouldn't know the requirements of people like me." Belladonna huffed back as I resisted an eyeroll.

"Shush!" I yelled out, unable to stop the words from spilling out of my mouth.

"So the quiet one finally got the courage to judge us." Moritica sneered back at me, her voice malicious and mocking, as if bluffing about her own 'greatness'.

"Look, the three of us barely escaped yesterday. Now we just need to get it together until the end of the Silk Road." I snitted back, feeling my eyes roll up to the sky once more, "Then our disagreement ends and we live our own lives in Europe."

Belladonna crossed her arms and stalked in front next to me as she asked menacingly, "Such pure of a soul to assume an agreement matters to criminals like us. Anyways, why did we choose the silkroad again?" I heard Belladonna whine once more, refraining from her previous malicious tone. She then walked over to Moritica, her steps intentionally clumsy as she clinged onto her arm.

"Moritica! Please can we slow down?" Belladonna wailed as she practically let Moritica drag her. Moritica replied with a huff and a shove, trying to make Belladonna release her arm, "SHUT UP!" Moritica yelled, her tone filled with annoyance as Belladonna continued to stubbornly cling to her arm.

I was about to pass both of them on the road, as they were both annoyingly slow, when I noticed a flicker of movement from the bushes. I was about to open my mouth to warn Moritica and Belladonna instinctively.

But then I hesitated.

Why was I planning on warning them? I was going to leave them near the end of the journey, wasn't I? Isn't that a basic morality for an assassin? So why did my instincts yell at me, urge at me, scream at me to warn and help them?

Before I could further think, the movement quickened. Scurrying further and further away from its cover of the bushes. It was a cobra. Sneaking faster and faster over to Moritica and Belladonna. My instincts screamed to warn them, but I held my tongue as I watched the cobra launch up to Belladonna, fangs sinking deep into her ankle as her eyes flipped back, her once stubbornly clingy arms turned supple, her limp body fell down on the sand with a soft 'thud'.

"So it's just you and me, Laurence." Moritica's voice cut through the silence that fell between us since we left Belladonna, lying on the desert dunes, "Just you and me on this journey through the Silkroad escaping from China to Europe."

"I guess so." I commented simply back. I was still stunned by how Belladonna had just gone. And we haven't even given her a proper burial. We just took her stuff and left.

Like heartless criminals.

Like how we're supposed to be.

Then why do I feel the urge to go back and give her body the honour it deserves? Why do I feel horrible for raiding her stuff with complete disregard for her dignity?

To my left, I saw the sand dunes pass me as Moritica and I continued to make our way down the Silk Road. It's truly amazing how people before us would walk through this road to travel to other countries. It is still a piece of history that we are walking on. As if we were following our ancestors' footsteps. Literally.

But why is a criminal in awe of the history of a road? A criminal is supposed to be ruthless and cruel. It was what I strived to be ever since I was young.

Worthless.

I suddenly hear my parents' voices flying through my mind. Back when I was 12.

Useless.

A disgrace.

Their sneers and torments echo through me, tearing my resolve down from the inside. But yet I remember the moment I snapped. The moment I ran to the kitchen, and took my first life.

The joy, the satisfaction. It all came rushing towards me. I was playing a dangerous game. A dangerous game had no winners, yet the satisfaction made up for everything.

I should have been broken, yet I felt immense bliss. I had freed myself from the cage. But at what cost?

Afterwards, my reputation as the perfect child was destroyed. I was on the run. Yet I couldn't get enough of the simple joy that came with the scarlett at my hands. It was an addiction. One that led me down the darkest path.

I was arrested by the police a week ago. But I shouldn't have. That one flicker of hesitation as I gazed down on my next victim stopped me. He was just a child. A normal child. Like the others before. Why did I hesitate? I shouldn't have. I'm supposed to be a person that murders in cold blood simply to satisfy my hunger, as if a vampire.

But that wasn't the case.

Not that time.

And even now as I gaze at Morticia in front of me. I feel no more the desire for her blood. And that isn't normal. Not for me. The thought of betrayal has also ceased to come up in my mind. The thought of taking Moritica's supplies for myself and making myself last longer just isn't anything to me anymore. Not at the expense of another person's life. What is wrong with me?

My thoughts were interrupted yet again as Moritica suddenly stopped and turned around.

"What are you doing?" I asked in mild confusion as Moritica approached me, venom in her gaze and her hand in her pocket.

"Oh, where did your competence go, *Laurence*?" I heard Morticia hiss out my name. My name slithering out of her mouth with a toxic and dangerous edge.

Within an instant, I realized what she was about to do. Although I knew I wouldn't be able to escape her, my legs still made a desperate run away. I didn't dare look back, but I knew that Moritica was right behind me, with a knife held up threateningly. She was about to rid of me. For resources.

I was considering the same thing. Right after Belladonna's death in fact. But yet it was that hint of hesitation that led to my arrest. That one fatal second that will now cost me my life.

"What are you running from, *Laurence*?" I hear Moritica's sneer yet again from behind me, the sound sending shivers down my spine once more. My name slithered on her tongue, creating an unpleasant sound of malice. And yet, decisions needed to be made that would be better in the long run.

My panic without calculation had led me straight into a dead end. So this is it. The end of my life at 27. Most people my age would've reached their peak years. And me? Spiraled down the path of deepest abyss. A disgrace to humanity.

"No where to run now, *Laurence*." Moritica's voice taunted as I snapped my attention back to her. She was standing like a predator. Her right hand holding a knife, light reflecting it from the sun landing straight on my chest, as if the skies had deemed my end shall be today. My only option would be to edge away from Moritica, but another step and I would be discovered by the villages around us. Either way, my end would be today.

I desperately fought to have an idea to counter Moritica's attack. But I came up with none as I could only shrink further away. Moritica strided closer, each step of confidence and triumphantness. She knew she had won over me. And she was correct.

My life flashed before my eyes as I saw Moritica approach me further, knife ready and smirk in place. The times my parents yelled at me. The one moment I picked up the knife that started my path of darkness. What if I had contained myself in that one moment? Everything would have been different.

The last thing I thought before I felt Moritica come further near me was how hesitation was the one who murdered me in the end. What happened to the ruthless assassin? Gone.

Maybe. Perhaps. I would go down the right path in my next life.

And the world faded into darkness.

The Journey from Canonfall to Applejelly

Po Leung Kuk Choi Kai Yau School, Cheng, Emma – 12

Louis had always dreamed of adventure, but he never thought he'd actually get to travel the famous Silk Road. Growing up in Canonfall, a busy city full of travelers and traders, he felt excitement race through him when his dad got a job leading a clan all the way to Applejelly. At just thirteen, he was determined to see the world beyond his home streets. His best friends, Jack and Lily, were just as eager to join him. Lily loved to draw everything she saw, while Jack, big and strong but scared of snakes, always worried about what dangers they might face.

Before sunrise on the morning of their departure, the four of them set off, feeling a wild mix of excitement and nervousness. Traveling the Silk Road turned out to be a lot tougher than Louis had expected. He imagined it would be an easy walk, but soon his legs were aching, and his feet felt like they were on fire. The sun blazed down during the day, making everything feel even hotter, and the nights were freezing, which made sleeping hard. Despite the discomforts, they were on an adventure, and that idea kept their spirits high. As they traveled, they encountered traders with camels carrying all sorts of strange goods. Each day brought something new. One day, when Lily tried to sketch a camel, it surprised everyone by spitting at her. They all burst into laughter, and Lily couldn't help but giggle too. Jack tried to make a conversation with a trader, and even though they struggled to understand each other, the trader gave them some sweet Tanghulu, a delicious treat made of candied fruit. Jack's face lit up as he enjoyed it. This little moment made the tough journey feel lighter.

The mountains were the scariest part. The paths were narrow, and Louis felt like one wrong step could send him tumbling into the abyss below. To keep their minds off the heights, Rose, another friend who had joined them, told stories about faraway lands filled with dragons and brave warriors. Listening to her tales helped them forget their fears and stayed hopeful. One stormy night, the weather turned wild, and they had to seek shelter in a cave. The wind howled, and rain pounded against the rocks. Inside the cave, Louis shared stories about his dad's own adventures on the Silk Road. He talked about how his dad faced challenges and made new friends. "This journey is about making memories and meeting amazing people, not just trading," Louis reminded them. His words inspired everyone, turning their worries into excitement for the adventure ahead.

After what felt like forever, they finally spotted Applejelly in the distance. The tall stone walls and impressive towers sparkled in the sunlight like jewels. Louis could hardly believe they had made it. As they walked through the bustling streets, he was overwhelmed by the sights and sounds of the busy market. The air was filled with the smell of spices, and children laughed as they played. He marveled at the colorful fruits piled high on stalls and shiny jade beads that sparkled in the light. It was like a dream come true. Even though everyone around them spoke different languages, they found ways to communicate through joy and laughter. They exchanged stories with other travelers, sharing bits of their lives. Jack and Lily were fascinated by the different cultures, and Louis felt a sense of belonging, even in such a diverse place.

Looking back on the journey, Louis realized that the real treasure was not just reaching Applejelly. It was all the unexpected moments and adventures they shared. He learned important skills, like fixing a broken bike and finding water in the desert when supplies ran low. Through challenges, he discovered that true friendship could grow even without words. As they stepped into the welcoming city, Louis knew this adventure would stick with him forever. Every bump in the road, every laugh shared, and every new sight made the journey unforgettable. And as they got ready to head home, he knew that the stories of their adventure would be told for years to come, reminding them of the magic of friendship and the joy of exploration.

The Tale of the Silk Road

Po Leung Kuk Choi Kai Yau School, Fung, Lana – 11

Once upon a time, there was a road that over fifty countries shared to trade their goods. China mainly traded silk fabric and jade stones for horses, cotton, pottery, and glass. But one thing caused a problem, and that was a pure accident. One of the horses that another country's ruler called the 'best' in the stables, a white stallion, caused a mess in the Chinese Emperor's Palace.

The Emperor's name was Ching, and his beloved wife's name was Zheng. The white stallion was Zheng's favourite horse, so she rides it in the palace gardens daily. One day, the stallion went crazy and started to throw Zheng off its back. Zheng panicked and went back to her room to treat her wounds.

This news made Ching furious, and started to plan revenge. He polished a box that was carefully painted gold, and captured three Chinese Cobras who are well known in China due to their deadly venom. If you were bitten by adult cobras and you didn't get treated by doctors within a specific time period, that part of your body can be paralysed, or even make you face life threatening diseases. Ching carefully wrapped the cobras with thick layers of silk fabric, with rings and necklaces made from jadeites and sapphires placed on top to hide the cobras. He thought this would be a good way to take revenge on whoever dared to give his wife a trash horse as a trade for nephrite jades, but he didn't realise what this act cost him.

As soon as Ching ordered some of his servants to carry the gold box along the silk road to trade it for some strong horses for his army. But he found out that something was wrong. His servants had not returned after a few days already, taking way too much time than needed. So Ching decided to take four of his best bodyguards and go to the trading spot where his servants usually went to trade.

The scene that laid before Ching's eyes was not what he expected, and it wasn't much better either. All of his servants and the other traders had deep fang marks in their body, blood pooling from their wounds. There were also some cobras lying next to the dead people, and a whining horse because of his wounded leg. Ching was instantly filled with regret. "Why, why did I do this!" He whimpered over and over again.

The next moment, things got even more worse. The Emperors from the other trading countries saw Ching bend over his servants and processed out what had happened. The countries decided to ally together to fight China, just because of a stupid mistake. China shut itself up, vowing to never step foot in the Silk road ever again.

The silk road might not be here nowadays, but it was pretty much the start of trading traditions, languages and more items. This is also the reason why we can speak English in China, and even the religions now were traded to China long ago.

Progression

Po Leung Kuk Choi Kai Yau School, Lee, Charlotte – 13

Wei adjusted the bundles of silk on her back as the caravan wound slowly through the treacherous paths of the Hexi corridor, gazing across the rippling desert plains scorched by the searing midday sun. The caravan horses pawed the dust, their cracked hooves stirring billowing clouds of dirt that glinted in the sunlight.

She ran her fingers over the smooth surface of the obsidian mirror, its glossy black plane cool to the touch despite the sweltering heat. As Wei lifted the mirror into the light, memories coursed softly through her mind; from when her ancestors first traipsed across this sprawling network of roads millennia ago, to more recent memories of her mother taking her through the cluttered bazaars of the Taklamakan markets, with people trading everything from ornate lacquerware to earthy incense.

As the caravan's camels ambled forward, Wei's thoughts slipped into a trance yet again. How many generations before her had watched the same sun rise and fall across these very same dunes, their shoulders hunched underneath the weight of exotic goods? And how many more would come after?

Her mother had once told her that her great-grandfather had once crossed the Gobi desert with nothing but a pile of tea bricks and a jade pendant for good luck. Now Wei wore that exact same pendant, cold against her collarbone. His hands had touched it. His sweat had darkened the cord that the jade hung from. And yet now, she couldn't even remember his face anymore...

The wind shifted again, grainy particles of sand stinging her eyes. Ahead, barely visible in the desert's afternoon haze, stood the ruins of an old caravanserais, cracks showing up in the facade of the crumbling basalt structure. Generations upon generation of travellers had once rested within these four walls, negotiating over the price of assorted goods brought from far away.

Either way, it didn't matter anymore. Everything was gone now. But the routes they had carved into the soil with their footsteps and wheels would still remain intact, for centuries to come.

Present Day China, National People's Congress

Secretary General Li wiped the sweaty palms of his hands on the thighs of his silk dress pants, gazing across the empty auditorium. The guests and the media would arrive soon. "For the first time in over 2,000 years, we are proud to announce the revival of numerous ancient Silk Road trade routes through our newly implemented Belt and Road Initiative," he proclaimed, his voice resonating clearly across the hall. "Through this program, we aim to further promote global trade and interconnectivity of nations. We will invest in over 150 various countries and international organisations, hoping to cultivate multiculturalism in Asia and beyond."

"Of course, this is something that we today cannot merely view as a means for economic gain, for we should also acknowledge the rich heritage and history of this network of routes and how they helped to shape what we know as our nations today. We must pay tribute to the thousands of people before us, whose ambitions and aspirations influenced these networks. Likewise, we must also give our thanks to future generations who will come after us, as they are the ones who carry on our legacy."

"In the name of history, who are we to say what we're worth? Centuries ago, didn't our ancestors also believe their rule to be superior and unstoppable? Now we learn about their mistakes in history class and laugh at

how foolish they seem to us. We may be proud to be part of something great now, but we should remember that in the flow of time, we will always remain bound to those who came before us, and those who will follow.”

Finally satisfied, Li picked up his cue cards from the lectern, slowly descending the steps from the stage, and placed them back into his leather briefcase, resting gently atop a black obsidian mirror.

Candle

Po Leung Kuk Choi Kai Yau School, Li, Rachel – 11

Freedom was a fragile thing those days, a flickering candle in the bitter wind. The gilded cage rattled onward, each turn of the wheels carrying me farther along the Silk Road and farther away from the life I knew.

We left China nine months ago, and Rome was still another three months away. My carriage, or more aptly my cage, was guarded by Roman henchmen day and night. These mobile statues had been tasked with delivering me, “the bride”, to the Prince of Rome.

Nine months. Nine months of exhaustion that never faded, as the fine lines around my eyes grew darker, more pronounced, carving themselves into my skin. My hands, once soft, had become rough maps of cracks and calluses, each line a memory of the journey. My back throbbed with a dull ache that never left. Nine months of apprehension. Nine months wrapped in the heavy, suffocating blanket of silence and melancholy inside my cage. Two hundred and seventy days inching closer to a future I never chose, two hundred and seventy days closer to a stranger I would call “husband”. Two hundred and seventy days of anxiety gnawing at me, whispering in the silence, until I found myself talking to the air, just to hear a voice, even if it was only my own.

Outside, the rhythmic creak of the wheels and the steady beat of the horses’ hoofs made sleep impossible as I stared out the glassless window at the jet-black sky, a sea of uncertainty and unease. The stars, usually a comforting presence to me, seemed cold and distant, their pinpricks of light slowly engulfed by an infinite void. Paranoia finds me every day, a deep, dark voice at the back of my mind, screaming at me, a shadow clutching at the edges of my awareness, twisting and turning inside me. I sighed as I sank back into the thick layers of the silk duvet, my haunted mind racing with unthinkable thoughts.

I often found my fingers tracing the jade pendant my grandmother pressed into my palm, her eyes crinkling with that familiar warmth. “Just an extra layer of protection against evil,” she had whispered. I never believed in her superstitions, always dismissing them as “old wives’ tales”. I remembered scoffing at her remedies, and her predictions of rain when the swallows flew low, her insistence on tucking herbs beneath my pillow. Now, I clung to the cool, smooth jade, desperate for it to hold some real magic, something to keep the monsters at bay. The nightmares waited for me, crouched in the darkness, as the door to my mind slowly closed.

The sunlight stabbed at my eyelids, a harsh, unwelcomed intruder. The black spots dancing in my vision forced me into consciousness. Peering out of the window, the jagged mountains gave way to a cacophonous hive of activity.

The air was thick with the aromatic scents of spices and the fragrant perfume of ripe mangoes. Sunlight streamed through the intricate woven tapestries, casting dappled patterns onto the bustling crowds and the kaleidoscopic tiled flooring below. My eyes landed on the overflowing baskets of goods and flamboyant handwoven clothing adorned with dazzling patterns. “Freshly ground spices, the finest of all in Persia!” one called out, his elaborate robe flowing behind him. Children darted in and out of the clusters of crowds, their laughter echoing through the bazaar.

I drew my gaze back, unable to bear the spectacle anymore. Everywhere I looked was full of life, vibrant and free, while I was trapped in a cage, a prisoner of my own mind. “Unfair.....” the phantom voice at the back of my mind rasps as I slowly descend back into my sea of thoughts.

“Wake up!” a voice growled, harsh and guttural. The relentless bouncing of the carriage ceased with an abrupt halt. I sat up and blinked as the city finally clicked into focus: Rome. Around my carriage, crowds pressed in, faces curious at the windows. The raucous clamor and yells filled my ears. Nervous, I gulped as trepidation clawed at me, fingers pressing against my throat. Suddenly, as a tall, grim man approached, the yells from the crowd dwindled. The prince. He was not the magnanimous monarch I expected—far from it. Not a dashing

hero, nor a benevolent ruler, but a man with eyes as cold and hard as the palace's marble statues. Beneath his thin lips, a crooked, malevolent smile played. I stiffened.

"Welcome, my bride," he hissed, "You are finally here. You are mine now."

I tried to force a smile, but it felt brittle. The palace was a masterpiece of architecture, but I could already feel the bars of my new cage; its beauty was a cruel facade. My gowns were prisons of silk, adorned with icy shackles in the shape of jewels. Every gesture was a performance, every word a weighted risk.

Later, cloistered in my room, a quiet hopelessness grew as I watched the city lights stretch over the horizon. The sting of new restrictions weighed on me. My thoughts were swallowed by the room's stillness—until the door creaked open. He appeared, a single candle in his hand.

"What is worrying you, my dear?" he asked, each word dripping with false concern. I remained silent, unable to speak the truth that stuck in my throat.

He stepped closer, his shadow looming over me like a heavy shroud.

"Well, you must understand," he continued, voice hardening, "that you are mine now. Your life, your thoughts. Everything... belongs to me."

He raised the candle, its flickering light illuminating his face, revealing the nefarious glint in his eyes. "Freedom — " he jeered, his voice a mocking whisper, each word hitting me sharp and cold as he tilted the candle slightly, letting the hot wax drip onto my skin as I bit back a cry, "is a fragile thing. A single breath. That's all it takes."

The Tale of the Silk Road

Po Leung Kuk Choi Kai Yau School, Lui, Megan – 11

The sky was a raging inferno as Raya scouted for any lost city from the Arid Age. But she had no luck. It had been four years since her family gave up on her ever being a famous silk weaver and put her down for adoption. No one had wanted her. She was olive-skinned, nothing like her family. Her brunette hair swayed in the wind as she stared down at where a city was supposed to be. Nothing. Just sand. But then she saw it, an oasis. Raya looked at her horse Onyx and told her to stay. Raya skidded down the sand and landed smoothly next to the oasis. It was quite large, but it looked as if it was used frequently as Raya saw the dim lanterns lighting a path. Raya whistled and Onyx instantly trotted down the slope to her. Raya jumped onto Onyx's back and trotted through the path, not knowing someone was watching her...

Raya looked around them as they walked. It was a beautiful forest of large, thick palm trees all with ripe coconuts. Raya looked closer. Between the trees, there were nets, catching the ripe coconuts as they fell. *That's definitely not the work of nature. Somebody lives here.* Onyx whinnied as the road narrowed and sloped downwards. "A secret entrance." breathed Raya. "That's right. It is a secret entrance. BUt you're coming with us." said a voice. Raya briefly saw multiple blue hooded figures jump down from the trees all with an emblem on their chest. One figure grabbed her and secured her arms with a satisfying *clink*; another tied up her feet and blindfolded her before stuffing her into a black bag along with a metal mouthguard that muffled her voice. She could hear Onyx's neighing in pain as Raya thought of what they would do to the two of them. Be tortured? Punished? Imprisoned? She didn't know.

Raya felt herself being loaded onto a cart and pushed further down the sloping path along with the clickity-clacking of Onyx's hooves hitting the wooden platform. Raya heard some chatter and the creak of some heavy wooden doors. More voices. Then silence. Raya held her breath. Was she going to be executed? Then the bag opened. The hooded figures poured Raya out and threw her onto the hard floor. She blinked as her dry eyes adjusted to the bright lights of the room. There was a man dressed in formal attire at the centre of the room. She faced him and stared into his deep blue eyes. "Welcome, traveler, to the land of the blue onyx. Raya sat up straight. "Are you a lost land from the Arid Age?" asked Raya. "Yes. We are. We have not seen travelers for at least forty years now." stated the man. "There's nothing much nowadays. Only a few nations have survived the Arid Age." The man nodded. "My name is Rincold. As we may not survive another coming Arid Age. We would like to pass a legacy down to you travelers. Spread it across the world, to all our nations, keep it alive for us." Raya was taken aback. Ask the travelers to pass down their traditions? Despite her doubts she nodded to Rincold. Rincold got up and walked out to another room and Raya followed suit. As Rincold slid open the door, Raya gasped at the sight. Hundreds of workers all working together, all doing the same thing. Weaving silk into beautiful tapestries. Rincold gestured to the empty seat. "You can learn here anytime you want." Raya turned away from the room. She angrily walked away. She walked to the barn and pushed open the door. She ran to the stall Onyx was in and laid her head against her soft mane. Comforting herself. *Why was everything related back to her mother? It wasn't fair. She hated her. Why did everything remind her of mother?* Raya sighed and before she knew, she was snoring away with Onyx as a cushion.

Raya woke up and brushed the butt of her pants. She petted Onyx and left the barn to go back to the silk weaving room. She opened the door and sat at her station. The master smiled and taught her how to hold and pull at the silk, then delicately looping the silk around the white threads on the small board on her lap. "This is a practice board, when I am satisfied with your work you may move on to the one everyone is using. The big one in front of you." said the master kindly as he busily went back to weaving. Raya took one thread, looped it around the line and pulled it tight. Loop, pull, repeat. Loop, pull, repeat. And finally, she was done. She tapped the master's shoulder and he turned around to look at her first tapestry. "Good job, you can move on to do the big one tomorrow." he said. *Tomorrow!Isn't it...* Raya looked at the clock. *EIGHT! No way, it's so late!* Raya walked out the room and to her private bedroom. There was a lavish four-poster-bed and a fancy shower, but all Raya wanted to do was sleep in the sand with Onyx next to her.

Raya rolled around under the covers all night, only to wake up to the alarm beeping at six in the morning. Raya slumped out of bed and walked to the silk room, still in pyjamas. She started working and dozing off at the same time. This continued until one day, when Raya finally finished the last strand of her weaving, she showed it to the master, and finally he approved, and Raya could leave this nation. As Raya packed up her things in the room, she realised how little of the new cities she had seen. Raya decided that she would spread their culture far and wide, to the cities and through the desert.

And so, she left the blue onyx nation. She hopped onto Onyx and they set off into the horizon, following the silk roads to the new cities. It was funny, though. Raya's mother always said she had no future as a silk weaver, and yet now she was spreading the culture of silk weaving all around the world.

—THE END—

New Tales of China's Silk Road

Po Leung Kuk Choi Kai Yau School, Shum, Aiden – 11

Once upon a time, the Silk Road was crowded as always—a cacophony of braying camels, the rhythmic clinking of Roman coins, and the scent of cumin clashing with expensive frankincense. One of the traders there was Zhong, an old man who lives near the Silk Road. His face was full of wrinkles, showing his old age. Zhong had been on trading routes to countries like Africa, Europe for about forty years.

As the bustling market faded into the evening, Zhong's peaceful routine was suddenly shattered by news from a traveling merchant—an urgent warning that a rival trader, known as Li Shen, had arrived in the city. Li Shen was notorious for his ruthless tactics, willing to do anything to dominate the trade routes of China and it was easy for him because the security in the Silk road was sparse. Zhong quickly packed up and headed home. On the way, the peaceful evening was shattered by a sudden, ear-splitting scream that pierced the air near the pier. Zhong's instincts kicked in, he broke into a run, heart pounding. As he neared the waterfront, he saw a horrifying scene—a large ship bobbing in the river, its deck awash with a crimson pool of blood. Standing amidst the chaos was a towering, bearded figure—Li Shen. His face was twisted with fury, and in his hand gleamed a razor-sharp knife, glinting menacingly in the fading light. Without warning, Li Shen lunged, stabbing a man on the ship—a merchant or sailor, Zhong couldn't tell—his body jerking violently as blood erupted from his chest. The crimson liquid spilled out in rivulets, staining the deck and flowing into the river, turning the once—azure water a sickening shade of red. Zhong's eyes widened in horror; his breath caught in his throat, and an involuntary scream escaped his lips, echoing over the tumultuous water.

Li Shen's sharp gaze snapped toward Zhong, his expression darkening with recognition. Without hesitation, the ruthless trader sprinted toward him, eyes blazing with murderous intent. Zhong's mind raced—panic flooded his senses. Before he could react, a powerful hand grabbed him from behind, yanking him away at a high speed. His feet stumbled over uneven stones, heart pounding like a drumbeat in his ears. The world blurred as he was dragged away from the chaos, the sounds of Li Shen's shouts and the splashing of blood fading into the distance.

For a moment, Zhong's mind was a fog of fear and confusion. When he finally looked back, the figure of Li Shen was nowhere to be seen—shrouded in the shadows of the evening, vanished as suddenly as he had appeared. Zhong's chest heaved with ragged breaths, trembling from the adrenaline and shock. The peaceful market—his familiar world—had been shattered by violence, and he was left trembling, clutching the precious relic tightly, knowing that his life—and the fate of the Silk Road itself—had just taken a dark turn. Zhong saw a person in a black hood and asked, "Who are you?" The mysterious person took off his hood and a young boy showed up. Zhong asked, "Are you Ming Wei, the seller from the neighbouring store?" Ming Wei nodded.

Ming Wei explained how he saw Zhong being chased by Li Shen when he left, and also mentioned that Li Shen will rush to get anything as long as it is valuable. Zhong immediately thought of a plan to deal with Li Shen. He set up a trap at the Subashi temple at the silk road and left a trail of shiny gold coins he earned from the traders leading towards it. Zhong took a deep breath, heart pounding in his chest and waited for Li Shen to arrive. After half an hour, Li Shen showed up as he was picking up gold coins. Zhong appeared and Li Shen said, "It's you!"

Zhong stepped forward and pulled the trap lever and a cage trapped Li Shen in. Li Shen laughed and used his strong arms and broke the cage. Li Shen's laughter echoed through the temple's shadowy halls, a harsh, jagged sound that sent a shiver down Zhong's spine. He lunged toward Zhong, wielding a dagger from his belt, eyes blazing with fury. Zhong dodged and Li Shen fell to the ground. Suddenly, from the shadows, Ming Wei reappeared, clutching a small, ancient scroll. "Zhong! Look, I found this in the temple ruins," he whispered urgently. "It's said to hold the secret to protecting the trade routes—an ancient spell that can summon guardians from the past."

Zhong's eyes widened. "Can it really be true?" Ming Wei nodded. "We have to try. If we don't, Li Shen will destroy everything."

Li Shen, charged forward. Zhong remembered the scroll and quickly recited the incantation. A deep rumble echoed through the temple, and ancient warriors surrounded Li Shen.

The guardians drew their swords and shields. Li Shen, momentarily stunned, hesitated as the spectral warriors advanced. His bravado faltered under their ghostly gaze.

Li Shen's face twisted with rage as he lunged forward, stabbing wildly with his knife. His snarling voice echoed in the silent night, but the knights didn't flinch. Their armor caught the faint moonlight, and they moved with calm, practiced ease. The knife was useless against them. Without much effort, they grabbed him, his thrashing arms and curses falling on deaf ears. They carried him away, their footsteps heavy and steady as they locked him into a cold, dark cell.

Ming Wei sighed with relief. As they both left the temple, the sky was dark and Li Shen was trapped now, forever confined in that prison.

The Cancelled Parcels

Po Leung Kuk Choi Kai Yau School, Soong, Katie – 13

I once swore I would never disobey my father's rules. Yet here I am, stuck in the middle of nowhere on the back of a horse struggling to take ten steps further. I was slipping away from consciousness and the events of the past 48 hours kept replaying in my head...

It was a beautiful and sunny day and I was reading in my room when I heard my father yell at a servant about the cancellation of the goods from the western region that he had been talking about for weeks. Rushing to the door of his study room, I caught my father burrowing his head in frustration out of the corner of my eye through a gap in his door.

My father had been under so much pressure lately, and with the difficulty in finding someone to take over the throne after my father, this was just another problem that added to his misery. Suddenly, an idea hit me and I bursted into the room, saying excitedly, "Father, I can take HuaShen with me and go on the Silk Road to transport the goods back here!" Engulfed in my own excitement and naivety, I failed to notice the incredulous expressions etched on his face with traces of fear and anger. Before I could say any more, my father said in a tired voice, "YuYun, I appreciate your willingness to help. But you have to remember you are a princess. You are a royal and callow little girl. You cannot travel onto the Silk Road. Only men can work and trade. Girls like you are better off inside." My exhilaration immediately faded into annoyance and I left the room without another word.

That night, I lay in bed tossing and turning. My thoughts and endless questions wrapped around my mind like spitting snakes, squeezing tighter and tighter until my head felt like it was going to explode. It wasn't right. Women don't deserve to be disregarded. Throwing away the silk covers, I put on the only black Hanfu I have and crept into the horse cables, stroking HuaShen until he woke up. With my heart hammering, I whispered quietly, "HuaShen, we're going to help father whether he likes it or not. But we have to be very quiet, okay?" Taking HuaShen's soft neigh and nuzzle as a yes, I stole one of the horse trainer's outfits from the cabinet and hurriedly put it on. Then, I hid my long mane of silky black hair under a hat and stuffed a bag with food for both HuaShen and I that would last us two days. Securing the bag onto HuaShen, I flung my leg over his strong body and pulled on the reins gently. Trotting forward, HuaShen stepped into the dark night sky bedazzled with stars and set upon the road to the Silk Road.

I felt an alien sense of freedom and exhilaration as we arrived at the Silk Road, my eyes swallowing the beautiful scenery.

Suddenly, I remembered my father back in the palace, peacefully sleeping and not knowing he would wake up to a missing daughter. I quickly pushed the thought out of my head. Afterall, I will be back by tomorrow afternoon and will just tell him I woke up early to go horse riding with HuaShen.

As the sun began to rise up from the horizon, I looked forward hopefully, hoping to see some sort of house apart from the endless road I had been looking at for the whole night. To my disappointment, there was nothing but a long winding road that stretched onwards forever.

For the next few hours, or perhaps it was more, I slipped out and in of consciousness, not knowing the time and when I would finally arrive.

When I regained consciousness for the gazillionth time, the sky was already turning dark and I panickedly looked towards the road again. There was no sign of an end and an uneasy feeling surged through me. How long have I

been out here? HuaShen's brisk fast trot was already slowing down considerably. How much longer will I be able to travel on his back? When will he finally lose energy after endlessly walking for days? I rummaged through the bag only to find one small apple remaining. What a stupid girl I was to think I would survive out here, with no compass or rich food source!

As tears started to well in my eyes and fear engulfed me, I caught sight of a distant shadow. Hope flared into me once again, and I urged HuaShen forward. Soon enough, the shadow came into view and turned into a stumbling young girl with flowy gold hair. I hurriedly slid off HuaShen and ran to the girl. "Are you okay?" I asked, taking a few parcels that she was holding. The girl nodded. As I neared her, the dark circles under her eyes and her sunken face became more prominent. I grabbed the remaining parcels she was struggling to hold on to and safely secured them onto HuaShen. Then, I knelt beside her and asked her gently, "What's your name? Why are you out here alone? I'm YuYun. Don't be afraid, I only want to help you."

The girl's eyes widened in fear and she took a few steps backward. Only then did I realise I was still in disguise as a young man travelling on the Silk Road. I hastily take off my hat and shook my hair out of its loose bun. As the wave of black unravelled itself, the girl seemed to loosen up a bit and said in a small voice, "I'm Hannah. My mom sent me here to deliver these parcels to the Chinese Palace. She said the emperor wanted them. She told me to be very careful with it. I didn't know the journey would be this long. I don't have any more food. Can you help me reach the palace?" She looked at me hopefully. I stared into her blue eyes that looked so alike the sea sparkling under the sun. Suddenly, something clicked, and I said, "You said these parcels are for the emperor?" Hannah nodded, and my eyes widened. "Yes! I can help you! You have to promise me not to tell anyone, but I'm actually YuYun, the emperor's daughter. I came here because I thought I could help him..."

For the rest of the day, I filled Hannah in about everything that had happened to me, from the time I heard my father shouting at the servant up until now.

The journey back to the palace felt considerably shorter than my journey to the Silk Road, and just as the sun was rising, marking the 5th day I had left the palace, we arrived. I hurriedly helped Hannah slide off HuaShen, took him back to the stables, collected the parcels, and ran into the palace. I was greeted by two servants with worried expressions, who urged me to go find my father immediately. After telling Hannah to wait outside the palace, I ran into his room only to find him lying on the bed.

"Father, I'm so sorry I left without telling you. I knew I shouldn't have done it, but I really wanted to help. Look! I got the parcels for you just like I said!"

My father smiled at me, his face etched with lines and his eyes dim. "My dear YuYun, I am so so proud of you. But a disease has spread to my entire body and I fear I don't have much time left..." Before he could continue, he broke into a fit of coughing and I stared in horror. "YuYun, what you did demonstrated a great deal of courage, bravery, leadership and willingness to take on challenges. This is everything I have failed to find in all the young men around the country. I want—" Another fit of coughing took over him again, and as he surfaced, his words were barely audible. "YuYun, I crown...you...as the next empress.... Promise me...you will take...good...care...of...the...country..."

— —

It has been two weeks since my father passed away. The funeral was held two days later, a memory heavy in my head with the weight of sorrow and grief. Yet, as I sat in front of my dressing table now, I knew I had to let go of the chains that dragged me down with misery if I was to fulfil my father's last wish and take care of the country.

I walked into the Hall of Supreme Harmony as the coronation started, my red and gold Hanfu lavishly unfolding behind me. As the FengGuan was placed onto my head, a beam of sunlight shone through the window. It spread across the beautiful wooden floor and reached straight to my heart, giving me a warmth I have not felt in a long time. I looked at the beautiful sky outside and smiled, knowing my father is here to witness my coronation.

New Tales of China's Silk Road

Po Leung Kuk Choi Kai Yau School, To, Lucille – 11

Vivian loved visiting the Palace museum. One day, when she was casually strolling around in the sea of exhibits, an artefact caught her eye. It was a beautifully crafted Jade necklace that sat on a bed of dark velvet. Vivian immediately wandered over to the necklace and noticed that there was a tiny dent in the corner of it. A museum staff told Vivian that the necklace was found near the Xiongnu camp and was estimated to be over 2000 years old.

All of a sudden, gold swirls of colour started to form. “What’s going on?” Vivian screamed in panic. The lights dimmed and Vivian was no longer in the Palace museum, but instead she was in a cave. The walls that surrounded her were made of stone bricks and the area smelled of sweat and blood. In front of her was the mouth of the cave, opening up to a large room. Vivian circumspectly walked forward, half-expecting to be attacked. All of a sudden, a man came into the room and spotted Vivian.

“Hello, what are you doing here, little girl? I advise you to go home now, we aren’t supposed to be here. This is the Xiongnu camp and the people here are brutal. We have to be careful or we will be punished severely,” The man whispered in a gentle voice.

Vivian had heard of the Xiongnu Empire before. A long time ago, they were one of the main enemies of China. Vivian was about to introduce herself when the man went first. “I’m Zhang Qian from the Han Empire, and I’m currently a captive of the Xiongnu people,” he said.

Vivian stuttered, “Zhang... Q...Qian?”

Zhang Qian was a famous historical character that she learned at school. He adventured all the way to central China, sharing cultures with the people on the way, paving the way for the birth of the silk road.

Vivian really couldn’t believe that Zhang Qian was still alive after 2000 years. It had to be some kind of joke.

At the start, Vivian had theorised that she had time traveled back to the 140–120 BCE and bumped into Zhang Qian, but the idea of time traveling sounded too insane to be possible, but that was the only way explanation.

Just then, Vivian reminded herself of the bigger problem she was facing.

“How do we get out of this camp?” She asked, “The Xiongnu are very careful with their captives...”

Zhang Qian sighed. “This is my second time here and I still haven’t figured out a way out. During the first time I was captured, I was even forced to marry a local woman!”

“We have to find a way to escape before something worse happens to us,” she cried determinedly.

All of a sudden, a large bulky man stalked into the room. Zhang Qian pulled Vivian inside the cave and they hid behind a large rock.

“Where is the captive?” the man boomed. A skinny soldier tripped behind.

“I don’t know, officer Chanyu,” the soldier replied in a squeaky voice.

The man, officer Chanyu, declared, “We’ll find him later. Here, take this roll of map. It includes a labeled picture of our empire as well as the Han Empire.” The soldier nodded, grabbed the map and scurried away.

Once the officer left as well, Vivian and Zhang Qian sighed in relief.

That night, Vivian and Zhang Qian slept in the cave. They made a plan together on how to escape before they slept. At midnight, Vivian woke up and snuck stealthy in the soldiers' room. In the soldier's bedside was the roll of the map. Vivian bent down to pick it up but something slipped from her neck and dropped to the ground. Vivian crouched to examine the fallen piece of item. To her surprise, it was the Jade necklace. Just as she was about to take it, the soldier started to stir. Alarmed, Vivian hurried for exit, clutching tightly on the map. She rushed back and handed the map over to Zhang Qian.

He whispered, "I was so afraid that you were caught! Oh wait, where is your necklace?" Vivian reached to feel around her neck.

"Nevermind," She grumbled, unrolling the map.

In the museum, Vivian had learned that the silk road was not just a single path but a connection of roads. There were many, many different safe paths and ways to walk back to the Han Empire. Just as Vivian was planning on which route to take, there was a loud scream. Vivian and Zhang Qian once again hid behind the rock.

Officer Chanyu strode in the room followed by the skinny soldier. The soldier yelled, "I did not commit murder on your brother!"

Suddenly, Vivian finally recognised the officer. He was the brother of Junchen Chanyu, the leader of the Xiongnu Empire. After Junchen died, Officer Chanyu, or rather, Yizhixie Chanyu took his brother's place.

As the argument between the skinny man and Yizhixie Chanyu raged on, Vivian pulled Zhang Qian out of the cave into the main hall. Nobody noticed them because they were too busy arguing. Vivian took a long look at the map before pointing out the direction. As they sped off, Yizhixie Chanyu finally noticed them.

The skinny soldier ran after the pair but he wasn't even close to catching them. Vivian and Zhang Qian were way faster. During geography lesson, Vivian had already memorised one of the routes of the silk road that could lead them back to the Han Empire, so running back to Han Empire wasn't too hard. She just had to glance at the map a multiple times.

When the skinny soldier was out of sight, it paused to catch their breath.

"Thank you for saving me, Vivian," Zhang Qian said, panting.

Vivian smiled and said, "Thank you for helping me escape too!"

Suddenly, gold swirls of colour started to form. "Keep up with your trade route idea!" Vivian exclaimed as the lights brightened. She was back to the Palace museum.

Vivian stared at the tiny dent on the necklace and sighed. "I really shouldn't have dropped it in the soldier's tent," she said.

New Tales of China's Silk Road

Po Leung Kuk Choi Kai Yau School, Wong, Victoria – 13

For a God, will not play at our level.

We learn of the fact that throwing rocks into the sea makes land and in that revelation, suddenly we play God.

Was it the ambition of the human spirit that compelled you over the road, or was it the fear of losing your ground in a world vast enough to swallow you whole?

Two separate ideas of death await us when we leave, the first when your heart stops and the ones who acknowledged your existence mourn and cry and bury you six feet deep; the second, when people stop crying, forget what they were crying for and pray for your peace one last time. That is when you are truly gone, when you waltz with death and the music ends. Simplifying to a speck on a blotch on a smudge, infinitely forward. Does history really remember human ambition, or does it only celebrate the glorious? Who is anyone to tell the fourth dimension how to play, except those who dare try to sway the odds in their favour?

What's a God, to a nonbeliever?

The sun hung low upon the horizon, sinking so far it might as well have been called the moon, casting the final sunset to mark the end of a Great. Rays of bloodshot red and deep crimson shot across the sky, igniting the world a farewell. The last merchant of the roads, Ming, tightened the worn out straps of his pack signifying preparation to redefine what it means to win, to redefine history for what it is, because history is only written by its victors.

Today, Ming stands alone on a cracked stone bridge, looking down to where the rivers once were. Desolate. The water has dried up, the spices don't burn, the silk won't fly. The wind is cruel for forgetting the work and the heart of the fire, but isn't it cruel to learn to remember too? "Blissful ignorance", he thought, mocking the human instinct to aspire for change; yet engulfed by the frustration in knowing it's not enough.

Today, however, the competition has vanished. It is only you trading in the emptiness of what once felt like everything. Simultaneous to Icarus, who fell from the sky with a smile, embracing the descent. For to fall meant you had soared.

The crossroads led far, far away but not far from nowhere.

No more caravans. No more traders, no more hurt.

Especially, no more hurting.

Ming smiled as he shed the weight of his cargo, it didn't hold him captive anymore. Not the trinkets, nor the threads, those are just the ghosts of better days, residual echoes from a time hope flickered like the candles he has now snuffed out. Tonight, Ming won't just walk the roads, he will set it ablaze behind him, he will remain the last ember of a fading end of the road. Bury the silks into the sand, sieve the spices into the specs until the beach stings to stand on for the wounds of the forgotten lay upon it. Does history remember the ends or at the very least, the conclusions?

No. to put it simply, history is a devil of our nature, it does not remember us, nor should it remember, though we expect it to. "Being history" remarks Only the end, the conclusions, as it withstands millenniums accounts of life, impossibly more. Who are we to say that it can't, who are we to dictate the fourth dimension its disregards? Of what it should keep to itself and what it shares or spares? It is here; isn't that enough?

Ming steps into the infinite, whether towards eternal hope or endless loss, both roads converge here; As a wager with the fourth dimension.

The big idea is if he will trade his life and all he could bundle up for a concrete position in the timeline of it all, trade his caravan for an anchor he throws into desolate riverbeds and his pricey goods for words that will describe him when he is gone so he can forget about being forgotten.

But for now, he holds onto what he has, to put a good name or deal on his little bits of everything, he still has to make that last bit of money for the road. For the hope that people will care for where he will go, what stops he will make, where he rests and when his journey is over, how will he get home, go home with a heavy heart but an empty van. "Send me a letter for when it is all over, so I know you got home safe." he murmurs as he makes his way, defying the void of forgetting and what it stands for.

For a God, could not play at our level.

New Tales of China's Silk Road

Po Leung Kuk Choi Kai Yau School, Wu, Joycelyn – 12

“Grandma! Grandma! Tell me a story!” Xiaohua eagerly called, her tiny hands grabbing onto Grandma’s dark blue hanfu. Grandma smiled, the corners of her mouth stretching upwards to show decades of smile lines and grateful wrinkles. As she settled on a tattered mahogany stool, her eyes sparkled with a faraway gaze, like an ancient ember still aglow with life. She spoke, voice sweet as honey and as soft as a gentle lullaby. “Once upon a time, in a land not so far away...”

Once upon a time, in a land not so far away, there was a young girl. She was a curious child, and somewhat mischievous too. Day after day, Xunqiu’s parents would warn her not to run too far, or venture into the unknown. They feared she would get lost along the seemingly infinite silk road, which wound and coiled around mountains and valleys alike. Often, her mother would send her on errands in the Chang’an trade hub, asking her to bring back a few ginseng roots, bags of rice, and sometimes a few handfuls of cilantro or mint. Boredom had slowly crept into Xunqiu’s life, and she soon grew tired of the same markets, the same people, and the same routine leaving her a longing to prove there was more than her provincial life.

While indulging in a street performance of the Erhu and Pipa one afternoon, Xunqiu overheard the quietest of whispers among the streets.

“...a ghost,”

A lady in pale blue spoke in hushed tones, as she nodded at the other ladies’ amused smiles and shocked faces.

“..haunts the outskirts of the city,”

Her voice dropped to even lower octaves, and Xunqiu had to stop herself from leaning in to listen.

“...protecting trade routes...”

Xunqiu listened, enthralled, as something seemed to ignite within her, and she knew she finally found the adventure she had been looking for.

Later that day, Xunqiu wrote a quick note down for her parents that she had gone exploring and would be back soon. Setting it down onto the round table in the living room, she slipped on her straw sandals and tied a small bundle. Her dainty feet carrying her petite body with great ambition installed within her, she raced to the outskirts, eager to see the ghost the ladies described. There, wandering in the moonlight, cloaked in an ethereal glow, with flowing robes of deep violet adorned with golden threads clinging to his broad shoulders, and wisps of mist that curled around him, stood a translucent figure. In his hand he grasped an old, weathered scroll, clearly browning. The blue tint of his silhouette made him so foreign to Xunqiu, yet something seemed familiar about him that she couldn’t quite place.

True to her ambition, Xunqiu felt a surge of courage, taking a small step forward to converse with the ghostly figure.

“Are you a spirit?”

she blurted, startling him.

“I suppose so,”

he turned, his eyes bearing onto her, seemingly intrigued by the tiny child before him.

“Why do you walk this route then?”

she asked.

“I do not wish to walk this route,”

he sighed.

“Yet I cannot remember who I am or why I cannot move on. My purpose is to keep this road safe... it’s simply been too long!”

Troubled by his answer, Xunqiu couldn’t fathom how one could forget themselves.

“What is your name, little lady? Perhaps you could assist me...”

She perked up at the prospect of adventure.

“My name is Zhang Xunqiu, and I’d love to help! Maybe if I can convince you the road is safe enough without you, you’ll be able to move on!”

He looked at her with a flicker of hope.

“You would do this for me?”

“Of course!”

The spirit produced a jade hairstick shaped like a benevolent dragon.

“This will help you understand the languages of travelers. You must collect three items from three lands outside China to prove safety. Only then will you uncover the truth of my past.”

Setting off down the road, Xunqiu made her way west, passing through the Loess Plateau, climbing the QinLing mountains, the Gansu province. Weeks later, she arrived at the vibrant markets of Sogdiana, which buzzed with activity, caravans and merchants selling and bargaining, haggling prices and exploring every culture and tongue. There, she approached a beadmayer, his stall pouring with shimmering treasures.

“May I trade something for a lapis lazuli bead?”

she asked, the beadmayer looking at the strange child with curiosity.

“What do you offer, little one?”

Xunqiu rummaged through her pouch, and found nothing.

“...Might I interest you with a story?” she said, hoping with all her heart the beadmayer would accept it.

The beadmayer thought for a while, then nodded.

“Deal!” she exclaimed, as she told the tale of her trip to Sogdiana. The beadmayer smiled and carefully placed a stunning lapis lazuli bead in her palm, its deep blue hue glimmering in the sunlight.

Returning to her travels, Xunqiu once again traveled west, crossing the beautiful Bamiyan valley. As she ventured further, she saw a fascinating caravan camp. One particular merchant caught her eye, showcasing an assortment of unique coins.

“Do you have any Bactrian coins for trade?”

she asked, eager to strike a deal.

“What do you have to offer, child?”

The old lady who ran the stall asked her, a small grin showing.

Xunqiu thought carefully before replying,

“I could share stories from my journey...”

The old lady chuckled, amused by her idea.

“Stories are quite valuable, how about two stories in exchange for a Bactrian coin?”

Excited, Xunqiu agreed, weaving captivating tales of her escapades in the woods back in Chang’an. In return, the merchant handed her a shiny Bactrian coin.

Gaining the second piece of her puzzle, Xunqiu was ecstatic. As she continued west once more, the thought of returning to the spirit and bringing back the three items to finally free him entered her mind while she passed into Persia. Among the colorful stalls, she spotted a sealmaker working at a wooden table, surrounded by intricate seals crafted from stone and clay.

“May I trade something for one of your beautiful seals?”

she asked eagerly.

The sealmaker looked up with a kind smile.

“What do you have to offer, young traveler?”

Once again, Xunqiu found her unique form of payment...

“I have stories of my travels from Chang’an to here.”

The sealmaker listened to her intently, nodding appreciatively. As Xunqiu finished her story, he smiled warmly.

“There was one here before, and quite similar to you, he had a natural gift too. I’ll gladly trade you this seal, adorned with a dragon design, for your captivating tales.”

Delighted, Xunqiu accepted the seal, feeling its cool weight in her hand.

With all three items in hand, Xunqiu journeyed once more, this time returning to the east.

When she arrived at the outskirts of her hometown once more, night had fallen. As if hearing the footfalls of her return, the spirit rushed to greet her. Unfolding her bindle, she showed off the three items she had retrieved. Responding to the ghost’s beckons for her to tell him of her travels, she excitedly recounted her adventures to him, sharing tales of tall mountains, rising oceans, bustling markets, enchanting woods, vibrant cultures, each story glowing with the magic of the silk road. As Xunqiu shared her stories, the spirit began to glow softly, the light paralleling the moon above. Recognition of who he once was washed through him, as he whispered his name...

“ZhangQian, I was the envoy of the Han, and I must make the silk road safe.”

Xunqiu’s heart raced,

“You remembered!”

She exclaimed.

“Yes, thanks to you, dear Xunqiu.”

he replied, his voice warm

“I may finally move on now, now that the road is safe.”

With a gentle smile, he began to shimmer, his form becoming translucent, as if blowing away in the wind, leaving as quietly as he came.

As a gentle wind swept through the marketplace, ZhangQian faded into the breeze, carrying her story with him, never to be seen or heard again. Xunqiu stood in awe, as a smile of relief and happiness plastered itself over her face.

Back home, she took off her sandals and unpacked her bindle, slipping under her warm blanket and under the roof that she called home, where all the stories originated.

“And she grew up to live happily ever after, and had a very nice granddaughter too,” said Grandma, stroking Xiaohai’s hair. Grandma’s voice carried the warmth of countless tales, and as she glanced at the jade hairstick shaped like a soaring dragon; one she had worn since her adventures as a younger Xunqiu; memories flooded back. Laying her granddaughter down gently, she whispered a quiet goodnight, the candlelight illuminating her silvery hair tied in a loose bun, just as it had been in her youth. Zhang Xunqiu would never tire of telling that story, and neither would she.

My Last Whisper, Spun in a Thread of Silk

Po Leung Kuk Choi Kai Yau School, Yip, Averie – 14

The phrase “一生一世,” which corresponds to “a lifetime and beyond,” is embodied in the numbers 1314 — and so this story below unfolds in exactly 1314 words — *a testament to an enduring love amidst language, time and distance.*

Perpendicular lines meet but once — *a fleeting spark, a single touch.* Parallel lines stretch endlessly apart — *never to meet, nor to touch.* So tell me, which wounds the heart less? *The ever-lasting yearning for a touch once known, or the hollow ache of a distant star that will never shine?*

“*The Silk Road*” — an ancient artery of connection pulsing beneath the weight of history — “*is now gone.*”

As I tread my weary steps, each one presses deep into the ancient imprint of millenniums long bled. Centuries marked by sweat and tears, every grain of dust bearing a memory carved not solely for survival, but for a future — *humanity’s future.* The scent of silk and spices cling to my skin, a residue from prolonged days carried beneath the sun and the indifferent moon. Every thread, every speck of sand, whispers stories older than memory itself, along tales that entwine with the pulsing ache inside me — *the ache born of your absence.*

You linger in the spaces that history forgot. You linger in the quiet murmurs of markets now hushed. You linger in the dust clouds that rise where caravans once roamed. You linger in the empty echoes between deserted bazaars.

And though miles and years attempt to sever our bond, your presence still loiters within me. A constant soreness beneath my skin. A force, unseen, that stalls through my every breath and my every step.

There were no words, nor common tongue. No language that could bridge our divide.

Yet still I remember the searing sun that branded our backs, along the mountains that stood high around us. The wind — *sharp* — whispered secrets neither tongue could voice, yet sung a silent song both hearts heard and understood. Still I hear our dreams and hopes that remain through sand and sky. For as we stood in that vast quietude, a spark ignited — a glow so raw and fueled of moments we stole between smiles and laughter as delicate as porcelain. Still I see our two shadows tracing the same path beneath the sun — *two shadows a tapestry fragile but fierce.*

At last, this road that aligned our paths was the very force that pulled us apart. A trail relentless as river’s course, carving channels we knew we could not cross. Your steps turned to the west, mine to the east. And though our eyes locked one last time, the years slipped through our grasp like water carried by the tides. Our cargoes were as heavy as the silence left amid our wake, leaving a strangling void filled with promises we never vocalised and deluded dreams swallowed by passing nights.

Now as I stare into the nothingness, decades have spilled between us like the endless desert we travelled through. The Silk Road itself, once the lifeblood of our empires has breathed its last, folded into a mere flashback beneath the hand of time’s sweep. Once spirited markets now lie in silence. Once endless caravans no longer drum their restless march.

I stand under the silver teared moon, its gaze sinking into my bones just to touch the crater etched by your absence. I raise my eyes to the same constellations tracing your night — *hungry for some mercy, some slender chance that you too lift your gaze and rest your longing into the canvas* — leaving a yearning aloft with its pale light.

Don’t you feel the —

“Don’t you feel the relentless anguish tethered by weathers, by seasons, by the love that dared not form its shape with words but grows instead within the void between us?”

No voice can traverse this expanse, no lines can bridge the silence between us. Solely a hope on the eye of the moon, or a plea to the witness of countless stars in hopes to cradle the story we carry. A story — our story — unspoken, unseen, but never gone. Yet, some journeys end not in reunion but in the torment of a moonlit farewell, leaving an echo of all that was, and all that will never be.

A whisper of your name escapes my lips, or perhaps a glimpse of hope hidden within the dust rising under the indifferent moon. *May my words find their way to you, carried on the currents beyond the deserts and mountains, or travel between the stars tracing the heavens above.* And as I beseech the moon, I hold you close within the echo of your footsteps that will never again align with mine — a *haunting* cadence that defies time and distance.

The reminiscence of how our stars once collided. The echoes of the clatter of hooves against voices in the chorus of trade. How those fleeting moments shimmered with a glance that lingered longer than propriety allowed, and the brush of our hands that sent a riot swirling beneath the surface of our hearts. A sanctuary and a torment, a carving from the same sands now bare. *Just a vast desert of everything left unsaid and untouched.*

“How many hours have I lain awake? How many nights have I been tracing constellations only to feel a flicker of your ghost beside me?”

Even the night whimpers with uncertainty as the moon’s hands press deep, and as the stars blink like distant flames, a spark shines against the infinite emptiness.

My heart screams in its silent agony, a cry caught in the hush. I yearn to call out your name, to yell louder than the winds, to pierce the veil of time and distance, but such calls are swallowed by the emptiness that lies between us, abandoning me with nothing but the sting of knowing you are there, *somewhere beneath this very sky*, yet unreachable. I look to the way dust dances in silvery light, the bloom of desert flowers defying its oblivion, the timeless rhythm of stars glowing overhead. But each moment gnaws at my ribs and bones, for I plead to witness this sight with you. *I plead for the future we could have woven together, for the warmth of your breath, for the weight of your hand in mine.*

“Do you, in the moments beneath your own night sky, trace my name with your eyes?”
I hope that these threads of love we once spun have not been entirely severed by time’s hand.

Trapped in pining, I send my love adrift upon the cushions of the clouds, in hopes it may leap the gulfs carved by our unstated words and find sanctuary within your heart. And I pray you cherish it as the finest silk once carried on the winds of the trade we shared.

This road we shared no longer exists beneath my feet, but it lives on in the spaces between moon and stars. A story etched not in the grand events of history but in the throb of a recollection — the pounding of footsteps long departed yet never forgotten. A bond that transcends all bounds of speech, that defies the stretches of distance and the march of time. A fire kindled beyond the reach of words — a burning flame amidst the snow.

A love, a burden and a blessing, a paradox woven into the very fabric of my existence. To love is the greatest gift I could be granted — a privilege that refuses to fade yet is unable to thrive. To love is a *burden* — for it imposes a longing that stretches beyond all limits, but to love is a *blessing* — for it engraves memory, inscribing itself upon the heart.

To love is to leave an indelible mark.
So tell me, was the privilege of crossing your path once
a curse or a blessing?
A wound that never heals,
or a remedy that mends?

At last I ask, “Do you feel this suffocating ache, or have you long buried me in the forgotten dust of your past? Please, I beg you for any glimpse or any whisper, just — please answer me.”

The Silk Road Saga

Po Leung Kuk No. 1 W.H. Cheung College, Ho, Ho Tung – 14

In 700 AD, on the busy streets of Chang'an, a young merchant named Li Wei got ready for his journey along the Silk Road. He had spent years learning his trade and mastering negotiation from his father, who had once traveled this ancient route. Now, the lure of wealth, adventure and the unknown called to him.

Li Wei's shop brimmed with exotic silks, vibrant dyes and detailed ceramics. The scent of spices filled the air, enticing the passersby. In those days, Chang'an was more than just a city. It was a lively crossroads of culture, stories and dreams. Traders from far-off lands roamed its markets, offering goods from Persia, India and many other places.

As he packed his goods—silk bolts wrapped tightly, fragrant spices sealed in clay jars—Li Wei felt a mix of excitement and nervousness. His lifelong dream was about to begin, but he had no idea that fate had its own plans.

Li Wei set out at dawn, welcomed by the golden light of the sunrise spilling over the horizon. The caravan, made up of merchants from various provinces, departed with the sound of hooves on the earth. Among them was a fierce warrior from the Xiongnu tribes named Kira, known for her bravery. As they traveled westward, the mountains loomed ahead and the path was narrow and dangerous.

One evening, while the group camped under the stars, Kira approached Li Wei, interested in the silks he carried.

"Fine wares for such a dangerous journey," she noted, her voice steady like the wind through the trees.

"They are not just fabrics. They hold the stories of my people and the dreams of my heart," he replied, surprising even himself with his boldness.

Kira smiled, a rare softness breaking through her fierce exterior. "The road is not just a way for trade. It is a story waiting to be written, a bond waiting to be formed."

Days turned into weeks as they moved through dry deserts, where the sun scorched the earth and nights were as cold as forgotten spirits. Thirst plagued them and exhaustion weighed heavily on their shoulders. Yet, in the midst of the struggles, an unspoken connection grew between Li Wei and Kira.

One night, gathered around a flickering fire, Kira talked about her homeland—vast plains where freedom thrived and battles were fought under the watchful eyes of ancestors.

"And what about your dreams, Li Wei? What does the road offer you?" Kira asked, looking into his eyes.

"To bring honor to my family," he answered, his eyes shining with passion. "To connect us to new lands and bring wealth to our people."

"But wealth isn't only found in possessions," Kira replied, her gaze turning to the stars. "It lives in the stories we gather, the friendships we make."

As the flames danced, a new understanding developed between them, deeper than trade and commerce.

After months of travel, the caravan finally arrived in Samarkand, a jewel shining under the expansive desert skies. The city's beauty, with its bright mosaics and towering minarets, captivated Li Wei. Here, the streets buzzed with the energy of countless cultures—merchants haggled in many languages, while musicians played melodies that filled the alleys.

In a lively marketplace, Li Wei set up his stall, displaying the silks he had carefully prepared. His heart raced as he noticed buyers approaching, their eyes lighting up with excitement.

But amid the sales, urgent whispers reached him—rumors of a gang of robbers attacking caravans along the Silk Road. As anxiety crept in, Li Wei sought Kira's advice. Together, they devised a plan, gathering fellow merchants to protect against the impending threat.

One fateful night, with a crescent moon shining overhead, the robbers struck. Chaos erupted as metal clashed against metal while the merchants defended themselves, their lives at stake. In that moment, Li Wei found himself alongside Kira, her sword flashing in the dim light.

"Stay close!" she shouted as she parried an attack, her movements fluid and fierce.

Together, they fought through the turmoil, their destinies entwined in a backdrop of urgency and determination. The night felt endless, but their resilience held them firm. With a final push, they drove the robbers away, the faint echoes of victory merging with the dawn.

With the battle behind them, Samarkand thrived once more. Li Wei's silks became legendary, stories of his bravery spreading among traders and nobles. But as prosperity flourished, a longing within him flourished too.

One quiet evening, as they looked out over the bustling market from a rooftop, Li Wei turned to Kira. "The Silk Road connects us, but where does it take us from here?"

Kira smiled gently. "To new adventures, and perhaps new dreams. The road is endless for those brave enough to travel it."

Fate had joined their paths and they knew their journey was far from finished.

As years went by, Li Wei achieved what he had always wanted—a thriving trade network stretching across continents. Yet, the most valuable treasure he had discovered was beyond wealth. The Silk Road had given him the strength of unity, courage in tough times and a shared destiny.

One day, as he got ready for another journey, Kira joined him. Her spirit remained unbroken, and together they created trade alliances reaching into Persia, India, and beyond, weaving stories of cooperation and respect.

"Let's carve new paths," she encouraged, her eyes full of the promise of adventure.

With a nod, Li Wei realized they were not just traders; they were storytellers, guardians of the Silk Road's legacy, set to create chapters of hope and connection.

By 1500, the Silk Road thrived, serving not just as a channel for goods but as a link between cultures. The partnership of Li Wei and Kira became legendary, representing strength in working together.

Their children inherited not only the spirit of trade but also the deep belief that exploration was limitless. It crossed borders and embraced cultures, weaving the fabric of humanity.

As generations passed, the stories of Li Wei and Kira, the merchants who endured hardships and built a legacy along the Silk Road, resonated through the ages. They transformed a simple journey into a saga of connection—a testament to how dreams woven together through shared goals can light even the darkest paths.

And so, the Silk Road continued to thrive in the hearts of those who dared to embark on its path, carrying with them not just goods but a wealth of stories, friendships, and hope—a legacy as rich as the silks it once bore.

In a world where trade routes changed and empires rose and fell, the stories of the Silk Road lived on. The legacy of Li Wei and Kira was not just about their success; it was also about the bonds created across distances, showing that even in tough times, the spirit of humanity could prevail.

As the winds whispered through the valleys and the roads stretched far into the horizon, the journey continued—one filled with bravery, dreams, and the endless quest for connection across cultures. After all, the Silk Road was never just a path. It was the lifeline of stories waiting to be shared.

New Tales of China's Silk Road

Pui Ching Middle School, Fok, Ho Yee Kalie – 13

Twelve years, five months, and twenty-four days.

Every step crunched into the sand, following the path only visible, because of the many creatures that had walked before her own. She clutched the bridle of the sleek white steed, her head absently nodding to each movement, each closer and closer to her destination: Home.

The Silk Road is rather merciless to lone travellers, given how the strong winds forced specks of sand into Mulan's eyes. The blinding pain should've caused her to blink, should've caused her eyes to water, but there hasn't been any sight of natural liquid for the past two days. She'd made a note to ration her last bits of water for the faithful horse, though the thought of slaughtering it for a chance at drinking its blood still came across her mind every now and then. Another gust of wind blew through her bones, hot and piercing. It didn't help that the choppy haircut she'd ordained for the past decade had dust stuck to the ends of it, and that she had to shake her head like a feral dog so she wouldn't have a crown of dirt in turn. It most certainly didn't help, in fact, how breathing felt like someone was grating a slab of tree bark against her nostrils, despite the meek cloth the Emperor had gifted her, tied behind her ears and covering her mouth. A particular bird was adamant to follow her, one red like a fiery ember, with tailfeathers that shone brighter than any gold she could ask for. It cried its melodic cry, a sound she could never get tired of, and a warmth spread over her body. Not like the heat that burned into her flesh, it always seemed to come from inside her, in a way that made her feel as if she could conquer anything. She sat up straighter after that, a small 'thank you' for the energy boost, kicking her horse's side and even laughing as it raced against the sand.

One step, two step...three step...four...

She was kneeling in front of the Emperor, head bowed down. His expression wasn't easy to make out—she'd assumed it was something emperors trained for, to act like they knew something others didn't. His stroking of the beard added to the tension, his voice thick, thick with everything he's witnessed in the countless wars he'd fought in, thick with an emotion that seemed so distinguished in a way: bits of curiosity, bits of astonishment, bits of admiration, rolled into a fine cord that came out of his mouth. He asked her for her real name, because it certainly wasn't Ping, the one she used to enter the army. She answered Fa Mulan. He stroked his beard, for a bit more time than the last. He whispered and whispered, certainly not to her, and offered her a job at the palace, a job as a high-esteemed general. A beat. She declined.

More whispers echoed through the halls, shocked because who would dare decline the Emperor himself? Mulan tilted her head up for the first time since entering the throne room, locking on the beady eyes that had seen so much, and yet not enough to see her reasoning. She opened her mouth, and spoke. Spoke of how she took her sick father's place in the army, because he bore no sons. Spoke of how she killed—oh, how many she killed—because she'd let the world burn if it meant going home. Lastly, she spoke of how she missed the warm embrace of her parents, and that with her father's old age, she hasn't any knowledge of whether he's even alive after a decade of waiting.

The Emperor looked at her, his black eyes meeting hers with a look that could only belong to a father. He didn't say much, not anymore, but instead ordered her the best horse China could offer, and all the equipment she needed to make the journey back home through the Silk Road. He did not, however, anticipate the dangers the Road itself held, as most emperors who had everything at arm's reach do.

One step...two step...three...

She was back in the present again, begrudgingly so. The scarlet bird had made itself comfortable on her shoulder, and she'd hate to admit enjoying the tiny weight. The three of them had already passed a sand pile...and another...and another....so far, the only other sign of life was the cacti that appeared every now and

then. The white horse had slowed down to a steady trot, and Mulan wouldn't exactly blame him, not with the burst of adrenaline leaving her as quickly as it came. The sun overhead was dipping down, quicker than most would like him to, so if they could just find some place that's stable enough to hold their makeshift tent for the night, then she'll want to kiss one of those spiky green plants as a celebration. Every bit of saliva in her mouth had dried up, leaving her no choice but to drink from her last ceramic vessel, and later give some to the horse as well. He deserved it, didn't he?

But when she lifted the container again once his turn was done, it was empty, left with a few droplets' worth. She couldn't blame him, not at all, not when she was the one who forced him to go for three days on end. No, it was her own fault, and now they'll die of thirst in the middle of a desert. Perhaps whatever divine deity above can spare her some mercy and give her a good afterlife...

She flipped the vessel upside down above her face, narrowing her eyes to check, only to be met with a full jug pouring water onto her. She spluttered and spat, coughing up the liquid she could've choked on if she wasn't fast enough to react. Her hair was drenched, her clothes sodden, and she would've been gasping for air if it weren't the bits of sand that'll stick to her mouth. Something cawed behind her, then the scarlet bird tilted its head towards the soaked girl, with chirps so innocent she couldn't possibly stay mad. She paused, taking a good look at the bird. Then she burst out laughing, hitching the now-full vessel back onto the horse as she kept her gaze on the creature before her: A phoenix, and a mighty beautiful one at that, deciding to grace her with its presence. A blessing some could only dream of being bestowed upon, more so having their vessel contained at the phoenix's will.

One step...two step...

The journey home continued, with Mulan in a better mood than before. Her horse had noticed too, from the looks of him quickening the rhythm of his hooves. There was a certain lightness to knowing a phoenix was by their side, as that would mean the majestic bird would make sure they'd make it to their destination. The vessel never showed any sign of running out, and neither did Mulan's energy regardless of the past few days of treacherous hikes up and down. She was being led back down a certain hill, and took the moment to check the road up ahead. Was that...smoke she caught sight of?

It couldn't be, could it? It must've been a trick of the light, or just another oasis (they'd passed by two in three days alone), most definitely not...?

Another stream of smoke floated up not far from the previous one, and before she knew it, Mulan dismounted the faithful horse. She ignored how the sand reached her ankles, how she should've ridden her horse a few more meters further. No, the sand had started to give way to cobblestone now. It was a village, *her* village, and she was finally going home after twelve years, six months, and four days.

She took off and left the Silk Road behind.

One...last...step....

A Quest

Pui Ching Middle School, Ku, Lap Yin Vincent – 13

At midnight, the TV screen cracked, made weird noises, and glitched...

'WHO IS IT!?' Ava shouted and grabbed a baseball bat, then tiptoed out of her room into the pitch-black living room, lit only by the purple glow of the TV.

'What... is this!?' Ava murmured as she slowly touched the screen.

BANG!

Ava was standing on a vast plain covered with rocks, dirt, and moss, surrounded by mountains and sand.

'A portal!? Where am I?' she trembled.

'How do I get back?' Her head pounded with tension, she realized she had to find a way to get back home...

Ava paced up and down as she suddenly glimpsed smoke rising in the distance; knots formed in her stomach, and a chorus of "what ifs" buzzed in her head, drowning out her own thoughts. But at last, she still decided to follow it.

Ava rushed between stands of trees and up onto dunes in search of people. She finally arrived in a village that has a tall yellow pagoda in it, all the villagers shot Ava odd looks, EXCEPT for one old lady who was taking water from a well.

'When you collect the Treasure of the South, Silk of the West, Potion of the North, Sunlight of the East. You could create a powerful portal and go wherever you want. The old lady uttered Ava warmly and also gave her a map. Ava smiled and took a deep breath to calm herself, she set out into the boundless desert in search of the sunlight of the east.

Ava slowly unfolded the piece of wrinkled map; the ink was faded, but it was enough for her to follow. As Ava hurried through the forest, the golden sun stretched orange and purple across the sky as it dipped below the horizon. Ava was standing on a soil path, and the air was filled with the aroma of wildflowers in bloom.

Ava inhaled deeply, the valley stretched out in front of her. Ava's eyes glistened as she moved forward and beamed broadly. The sunlight shone on her freckles, the gentle warmth was soothing.

Hmm...How do I 'take' the sunlight?" Ava murmured as she scanned the map. Suddenly, the sunlight started to absorb into the piece of paper, and the cracks turned golden.

"Next stop, Potion of the North," she mused, glancing at the map as she kept repeating, "Where's north?" until the words "The Silver Pond" caught her eye.

"That must be it!" she exclaimed excitedly as she headed north. Ava grasped the map tighter and quickened her pace. She followed the map's directions, and behind a bush, she found the 'Silver Pond.' She cupped her hand to scoop up some water. A sudden ripple disturbed the silent surface.

Before Ava could react, a figure emerged from the depths— it was a human shaped creature with a shimmering body.

Ava gasped.

'I weave through mountains, deserts, and sands,

Connecting cultures with open hands.

From the East, I bring treasures so bright,
While the West shares its wonders, a beautiful sight.
Where trade and tales meet every day.
'What am I?' chanted the spirit.

Ava frowned and narrowed her eyes as she replayed the riddle in her mind.
She widened her eyes and shouted, 'The silk road!'

'Here's the potion you're wishing for...' hissed the spirit as it sank into the pond. Ava poured the potion onto the map, and it glowed neon green.

'Alright, two more to go. I guess I'll collect the Silk of the West first.'

Ava glanced at the map.

'It seems like the silk is in a cave near the ocean.' The cave was marked with a drawing of a waterfall, and there was a note below it: "Beware."

Determined, she set off toward the coast, the salty air filling her lungs as she navigated through the forest. The path twisted and turned, each step bringing the sound of the ocean closer. As she neared the shoreline, the trees began to thin, and the vibrant blue of the sea came into view. Ava paused for a moment, taking in the breathtaking sight before her. The sun glinted off the waves; she could hear the rhythmic crash of the surf against the rocks, which drowned out her worries.

Ava scanned the shoreline, her eyes darting from the foamy waves to the rocky cliffs that bordered the beach. The cave had to be nearby, but it was well hidden among the jagged rocks. Taking a deep breath, she decided to explore the base of the cliffs.

Ava sprinted around the waterfall, but she noticed something strange about it—behind the waterfall was not a rocky wall—it seems see through. She inhaled deeply before jumping into the mist, the cool spray enveloping her like a cool hug. She staggered through the water curtain.

As Ava emerged from the waterfall, she found herself in a hidden cave. The air was thin with an extraordinary scent.

'Hello? Anyone here?' Ava shouted as her voice echoed in the cave. She walked deeper and deeper into the cave.

A tan old man with a turban and a cloak staggered out. He had sharp cheekbones and piercing eyes that saw through you.

His eyes narrowed, and his lips pressed into a thin line.

'What are you doing here, young lady?' A chill ran down Ava's spine as each word sliced through the air.

'Um.. I'm here for the Silk of the West.' Ava murmured.

'Well, if you pass my test. I'll give you 10 minutes to find the Silk of the West, starting now,' he commanded in a cool tone. Ava scanned the cave for any traces of the silk, but she had no clues.

'What should I do?' panicked Ava. Suddenly, she spotted a narrow path hidden by a couple of rocks.

'It must be in there!' she told herself as she cleared the rocks. Ava followed the trail, her heart pounding as the man counted 2 minutes down. Ava rushed deeper and deeper into the path, and finally, she came to a dead end.

'There...s no hope. ' Ava sighed as she felt something soft beneath her... but it was rougher than silk, something like cotton.

'Oh no, I only have 30 seconds....' Ava dug the soil desperately. She was running out of time, and was out of ideas... when suddenly she had a thought.

'Wait, in the West, they didn't have silk. Maybe this material is it?'

'3!2!1! 'The man shouted while Ava came dashing out of the cave.

'Here...here's the 'Silk' of the West,' Ava panted.

'Wow,' the man murmured in disbelief.

Ava handed out the map and the linen. Then the man dropped them on the floor, without a second, they swirled into the paper of the map, adding delicate white spirals around the border...

'Last but not least, the Treasure of the East' Ava exclaimed .

'So, according to the map, it should be in... a desert,' she sighed as she set off . The ground slowly turned from vivid green into plain tan and sandy beige as Ava dragged with heavy footsteps out of the wet, dim forest into the dry and boundless desert.

Like sand through an hourglass, time slipped away. It turned dawn when Ava arrived in an abandoned village. There were lots of shabby cottages, some of them looked as if they were about to collapse. Ava's legs were about to snap, so she picked a cottage that looked the most solid to rest in. Ava's teeth shivered. She found some matches on the icy floor and lit the fire beside her.

'That's better,' Ava sighed, she loosened her brown hair as she stared into the fire. It was shimmering magically as if it was gold and diamonds...

The fire was blurring at its edges. Ava's eyelids drooped as she dozed off, but what she didn't realize was the map was close to the fire. A bit too close...

'BOOM!' a loud bang woke up Ava.

"Who?"Ava shouted, she widened her eyelids and there was something circular with a turquoise blue colour with magical purple swirls in it.

Ava touched it as she gasped – it was the portal she was looking for.

Ava stepped into the blue,purple and green swirls; she was in a village that had a tall pagoda in it.

Ava was taking water from a well and she saw her reflection—she had wrinkles and grey hair!

'How do I get back?!' while a young girl approached her.

' *When you collect the Treasure of the South, Silk of the West, Potion of the North, Sunlight of the East. You could create a powerful portal and go wherever you want*' Ava told her. The young girl smiled and set off. She looked strangely familiar. She had freckles and straight brown hair...

The Story About Artemis's Adventure

Pui Ching Middle School (Macau), Fong, Wan Yu Hayley – 13

In a quiet village there was once a small but happy family, a determined daughter, Artemis and strong hearted mother with a humorous father, then her and her mother had an argument and the next day her mother went for work, but then that night she overheard her father talking about her mother passed away, but her father refused to tell her about it and the funny man became silent and gloomy only working very hard to keep a roof on their heads until one day, her father was promoted to top guard and was granted the mission to be on the silk Road journey.

When Artemis heard about the news, she asked “dad, can I go with you? I’m already 18 years old.”

“Artemis, we have talked about this before, you know it is dangerous outside!” he said.

“But you saw me train, dad please I swear I won’t be trouble to you, ”

“No, I won’t let you go, I promised your mom to keep you safe here,” he replied.

Her face went red and shouted “Just stop already! *I’m not a kid anymore!* And stop bringing mom into this.” he didn’t say anything and just slammed the door on his way out, but an idea went to her mind. The next day she went under the small boxes in the carts when they were about to set off.

Although her father knew he kept quiet because he didn't want to alarm the other guards sensing that she was hungry he snuck in a few fruits and nuts to her. She thought “*Did he just give me snacks? How did he know? you know what—*”, then she noticed that they were passing through so many beautiful sceneries that her quiet village never had. Animals running around and nature glistening in front of her eyes, but suddenly some raiders came and tried to sabotage their carriage. Her father shouted “Raiders!! Quick hold your positions!” Luckily the other guards managed to hold them off but they didn’t know that there was another hidden enemy behind their carts, again the enemy stabbed one of the leaders and almost killed everyone but her father swooped in and saved them. Her father seeing everyone injured and some of the goods damaged he decided to stop.

Artemis then came out of the hiding spot and helped the other wounded guards. She asked concernly “Dad please let me help you there are barely any guards to defend, you know I can! Protect the people? Isn’t that what you *want?*” He said sternly “Kid, I already told you many times that you shouldn’t come here and don’t even try to argue with me this time when we get back home you’re not allowed to train *anymore!*” Then he walked off to help others, she rolled her eyes and continued to wrap up the goods. After they fix up everything they decided to continue their journey at sunrise, since these were the emperors goods they had to be extra cautious making sure no one tries to steal them again, Artemis knowing that the carts and carriages were too fragile, she built a few inventions to help it to be secure but then her dad found out and said “Artemis! What are you doing to the emperor’s cart?!” Without looking at him she said “I am just fixing a few minor issues with the cart, you see—” “Stop, we are in the middle of nowhere I don’t need you to *play* around with your so-called inventions anymore just go to bed.” She said “but dad I—” “NOW!” She was so fed up with him and stormed off the camp. “Ugh, why is he always on my nerves? Whatever I mean he is my father he is just trying to look out for me.” She said. After a while, she came back and noticed that the camp was being ambushed she tried to tell her dad but he was already stabbed in the stomach and then she broke down completely

She grabbed her bow and fight off almost all the ambushers and after that she made sure her father was okay, luckily there was an emergency kit near him and quickly wrapped him up but if he didn’t get urgent care, he might die so without a choice the people decided to set off again, in this state everyone was tired and hurt. Only Artemis was alert and ready at all times. With her small inventions, she managed to create light and also a faster wheel to go quicker to their destination when some wild animals came to raid, she scared them off and

when she saw fallen people, she would carry them, and finally after all her hard work they finally had reached to their destination the Silk Road.

People were already waiting for them, and when she carried the goods to them, surprisingly all the artifacts and things in the carriage were not damaged. All thanks to Artemis's inventions to keep them intact everyone celebrated and congratulated Artemis for being such a strong and independent woman. Her father was very proud of her and then he pulled her into a room and finally told her the truth saying "look your was mom a guard....she passed away because of a mission...she was a strong but also stubborn like you and didn't listen to her teammates about the danger ahead and unfortunately she died while trying to protect a kid nearby, when I learnt about her passing I decided to take her role and continuing her dream which is protecting the people." Artemis was shocked and devastated about the news her father just said and for the first time she cried in his arms knowing that her mother had died saving a person but didn't get to say bye to her in the end and even argue with her, then she said sobbing "I'm so sorry mom.. please forgive me and—" feeling her throat was closing up and snot dripping down no stop, but no matter what she said it still couldn't change the past. In the end she writes a letter and places it in a box to keep it safe.

Now Artemis became also one of the top guards and became the leader although knowing that this was a dangerous job to take she still wanted to honour her mother after this, her and her father's relationship have grown much closer.

At last he said, "Artemis I'm so proud of you but please try not to sneak into the cart next time?"

She laughed saying "of course *you* would say that."

Map to Rome

Pui Ching Middle School (Macau), Jiang, Chi Kei – 14

Mihir woke up before the sun, like he always does. He came down the stairs to his family's inn's common room and stood as the silence wrapped around him in an uncomfortable manner. He decided to break the silence with creaks he made stepping around the floor, a couple were enough to crack a relieved smile so his angry frowns could take a break. He boiled some water to make red bean porridge and prepared the inn for the day to come despite it being closed.

As he worked, he allowed his eyes to wander aimlessly in the dark for a while, where it glared angrily at a small candlelight before resting itself upon where small parts of the sun crept in onto a map of a journey to a far-off land and broke the shadow enveloping the room's innards, and he allowed his mind to take time and breathe in the news that came riding a high horse yesterday and conversations he had with customers.

'I reckon your father is dead!' He recalled a voice telling him, 'I on think it takes ten years to reach the end of the Road.'

Mihir punched the bar desk, but it made a bigger dent on his fist than on the old wood. "Ouch." he said blankly to no one in particular.

He noticed a couple of his father's collectables, hoarded from his merchant years, suffocating under dust on a hidden edge of the shelves behind the bar.

"Out with the old, in with the new." he said, and started to pick up his father's collection one by one, "It's about time to let him go." Words unfamiliar to his mouth came out by themselves, but his inner voice knew them like family. 'How?' was the question that willed his every movement as he was tidying, until a glint of gold from an old coin lunged and grabbed hold of his eye, causing him to pause and all that he was holding to rain on the floor.

"You good?" A soft voice questioned as it welcomed itself into the cold inn.

The muscles that control Mihir's voice reacted faster than his mind. "Oh, I'm absolutely fine! Please come in and take a break! Why, you must be exhausted from your journey!"

"Aren't you closed?" The voice chuckled a bit.

"Kalsang! Well, you're welcome anytime." He said to the regular, the family friend, while blushing blossom red, "Are you travelling?"

"No," Kalsang replied, "But my buddies are, and I thought they might stop by." He sat himself in front of the bar and in front of Mihir, who handed him a bowl of porridge. "Are *you* alright?" Before Mihir could answer, Kalsang caught a glint of candles and the urn sitting in front of the ancestral tablet behind Mihir.

"Oh," he said quietly, "How are you feeling?"

"Not as upset as I thought I'd be." Mihir admitted and picked up his father's old coin to show to Kalsang, recalling what his father had told him the last time he saw him.

"This coin has Ērakilo engraved into its form, do you know Ērakilo? He is a god from my homeland and evidence of the City of Quartz at the end of the Silk Road!"

"Or so he said." As Mihir added this, memories came flooding back.

'The city, they say, is but a fable by merchants to make an extra buck'

'Little Mihir, your pa will prove all those merchants wrong when he finds it!' His father insisted and opened a map.

"And he totally did." Mihir muttered too quietly to be heard by Kalsang.

"Well, he was an ambitious man to say the least, leading a caravan of men to find a tale." Kalsang commented, "That was a bit of his charm to be honest. He was a fun man to be around."

Mihir kept an angry silence. Attempting to switch the topic, Kalsang asked hesitantly, "So... how did you say goodbye?" To which Mihir shook his head, "They cremated him, Ma insists that's disrespectful, and—"

"No, no, no, not your mother, *you*."

"I don't know." The words came out of Mihir's mouth hollow, "I've been wondering that too."

Awkwardness wobbled chummily between the two of them as Kalsang attempted to come up with something to say, "Well, it's unprofessional of a host for me—"

"Let's go out for a breather, shall we? It's your day off after all." Kalsang interrupted and pointed to a location on a map. Mihir could find no reason to decline him, so he trailed along.

Salty air brushed repeatedly onto Mihir, like the sea would do to the wave-tormented shore, which was weird because there wasn't a desert nor source of saltwater nearby. They strayed slightly off-road, and as vines and other wildlife pedestrians walked by and along the edges of the small domesticated road, Mihir realized that he was being guided away from the cozy familiarity of his town. Yet, feeling slightly numbed, he marched onwards with blind faith.

The birds and the trees sang songs of lives long ago, and Mihir started to wonder if this place was perhaps home to another him.

Kalsang signalled Mihir to sit on the dry rocks resting by a small stream, marking an end to what Mihir could only describe as "the longest type of fast" he had ever experienced, and of his limited years into adulthood, he had never felt so free.

"Back home, they would say that all life comes from the earth." Kalsang said as he gently held on to a handful of water, only for it to slip slyly past his fingers, "And it will return to it as well." Likely thinking of food, fishes swam eagerly towards Kalsang. "No matter the form, it will return home."

"That's... really poetic."

"It's even more so when we do it with vultures."

The two went on with their conversation on death and goodbyes, and Mihir took the chance to tidy his feelings. "Kalsang! Mihir! A surprise to see you so far from the inn!"

The voice coming from one of the two travellers approaching them rudely interrupted the talk, and Mihir instantly recognized them as Advi and Ting, the voice being Advi's, who are close friends of Kalsang and his mother.

"How was the journey?" Kalsang asked.

"Utterly horrendous!" Advi nudged Ting, Ting ignored him. "I heard the news." Ting sat down beside Mihir. "I came with sacrifice and candles for him, authentic Chinese ones." Ting offered and was given a weak jab from Advi as a result, "Insensitive!" Advi whispered loudly, and that made Mihir giggle the slightest, "I suppose Ma would appreciate that."

"Say," he paused, "Advi, Kalsang had me interested; how would you do a funeral?"

“I mean...” Advi began, “Traditionally it’s boring, long, and full of rules, we do cleansing and end with a prayer, but,” he glanced over at Mihir, who gave him a slight, green nod, “but while travelling, I might have picked up some habits from some old buddies, now I do a mix of all personally, ashes in urn, a coin, a prayer.”

“You could mix?”

“Of course!” Advi replied, seemingly to have fully understood Mihir’s intentions, and reached and fiddled with his bag for a bit, “All cultures mingle and mix into this glop at some point, do what you want to do, be free! Life’s too short to be trapped in an inn, constantly working.” Mihir said nothing, so Advi patted Mihir’s soft hair and untied it to let it dance freely in the growingly fierce Spring wind, “Tell me, Mihir, what do you really want to accomplish with this farewell?” then offered him a closed map.

Mihir stayed quiet, deep in thought for a long time, long enough for his hair to pick up small pests and other passengers of the breeze. It was itchy at first, and he brushed it in an attempt to clear them off, but then, stopped.

“Thank you,” Mihir said as he held his palms forward and dipped his head. “I think I finally know what to do now.”

At last, when darkness and slumber returned to the world, Mihir took his bags and slipped a note under his mother’s mattress before muttering a guilty goodbye. He slowly walked further from the home he had never really left before, each step accompanied by silence, frost, and will. “Father never made it; you’ll be the first, the first Chinese to make it.” The moon whispered to him.

“You know, Father, for a father, you are really bad at fathering.” He spoke softly to the shadow following. “You didn’t raise me, and neither did you teach me all the important stuff, like how to say goodbyes and hold funerals.” Mihir grinned slightly, “So I’ll do it my way and collect all your fragments until I can recreate you.” he patted the urn in his bag and opened a map to Rome. “Next stop, the City of Quartz!”

Mapping the Silk Road

Pui Ching Middle School (Macau), Lei, Ian Io Cecilia – 12

I recently visited a city with a long and fascinating history, a place famous because of a special road. Fifteen hundred years ago, Xi'an was the well-known capital of the Tang dynasty, and this was mainly due to the world-famous Silk Road.

During China's golden age, Chinese artisans invented masterpieces from porcelain to clocks. It goes without saying that trade became one of the most money-making jobs at that time, lives became easier, and markets were filled with all kinds of goods. Yet the emperor remained unsatisfied. One day, a quick thought slipped across his mind: What if I send an envoy abroad? And that thought would give birth to the world-famous Silk Road.

The chosen envoy was Lei Wei, a scholar whose maps were famous not because of the large areas of white in his maps, but the words labelled in it 'The page is blank, but not for long.' People all said this was ignorance, but it was this phrase that caught the emperor's eye. With a brushstroke, he turned a person's so-called ignorance into a historic mission.

Standing before the Dragon Throne, Lei Wei was left withstanding the emperor's cold gaze along. 'A blank map is either ignorance or arrogance,' said the emperor. 'I think they both fit you very well, mind choosing one for yourself?' 'None,' replied Lei Wei, his voice unsteady. 'It is an unfinished masterpiece, waiting for the right moment to shine.' After a moment of silence, the emperor dismissed him with a cold command: 'Make your preparations.' The mission was his, but not the emperor's approval was, it was a warning in disguise.

Outside the palace gates stood a man, after walking closer, he saw General Wang, without giving Lei Wei time to think, he tossed a silk purse. Lei Wei stared at the purse in his palm; its weight feels like an insult to the weight of the task he's been given. The court told me to help fund your 'great journey', so be grateful with what you have and don't be a greedy brat,' hissed General Wang while tossing him a light purse that clinked with a disappointing noise. 'But General Wang, this amount of money isn't even enough to support myself financially for one week,' said the scholar. 'Oh, I forgot to mention, as for the rest, scholar, the emperor significantly reminded me to tell you that you must find among the dust and deals of Western Markets. To let us see if you really have the power to take over this mission,' said General Wang. For a second, he could feel his soul hesitate, frightened by the cruel logic of survival. Lei Wei saw schemes but besides, he also saw the first brushstroke slowly forming on his blank map, the starting point of his adventure. And to the general, this was a lesson in obedience. As for the emperor, perhaps a test of resourcefulness. And he decided to show exactly that.

Worried yet determined, Lei Wei walked to the Western Market. The air was filled with the smell of spices, leather and animal dung, ignoring the sound of the merchants haggling, he walked past the caravans he used to dream about and headed to a quiet stall tucked away in the corner, the stall's owner was a solitary Uighur trader, He saw himself in the trader's shadow. With his last coins, Lei Wei would not buy supplies, instead, he would buy a conversation.

As he considered, a new voice, fluent but with an accent, slowly spoke from the shadow of the wall, 'A scholar with a heart full of determination and an empty purse is indeed an interesting show to watch, but sadly, I doubt you will succeed with ... that poor amount,' said a Sogdian merchant who was leaning on pillar. Being a witness to the whole exchange. 'My people say: trust is the first coin spent on the Silk Road. You clearly have none. But your situation is quite interesting, to the state it manages to attract me. Let's make a deal.' 'Why should I trust you?' Lei Wei asked. The merchant smiled. 'You just proved my point. You lack the first coin. Trust me, you won't get the short end of the stick.' After moments of thinking, Lei Wei agreed. 'Deal,' 'Wonderful!' said the merchant. "But don't forget, this was never charity.'

Lei Wei's blank map was starting to fill, the ink was not layout, but a name and pact.

The deal was set, not by gold, but by knowledge and trust. The Sogdian, named Anwar offered a test: a scrapped map from Samarkand, its routes swallowed by the year and dust of time, like a ruthless machine eliminating the bad and keeping the best. Lei Wei decided to settle at Anwar's stall, watching the stars and the dark, using a candle to read the letter's descriptions. By dawn, he had redrawn the most likely path to be correct. Anwar provided him with two strong and healthy camels and a letter of introduction to a cousin in Dunhuang in return.

This was the first brushstroke on his blank map: a name, and a thread of trust from a doubting person.

In this small capital, Lei Wei invested not in army, instead he chose to invest in tools for effortless conquest. His tools were no ordinary tools used by the general public, but elites that claim to be tools for the Great Tang dynasty's future. The most famous 'tools' are a half-Uighur, half-Han interpreter named Kadir, with a hearing that can even hear a mouse squeak from millimeters away. Then, there's a former army horse-doctor named Arlo, a healer whose medical skills is one of the best in the country. They were all overlooked experts, bonded not by orders, but by the love for one's country.

They left the city on a misty morning, the mist clung onto the city walls, acting like a translucent barrier protecting the city. Lei Wei didn't look back at the imperial palace. His final gaze rested on the walking chaos of the Western Market, the true engine keeping the empire running. And so. The first mark on the blank map was not 'where', but 'who'. And that person was Anwar, of Samarkand.

Before them extended a road, like a road destiny opened for them, with nothing more than dust and the sound of the wind blowing. Arlo whispered what sounded like a prayer or a curse. Kadir, wordless as ever, gave Lei Wei a pat full of confidence, both giving a version of blessing for the road.

'What did he say back then?' asked Lei Wei while nodding to Arlo. Kadir smiled. 'He said, The path swallows memories and only leaves behind footprints.' Lei Wei nudged his camel forward. 'Then allow us to leave back more footprints for our descendants to see.'

With each step, a memory of the city faded, grain by grain, into the desert air. The landscape of the Tang dynasty changed, little by little, into the country we have today. This story is an overture and an invitation.

A Bowl Of Fragrant Tea: Kindness Across the Silk Road

Pui Ching Middle School (Macau), Leong, Ian Ut Cintia – 12

In the heart of Chang'an, the prosperous city in China, where camel caravans travelled busily along the roads, a boy named Chi Ming walked around the crowded market streets.

His two thin but strong arms grabbed a tray of fragrant, steaming tea bowls as he shouted in a pleasant voice, "Jasmine tea! Pu'er tea for thirsty travelers!"

Chi Ming was eleven years old, yet he did not get a chance to attend school. His family needed every coin he and his siblings could earn. Each morning, Chi Ming rose before dawn to help his parents brew tea to sell to travellers arriving along the great Silk Road. While boys from the neighbouring houses recited poetry loudly, Chi Ming listened eagerly to the fun stories of the foreign merchants – blond-haired and blue-eyed men who talked about vast seas and cities with colourful walls.

One day, as he was carrying his tray of tea, passing through the crowd near the Fortune Market, he saw a Chinese silk merchant arguing with the foreign travellers. "You are so impolite!" said the silk seller angrily, putting his wife's hand away from the blond-haired man, who was trying to shake his hands with the wife of the Chinese businessman to show friendliness.

"Sorry!" the foreigner apologised, who kept holding the shocking woman's hand.

The angry silk merchant walked away with his wife, shouting, "I won't trade with these foreign people. They don't know any courtesy. They shouldn't touch other women's hands."

The tallest traveller, Tom, who had blonde curly hair and green, round eyes, was the leader of the group, and noticed Chi Ming overhearing their conversation. He smiled kindly and attempted to greet Chi Ming, "Ni hao," he said, twisting his tongue.

Chi Ming bowed properly in return, showing his curiosity. "Ni hao! Where did you come from?"

"From a small city of the Roman Empires," the man replied. "We bring silver and grapes... want silk." he hesitated and tried speaking in Chinese.

Chi Ming's eyes widened. The Roman Empires, which was across the vast seas that his father once told him about. "Welcome to Chang'an. Jasmine tea and pu'er tea! Please try some!"

The traveller group drank the jasmine tea thirstily, putting a coin in Chi Ming's tiny hand.

"Thank you!" Chi Ming smiled and walked away, holding the coin happily in his hand.

One windy day, the little tea boy was selling tea in the market. Walking past a path, he saw a cottage that had been damaged by a fallen tree branch. The roof of the house was broken into small pieces. Chi Ming saw the group of travellers he had met days ago, who looked worried, standing in front of the damaged cottage, so Chi Ming asked, "What happened? Did you live in this cottage?"

"A tree damaged our rented cottage. Could you help us find a new shelter nearby?" asked Tom, whom Chi Ming had met before.

“I don’t think you’ll find a new shelter in a few days. Maybe you can come to my house for a few days if you don’t mind.”

“Oh, yes, please, thank you so much, Chi Ming!”

After hearing this, Chi Ming immediately invited them to his little hut and stayed with his family until the travellers could rent a new place.

Chi Ming found out that Tom wanted to trade some silver and grapes with the Chinese merchants for silk from Chang’an, but the Chinese merchants often ignored them because they didn’t speak Chinese fluently; their different customs also led to misunderstandings. The family members of Chi Ming were as kind as him, they not only took care of the travellers, but they also taught them to bow appropriately to Chinese people. The foreign men learnt that they shouldn’t hug strangers or shake hands with women as a greeting. Chi Ming also taught them some simple trading terms, such as “Strong horses for sale! Fresh and sweet grapes!” and “Could we be business partners?”.

The foreign merchants said, “We enjoy learning Chinese, and we appreciate your help, Chi Ming.”

During the two-week stay, Chi Ming and his family taught the travellers essential customs: how to hold chopsticks properly, how to share food at a round table, and how to engage in simple, polite conversations. Chi Ming also heard a lot of fun stories from the travellers’ adventures and some simple greetings in their language. The foreigners learned to greet merchants politely and share meals without awkwardness. They managed to share friendly conversations with the local merchants. It was a great experience for cultural exchange for both Chi Ming and the travellers.

To thank Chi Ming, the travellers gave him some gold coins. Chi Ming was overjoyed and took the gold coins. From then on, he rose early to go to school – his longtime dream – rather than brewing tea for the market.

New Tales of China's Silk Road

Pui Ching Middle School (Macau), Leong, Ka I Leanna – 13

Storm, thunder and lightning tore the sky, making it scary. The road of the silk traders was covered with car tracks; dust and sand swirled through the air. My robe was completely soaked by the rain, but my heart was full of faith. I might be the first to step on this road and complete it – the Silk Road that wound across the East. Everyone said I was walking an endless road that led to the darkness, but I believed hope lay ahead as long as I continued.

I found a weathered cave and went inside to avoid getting wetter from the rain. The cave was carved with Buddhist drawings, along with messages left by kind travellers who had prayed to the sky for a safe future.

I felt ambitious as I touched the jade bracelet on my wrist, feeling the warmth of my small but cosy family. It was a gift from my wife, given a week before I started my journey toward a seemingly hopeless goal that no one had achieved in the past centuries. When I closed my eyes, I could still remember the feeling of my daughter's hands – heartwarming and full of love – as she placed a pouch of oolong tea into my bag for the journey.

I was originally born in a noble family of silk and spice merchants in a small kingdom on the western edge of the Silk Road. But when I was seven, everything changed. My family was slaughtered by an enormous creature; no one knew what it was or even its name.

All I knew was it had jade-coloured scales and a pair of blazing, terrifying red eyes, like a dragon with sparkling wings that appeared only in ancient tales from the East. I heard a rumour that it could be found only at the far eastern end of the Silk Road. The elders always whispered that it lurked in a mysterious place beyond the Lop Nur wetlands, at the easternmost end of the route.

I could not forget the feeling on that day – the crushing grief and the fury that rose from the deepest part of my heart. Twenty years had passed. During that time, I learned languages from Persian traders and Chinese monks. I secretly mapped the route in my mind using the words of travellers from many nations. I knew clearly that this was a task I had to complete, one that lived in my heart for a long time. The time was finally right. I told myself, "It is time to go!"

New Tales of China's Silk Road

Pui Ching Middle School (Macau), U, Wai Ting Justin – 13

I'm Justin, 13. Grandpa gave me an old silk square with a camel on it said a trader in Hong Kong gave it to his dad.

Last night, I fell asleep looking at it. Suddenly, I was on a fast new Silk Road train! A boy named Karim from Uzbekistan sat next to me. He had dried figs and said his grandma weaves silk too. "We use trains now, not camels," he smiled. We saw windmills and new towns outside the window.

Then the train shook, and I woke up. The silk square was still in my hand. I wrote this story down. The new Silk Road is just like the old one, about making friends from far away.

An "Adventure" of the Silk Road

Pui Ching Middle School (Macau), Vong, Ieok Cheng Priscilla – 13

In a normal history class, the teacher said, "Class, the topic of your group project is the Silk Road, which we are discussing these days. Remember to complete the assignments well, and then present your group project in class. "One group, the group members were Olivia, Sam and Amelia. When Olivia heard this, she does not feel any confident because she didn't know very much about the Silk Road. So, she told her group members that they needed to go to the library after school that day, and find books about the Silk Road, otherwise it would be really difficult to complete that group project.

When they arrived at the library, they searched very carefully for books about the Silk Road. After that, everyone found a suitable book of the topic and they read them together. One of the group members, Sam said frustrated, "This group report is really difficult; there's a lot of information to read." Olivia comforted him, "Although it looks difficult, I believe that if we work together, we can do very well." Suddenly, when they were reading the information, a bright light shone down, and a strong wind blew through the library. Amelia said, "What is that light?" Olivia answered, "I do not know!" Then they went into a history book about the Silk Road.

Sam asked, "Where are we now? Here is not like the library that in our school." When Olivia saw they were in the desert, with some camels near her, she known that they were in somewhere in the Silk Road. This was some knowledge she read in the history books. Olivia said, "I think.....We are at the Silk Road!" Amelia said, "What? The Silk Road? But we were at the library just now, why we went here quickly?" Olivia answered, "Although I know we are at the Silk Road, I do not why we went here." Sam said, "I know! Was the light that shown on us brought us to here? Amelia said excited, "I just saw in the movie, I can't imagine that one day we can bring to another place by the light." Olivia said, "Wait, but the most important thing is how can we go back to the real world?"

Suddenly, a businessman next to them called Peter said sadly, "What should I do?" When Amelia heard that, she ran to Peter quickly, she is a kind and helpful person normally. Sam and Olivia after saw Amelia's actions, they followed her. Amelia asked, "Hello, is there anything we can do to help you?" Peter said, "When I was transporting silk or other things from the Silk Road to other places, I often troubled by language barriers. Sometimes I was lucky to be able to use body languages, but it usually fails. It is caused a lot of troubles. "Sam said, "Language barriers can be very confusing, and sometimes they can even lead to arguments and conflicts."

Amelia said, "We still have all our belongings with us when we came from the library, right?" Then Amelia took out her phone. Olivia said, "Yes, you want to teach them how to use the translation app on our phones?" Sam did not understand, "Amelia, are you going to leave your phone on the Silk Road? We'll still need our phones in the real world. "Olivia suddenly remembered something and took a book out of her bag: "I borrowed this from the library. It is the language that Peter does not know how to speak, and I know a little bit of that language. I think I can teach Peter some simple sentences." Sam said, "That's so lucky! If Olivia hadn't borrowed that book, she couldn't have been to teach Peter!"

A whole afternoon, Olivia taught Peter patiently the language that she known. Of course, Peter also studied very hard. Olivia took a few pages from her notebook and wrote down some key points for Peter. Sam and Amelia also worked hard with them. After that, Peter did very well in his studies, at least he known how to greet people and talk to them. Peter learned so quickly, was a good result that made by Olivia, Amelia and Sam together, of course included Peter himself. Peter was extremely thankful to them: "Here are some small presents, I am going to give you guys, to thanks for teaching me." Amelia took out her phone and said, "Why don't we take a picture together?" Sam agreed, "Sure! We are the first time visit the Silk Road, of course we should take pictures!"

Suddenly, a bright light shone down, and a strong wind blew through them. Olivia noticed, "That means we are going back to the real world, right?" The three of them woke up together, the things that happened just now liked a dream, but the time just one hour later. In one hour, there should not be happened so many things. Amelia asked, "Were we just too tired to sleep? And I had a special dream, at the Silk Road." Sam felt surprised, "What? Me too." Olivia said, "And I also. Why we dreamt the same things?" Amelia was checking her phone: "No... I think what we just went through must be real, look!" Then she showed a photo of herself and Peter on her phone." Sam agreed, "Yes, and the presents that Peter gave us." Olivia said, "It doesn't matter whether it's real or a dream, because it's a memory we experienced together. Even if it's a dream, we still experienced it."

The Journey Of Lin

Pui Ching Middle School (Macau), Zhou, Hin U David – 13

In the ancient times of China lived a man named Lin. He had a loving family, a beautiful wife and a young joyful daughter. Some people say that you can't have a happy life without living an extremely lavish lifestyle. But even though Lin and his family weren't wealthy, their lives were still filled with the sounds of pure laughter and the warmth of family love. Most days Lin would go out to the farm to earn money to support the family while his wife and daughter stayed at home. Every night he would come home to the sweetest welcome of his daughter and the smell of freshly cooked food by his wife. Their lives were simple, but it was wholesome and peaceful.

Of course, not all things come to a happy ending. Unfortunately, Lin's daughter had been infected by an unknown disease that is rapidly decreasing her health. Living in the countryside with no professional doctor nearby made the situation even worse. Lin couldn't bear seeing his daughter lying on a bed all day looking so pale and weak. Lin quickly thought of an idea, discussing it with his wife and making a plan instantly. Recently, words about the Silk Road have been passed around the world. Some claimed that anything you could possibly want could be obtained by trading with merchants on that very road. It sounded like an easy thing except it wasn't. That road reached foreign countries and cities that some humans have probably never even heard of. It was a risky journey with horrible bandits and wild animals. "Lin dear, please don't go, it's dangerous!" Lin's wife warned. "I can't stand watching our very own daughter being sick and pale anymore... I have to go," he replied with determination. He only had one goal while packing for the road, to get the medication that his daughter needs no matter what it takes him. In a very short time he was ready and prepared to take on the challenging challenge. He said his final goodbyes to his wife and daughter before leaving his home to embark on a long journey on the Silk Road.

He knew it was going to be hard and oh boy it was hard. He experienced every single weather condition that you can imagine from thunderstorms to extremely hot weather. He experienced food shortages or when he got injured but even with all those inconveniences, he continued on the journey searching for the medication his daughter needed. He made trade after trade and sold items after items. It was like it was an endless black hole of exchanging goods. There were even times where he wanted to quit and just go back home empty handed. But thinking of his sick daughter back home relying on him to get the medication that she needs, it got him through. On the journey, he made some pretty good friends. This guy named Jin gave him the directions and steps on how to get the medication that he needs. Some kind restaurants on the road offered Lin some food to eat since he looked so pale and skinny from walking. It really showed just how comforting human decency can be when they help each other. After all that work, he managed to get the very needed medication for his sick daughter. Now that he got his goal, it was going to be just as hard to get back home. While on the way, he met some kind merchants, took some time to enjoy the beautiful natural sights around him and even gained a small companion. A little cat that took interest in Lin and decided to follow him back home.

It seemed like life really could get better. But not all things come to a happy ending. Unfortunately, on his way back in the Taklamakan Desert, he encountered a large group of bandits. They chose Lin as their target since he was alone and he clearly had goods in his cart. He was quickly outnumbered with the overwhelming number of bandits surrounding him. The cat fled into the desert, not looking back once. He knew that if they took the goods in his cart, then he wouldn't be able to take the medicine back to his daughter. He made a bold decision and decided to fight back with all the strength he could. He tried his best defending himself and his goods. In the end, there was only so much one person could do against a group of bandits with weapons.

For him, everything blacked out. Until suddenly he slowly opened his eyes and found himself in an unusually hollow cloud paradise. He was sitting on soft clouds floating on the air with sunshine torn between. In

the middle of his confusion, a heavenly looking angel approached him. He was in charge of Lin's fate in the afterlife since he had unfortunately passed away. Lin couldn't accept the fact that he didn't succeed to save his daughter and pleaded to the angel to let him have one more chance. Of course that was against the rules and was strictly forbidden, but looking back at Lin's story and his sick daughter, the angel couldn't help but feel bad for him. After a lot of thinking, the final decision was made. Lin had two choices, one was either to go back to his home and stay by his daughter's side spending the most time with her before she passed away or give up his life to cure his daughter. If he chose the second option then he wouldn't be able to go home but his daughter would be ensured a healthy and bright future. Lin being the loving and courageous father he is, he chose the second option immediately. It just showed how much he loved his daughter and that he would even give up his own life to save her. The decision was confirmed and soon a dove shipped a letter to his wife and daughter.

The note read: " You might be wondering where I have been for the past few months and how our daughter's sickness suddenly cured. What I just want you to know is that I am safe somewhere watching above you two. I don't want you to think that I'm gone. I just want you to think that I am still beside you two every single day, just not physically. Make sure to take good care of our daughter. I love you both." Lin wrote that in the heavens before ascending. Lin's wife and daughter made a special grave for him, honouring his bravery and sacrifice. Passing down this story from generation to generation. It was clear that Lin made a huge impact with his love to his family and bravery in his heart.

Call of the Void

S.K.H. Lam Woo Memorial Secondary School, Chan, Chuen Hei Aiden – 13

2100. The Planetary War.

The old Silk Roads in China? Gone. Climate collapse had completely destroyed the routes—land routes buried under megastorms and maritime paths vanished due to the contaminated oceans. Thus, humanity had no choice but to head towards the only direction remaining: up. And so came the Orbital Silk Road: a never-ending system of automated stations and transport drones with bundles of raw materials and especially neural technology going in and out.

The Moon was eventually colonised by an abundance of nations with rapidly advancing technology, but they chose to shield this technology from the countries on Earth, seeking independence and exclusivity. Soon they became the frontline of the Planetary War. Tension was high.

As time passed, the people living there slowly started to change, appearances turning more twisted and deformed day by day. The media on Earth painted the Lunarians as villains turned evil by “unknown Lunarian chemicals”. Famine. Bloodshed. Everything was unstable. The situation was getting out of hand.

The fate of the Silk Road was still undetermined.

May 30th.

Mei sat in her cell, with nothing but a small window and an iron hard bed for a home. Rough carvings on the wall counting the days of her stay. Death row for “the murder of a government official over a digital dispute”, but whether she was innocent or not was irrelevant, she didn’t even know herself. “The official wasn’t even Chinese,” she thought.

She slowly chipped away at the cell bars while reading one of the crumpled up newspapers tossed by the guards. The headline read, “**Lunarian Creatures Continue to Cause Catastrophe**”. The thought of life on the Moon disgusted her.

Suddenly, a guard came up to her.

“You have visitors.”

Confused, she looked behind him, and was met with a group of black-ops soldiers. In one of their hands was a piece of paper. A contract. “One shot to change your life,” one of them said.

Prisoner Mei, Zhang –

The largest Lunarian supply trade between nations will commence transit today. The mission: destroy the transportation network and weapons, hijack and send the supplies back to Earth where it belongs.

Succeeding grants you the immediate pardoning of all charges, a cleared record and a handsome cash prize depending on how much you retrieved. Failure to do so will result in your immediate execution.

Many of your fellow inmates have signed up and you will too. You are expendable. You are not expected to return.

Without much hesitation, Mei snatched the pen from the soldier's hand, not knowing what this mission may entail.

Injected with suppressants and trackers, Mei was sealed into a stealth pod disguised as part of a cargo shipment as her eyes slowly started to close, with her laying down as still as a statue to not get caught in the process. She was about to be going through the entirety of the Orbital Silk Road.

The pod launched off with a thrust, slowly accelerating in speed, passing through multiple automated stations as it continued to get boosted with the help of electromagnetic fields, zooming past Earth's atmosphere and its orbit.

The trip through the void that was space felt longer than usual. It was an eerie feeling. But finally, there was a sigh of relief as the craters of the Moon slowly started to appear outside the viewport.

With a loud rumbling sound, the container latched onto a chain as the doors swung open. Mei woke up and opened the pod, revealing a dark corridor in front, the stale air apparent. But in the hallway unveiled a horrifying sight. Stacks of bodies, all with pitch black skin and dried blood splattered everywhere, painting everything crimson red. Contorted faces with fearful expressions. Dozens. Hundreds. All with the same exact prison jumpsuit as her.

All volunteers like her. She thought back to what the contract said:

You are expendable. You are not expected to return.

However, she quickly shook that thought out of her mind and forced herself to ignore the bodies and continue onwards. With the soldier's virtual map embedded into her mind chip, she quickly navigated the complex arrangement of domes and bays until she found an already-docked, gigantic lunar shuttle hidden in one of the maintenance rooms, completely empty. She planned on moving all supplies to this singular shuttle and sending it back to Earth.

With the killswitch provided by the soldiers, she quickly hacked the security locks, gaining access to all shuttle controls. Not long after, a timer appeared. Five hours. Five hours to get all the supplies onto the shuttle and complete her mission. She had to locate and loot all the different supply sectors within the never-ending lunar base.

First stop was a bunch of unmanned storage bays, containing most of the neural technology exclusive to the Lunarians. Even with her heavy suit, she grabbed and moved multiple boxes at once, trying her best to not crumble under the weight of them or trigger any hidden defense mechanisms within the rooms.

After successfully moving most of the neural tech into the shuttle undetected, occupying half of its room, she had to take a trip to the armory and defense section to deactivate all weapons before going to retrieve more supplies. Rows of weapon control computers. There were big kinetic launchers, tubes loaded with asteroid-sized explosives, ready to drop down on Earth at a moment's notice. Enormous drones armed with automatic firearms that could wipe out multiple army fleets at once. She didn't even bother to look at the rest, the thought of unleashing all these dangerous weapons on Earth terrified her. She quickly plugged the second killswitch into the entire network of computers, watching in satisfaction as the screens blackened one by one, the weapons completely shutting down.

The weapons couldn't be activated anymore. At least for a while.

But she wasn't cautious enough. She didn't bother to notice the faint, metal wire lying on the ground. The alarms quickly sounded, the room flashing red. She heard footsteps behind her, uneven and heavy. Grabbing tranquiliser darts with lightning speed, she raced to pull the trigger. Walking into the room was a group of presumably Lunarian colony members. Their limbs were swollen, skin near pitch black but with veins pulsing like exposed wiring, warped faces and jagged teeth, with bloodshot eyes looking as if it was on the verge of popping out.

"Monsters," Mei commented. She shot a dart, but one of them quickly swatted it away, rushing towards her and knocking her out cold. After she fell onto the ground, they dragged her through twisting hallways into an unknown room.

She was strapped to a medical bed under fluorescent surgical lights with restraints biting into her flesh the more she struggled to get out. The pain sharpened her senses. A Lunarian approached her, with the same deformed face as all the rest. "Earth vermin," they gurgled with disoriented vocal chords.

"Plague filth," Mei said with disgust, "You creatures are the reason the war happened in the first place. Go rot in a hole for all I care."

As soon as Mei finished talking, they all started chuckling (albeit a much more disturbed form of chuckling). The Lunarians gestured towards the mountains of boxes behind them. Shipments sent straight from Earth, filled with engineered pathogens disguised as medical supplies and food. Decades of bioweapons sent intentionally to villanise the Lunarians, viruses that could warp limbs, organs, metabolisms, and so much more. The Lunarian mutations weren't from "unknown chemicals", they were deliberate. All to make sure Earth had the moral high ground. Mei sat there in horror. Everything she had ever known was crumbling right in front of her eyes.

She quickly cooperated with the Lunarians, got herself and her pod tested for the same sort of viruses. Positive results. The "volunteers" were always going to die either way. It was merely a matter of whether they would get the supplies in time or not. Horror continued to claw at her guts. There was no redemption for Earth. This was an unforgivable act. And she was just another walking bomb. Soon, she would have the same disturbing look as the other Lunarians, dead or not.

"You know what to do now," said a Lunarian.

Mei slowly walked to the armory and defense sector, reactivating the weapons and releasing them to go on a skydive towards Earth's surface. She then grabbed two of the kinetic launchers, walked to the shuttle, and drove it straight towards the void below.'

As the shuttle slowly headed towards one of the automated stations, Mei smiled and closed her eyes as she went off with a blast and headed towards the light. "For my country..." she muttered happily.

The automated station vanished without a trace.

The weapons eventually landed on Earth, decimating most of its land and people.

Without a key piece, the entire Orbital Silk Road completely collapsed.

The Planetary War had ended.

This begins and ends with the Silk Road.

The final tale.

A Trader's Path

Shanghai American School, Hsieh, Wynter – 14

Father's words were repeated in my head. He stared down at me and, with a calm voice, said, "You are not mature enough to handle the family business." I argued and argued, begging him to understand. Even during my training, every wrong decision was suppressed by his hurtful words. I kept arguing and arguing, until...I felt my cheeks burning; everything was silent. The air was still. Father's large hand froze in front of me. *He slapped me...* Without saying another word, he left the room. The quiet air was chilly, flowing past my red cheeks.

It was still dark outside when I heard the sound of Father's camels carrying away. He was going out to trade. Quickly and swiftly, I pulled on my linen clothes embroidered with silk. I sneak downstairs, weaving past our young slave boy's room. Somehow it managed to squeeze between the kitchen and the dining room. Usually, I hear his footsteps beating against the wooden stairs. The loud clacks mirrored my beating heart today. The boy would carry a large tray filled with cherries, figs, and a load of bread. "Leave it by the table," I'd say. He would look up in confusion. Annoyed, I would point towards the small wooden table. Sometimes I wonder why Father traded for him from that Chinese man.

I darted into the kitchen, feeling the cold sweat sliding down my back. I grab the nearest napkin and pull the corners into the center. I stuffed as many dried figs, fruits, and bread as I could find in my makeshift bag. Then I grabbed the precious leather bags Father used for storing water. I ran into our courtyard. The chill air hit me hard in the face, touching my swollen cheek. A wooden bucket lay next to the opening of the water cistern. I extended the rope, lowering the wooden bucket. The bucket got heavier as I pulled it back up. I poured the water with care into Father's leather pouch. From far away, I hear the early birds chirping. *Mother's going to wake up soon, I'd better move faster.* Dashing to the camels, I recalled Father's brief lesson on camel riding just a few days ago.

Soon, the sounds of people setting up food stalls, women fetching water, and little children running through the streets faded behind me. Constantinople is loud and busy. The streets were filled with dust and laughter. Most people woke up early. Like Father, some are traders. We trade crafted goods such as jewelry, glasswork, and ceramics. This business kept us wealthy.

The sun beat down on me. Finally, I saw a caravanserais just up ahead. A camel is already tied outside. I walk in to see an old man wearing a robe sitting on the floor. Next to him was a boy around my age. Their faces are similar to the new slave boy's. *They are Chinese.* I could not believe it. The boy looks up, catching my eye. He also looks astonished to see me. He whispers something to the old man. Then, he stood up and walked over to me nervously. He pulled out a map and held it in front of me. He pointed to Constantinople. "Do you want to go there?" I asked. He gave me a confused look. I point to where I think we were on the map. Then traced the path that led to Constantinople. He nodded and headed back to the old man. "What's your name?" I called after him. Although he probably could not understand, I still wanted to try. Besides, I didn't know where I was headed, and he might be able to help. But anywhere seems better than home, far away from Father. The boy turned and looked at me weirdly. I held my hand out and said, "Ali Demir."

Sort of confused, the boy reached for my hand and responded, "Li Cheng." *What a funny name.*

"Why are you headed to Constantinople?" I ask.

"My brother," said Li Cheng.

"You're trying to find him? Why is he there? What does he look like?"

Li Cheng draws one hand to his chest, showing the height of his brother. "He was sold to work."

"A young slave then..." I think about Constantinople. Many wealthy families lived there. But young Chinese slaves were rare. Then it hit me like a shot in the dark. *This brother of Li Cheng, could it be...* No wonder he looks like that new slave.

"Do you know where?" Li Cheng asked, "My brother."

"Maybe..." I replied. I was still deep in thought. I felt Li Cheng's eyes on me. He looked so desperate to know, to find his brother. Finally, I decided. "I will take you tomorrow, get some sleep tonight." Li Cheng looks confused. Frustrated, I traced the path again. Then I pointed to him and myself. "I might be able to find your brother." Then I turned and headed to one of the spare rooms.

Me and Li Cheng left early that morning. I first heard the bustling streets again. The laughter and dust filled the city. Li Cheng looked amazed by everything. "Leave your camel over there," I whispered, pointing to a small hut. Li Cheng held onto me as we ventured through familiar routes. At last, we were in front of my house. "Wait out here for me, I'll be quick." Before Li Cheng could reply, I was already gone.

The first thing I heard was Mother's wailing. "Mrs. Demir, it's going to be alright," says one of Mother's maids.

"He's out there alone. He's not going to survive!" Mother cried.

"Don't worry, darling, He would come running back in no time. Remember when he was younger, when he tried to run away," Father's voice replied. *What is he doing here? Why is he back so early?*

"It's different this time! He's old enough now! It must be because of you not trusting the kid!" I heard Mother started to yell.

I quietly sneaked past Mother's bedroom, heading for the slave's bedroom. Luckily, he was inside. He looked up and was shocked to see me. I covered his mouth and whispered, "Your brother is here. I'm going to take you to him. Please don't scream." The frightened young boy nodded.

We left his room quietly. I moved swiftly and comfortably around the hall while he trailed behind me. We turned around and saw the exit. "RUN!" I said to the young boy. I turned around and saw Father behind us. The boy darts for the door just as Father sees me. He marched madly. "Ali! What in the world are you doing!" Father stood there. He looked like a big wall.

"Father," My voice trembled, "What are you doing back so early?"

"The trader said his slave ran away. Now answer my question!"

"I went out to...um...find you. I wanted to help."

"Do not lie to me!"

I felt hot tears of anger, embarrassment, and fear trailing down my cheeks. "YOU NEVER TRUST ME!" The words slipped out of my mouth before I could stop them. Father looked surprised as he raised his hand and slapped my cheeks again. I felt a burning pain on my swollen cheek. "Do NOT talk to your father like that!"

Feeling brave, I continued, "Why don't you trust me! Why can't I go trading with you! You said I would have to take over someday! Just why..."

Father stood there, not saying anything. Until I heard teardrops hitting our perfect wooden floor. Yet the tears were not mine. "You don't understand, Ali. Outside these perfect walls I set up to protect our family, the real world is cruel. Families are broken up, hungry people roam the streets, and those harsh conditions. I'm not ready for you to face the real world, for you to lose yourself and the hope in your eyes," Father spoke in almost a whisper.

"But I do understand. I have been out there. But you have to trust me to be strong enough to take on these responsibilities. Please, Father, just trust me once," I begged him.

"Fine, but there's still more training to do," Father said. He turned back and walked down the hall with a slight smile. *The first time I'd seen him smile.*

Outside, Li Cheng and his brother were hugging each other tightly. They chatted happily in a foreign language. "Thank you!" Li Cheng said to me as he helped his brother onto the camel. I watched as their silhouettes faded into the busy city. The sun was setting in the distance, and people started packing stalls. The children started heading home with their mothers and fathers. The birds chirping mirrored my joyful mood.

Thrum of the Dunes

Shanghai American School, Liu, Bella – 14

Thump, thump, thump... The sensation of cool breeze ran through every tear and hole on my caftan as a cold ripple of sensation traversed down my spine. Coarse fur tickled my nose while my face pressed onto some sort of warm surface. I can feel my eyelids flutter as the world cleared itself from a blur of dreams. Sun was setting, I was on a camel's back, and it's not mine. My cheeks must have bruised because they are throbbing with pain, the unavoidable aftermath of a blow. Memory offered no source, leaving only the searing evidence. It is then that I realized that I'm in the exact same situation my father warned me.

I don't know where I am, where my father is, who kidnapped me and where am I going.

I attempted to gain attention by bellowing out into the stillness of the desert, only coming to the conclusion that my throat is too dry to articulate words.

Thump, thump, thump...

The camel carrying us suddenly halted.

As I swatted the fleas away, the camel body suddenly tilted, and as my weight shifted with the creature, I failed to keep my balance; which resulted in a clumsy, quiet war with gravity. I must have been making too much noise trying to gain balance because the next second a burly figure loomed over me...

Is he a—

A hefty hand grabbed my collar, and I could smell the stench of sweat from a mile away.

"Deh!" I hollered with defiance in Persian, and a huge hand cuffed over my mouth before I could make out the next syllable.

A boy much older than me shushed me as he stared into my bewildered eyes. He was a tall boy for his age, around 16, I assume. As my eyes traveled through the blur of evening, I notice three middle-aged men. They seem to be discussing something loudly. I quickly ducked down and shifted my gaze back to the boy. His eyes, magnified by strange optical lenses, squinted at me with intensity. His hair was neatly slicked back, unlike my messy halo of frizz. Also dressed in rags, wretchedness was the only kinship in us. Trepidation filled the air, attempting to suffocate me. He cleared his throat as I took a deep breath. Every passing second felt like an eternity. Finally, he whispered out of the blue.

"Salam."

One word, breaking the tranquility. Nothing afterwards. He tugged on the rope attached to the saddle. The camel continued walking

"You're... not going to say something more?" I questioned in Persian; my voice echoed hollowly in my ears. He glared at me, alert prominent in his eyes. The sentence I started was cut off. Beads of sweat fell onto the scorching sand as he took a deep breath and continued his words in a hushed manner...

"Be quiet, we are to be sold."

My pulsed stopped, heart hammering against my ribs.

Sold.

Sold to whom? Where? And most importantly, what for?

A storm of questions clouded my mind as the boy looked at me with intent eyes. Then he opened his mouth and muttered something I would not dare think of. Not in a thousand lifetimes.

“We’re escaping, tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?” My voice wavered with uncertainty. “How?”

He must have sensed my unease, because the next second he was on my camel telling me all the details about his masterplan of escaping. When he ended his last words, all I did was stare at him dazed and befuddled.

“Okay, let me get this straight. You expect us...*kids* to escape... out of this hellhole? But... how? We are only children, not even—”

“I’m seventeen. Not an adult yet, but definitely old enough to make my own choices. I’ve overheard those men talking about how to deal with us before you woke up. They are bringing us to...” Pause. His eyebrows furrowed as if recalling a nightmare. “Nineveh. They’re bringing us to the slave market there.”

Nineveh. The name struck me like a stone. Nineveh, capital of the Assyrians, the empire whose shadow stretched over our lands, whose name my father spoke in a lowered, fearful voice. To be sold there was to disappear into the vast territories of those perilous rogues, into the hands of doom. We would be bricks in a wall, oil for a mill, trapped inside this treacherous labyrinth, forever.

"But... the plan," I whispered, my defiance slowly crumbling into desperation. "Looting two camels from under their noses? In the dark? What if those camels grunt or... or make noises that will attract those men? You said there were guards at night."

The older boy—I still didn't know his name—continued. The strange lenses over his eyes caught a sliver of moonlight, making them look like pools of obsidian. "They post *one* guard. And he sleeps by the third hour of the night. I've watched for three nights. He drinks from a skin pouch until his eyelids droop. The ropes are old and worn out. I've already loosened up a knot tied to those beasts," he nodded towards his camel.

His confidence was a brittle shed in a torrential storm, steady but only momentarily. Yet something in my mind tells me that's enough.

“You still haven’t told me your name yet. What should I call you?”

“Omid.”

Hope.

As night bleached and blurred our surroundings into a shade of abyssal blue, we rode on. Two ragged shadows ready to flee this gilded cage, carried by burdened beasts into an uncertain future. We were neither safe nor free. Not yet, but we are now allied and at one, and that's enough.

Nexus of Lost Souls

Shanghai American School, Shi, Kevin – 12

One evening, the group made a stop between two cities, everyone smiling and laughing together, knowing that they had made it through another tough day of dealing on the trade route, dusk filling the sky. I took out my lute, and poured my heart into the music, weaving an entrancing melody. The boys started dancing, and soon everybody was together, forming a symphony of movement and sound.

“Dance like there's nobody watching, love like you'll never be hurt, sing like there's nobody listening, and live like it's heaven on earth.” Lumi shouted over the rhythm of the sound. Somebody clapped, and soon everybody was vibing more than ever.

Suddenly, another rhythm entered the fray, striking fear into every merchant. Footsteps grew louder and louder, the *fortissimo* of their symphony, agony driving them ever closer, louder. *Tick tick, boom!* The firing of a hand cannon blew the silence, with the bullet whizzing right past my ear. They said *you only live twice: Once when you are born, and once when you look death in the face. I laughed bitterly at that thought.*

We all started running away, instinctively against gunshots and screams. All around me, I saw people falling and bloodshed. No, not just people. Our people. My people. Beside me, a man grabbed my leg. When I looked down, his hand had already gone limp, an arrow struck through his ribs. I didn't even know this guy's name. God. Most of my comrades were going to die here, and I hadn't even had time to get to know them before they'd left.

Stop the remorse, Aari. Time to get going. I ran with all the might left inside me, pushed onwards by the crimson around me and the terror chasing.

“What do you even want?!” I heard Tara shout. They responded with a wave of gunfire.

“Spices, silk, glass, and FORTUNE!”

Then everything went black.

2 days later...

“No, I got dibs on that one!”

“Hell, that one was on my shot!”

“Everybody shut up!” Somebody screamed over the debate, “the trader is awake”. The horde of people hushed into a chorus of whispers.

I looked around, seeing tattered banners and acrid smoke. What was this supposed to be?

A young man walked through the ushering crowd, sending yet another ripple of excitement through the people. He seemed to possess youthful energy that sparked all around him, but it also felt like he had age and wisdom nothing in the bandit tribe dared to speak against. Wrinkles and scars protruded and tore against his tight skin, and while his eyes glimmered with young spirit, his body seemed to be tired and decrepit.

“Young boy,” he spoke after he made his way up in front of me, “tell me, where did you get all that spice?”

I didn't respond. Couldn't respond.

“You know, don't you?” He responded, which was followed by a wave of furious screams in the crowd.

“Listen to my people! They all want this, need this. It isn't me you're helping if you just give the location right now, but it is helping the entire tribe of the Scarlet Brotherhood.” *Cheers.*

I couldn't speak, couldn't cry, couldn't shout into your ears. But what I could do, nobody else could. Muscle memory made me grasp for the lute that wasn't there, stripped away with my pack. *No calling for help now.*

“They say, a man with outward courage dares to die; a man with inner courage dares to live,” the leader said, “I got to hand it to you, you sure have some inner courage, but if you don't give us some answers, I——

we, might not be able to spare you.” He opened his coat, revealing glinting Japanese Wakizashis, and a Chinese Qiang. Taking one of the many blades, he prepared to find an answer.

Panic rose inside me, but all I remembered was that it was never my place to speak up. It wouldn't have made a difference otherwise.

Time slowed as I braced my body for the strike of a blade. In those raw, silent seconds, something pounced out from the crowd. The moving figure seemed familiar, even in the blur. I blinked, and a blade was lodged in the leader's body, struck in an instant by the silhouette. He lifted his hood, and that's when I realized it wasn't a *he*. It was Lumi, and she was looking at me with steely eyes that I'd never seen in her. *Wow, I thought she'd fallen.*

“When people don't express themselves, they die one piece at a time. Consider yourself lucky,” she said, conviction in her voice, “you have a much greater destiny.”

The moment of peace and reunion between Lumi and me ended just as quickly as it started. The crowd erupted into chaos around her frame and by then I realized that Lumi would not be here for much longer.

“Quit standing around! Run!” She howled, and I followed her directions, turning around and bounding towards the empty desert. Behind me, the tribe was still using their might and anger to avenge their leader, but when it grew silent, *I knew that she was gone. Gone for good.*

As I ran deeper into the empty desert, farther from the bandits' settlement, the sun began to set, bringing the first signs of dusk. The world fell silent, matching exactly how I felt, with the sun sinking under the horizon, darkness taking over.

Everything was falling apart. Lumi just died saving me, I didn't have my lute, and I was alone in the desert without my compadres.

Then as I thought about all that I'd lost, something ignited inside my thoughts. It was something that Lumi used to say, to calm and guide the caravan through grief. *‘Letting go means to realize that some people are part of your history, but not a part of your destiny.’* She also mentioned that I had a “much greater destiny.”

What was that supposed to mean?

Tired and hungry, I fell asleep as the silence of the dunes pressed on my eardrums.

“It means that you have a role to play in a much greater story.” Lumi was looking down at me, as I lay in the shadows. I reached out for her, but my arm passed right through her body. “She is not me; I am not her,” the figure said, “I am her ghost, spirit, her soul.”

“What is this destiny you're talking about?” The words were out of my mouth before I knew it. I didn't know how, but I could suddenly speak.

“You. Nexus.”

I gave her a look of confusion, and just as she started to answer, her body violently twitched.

“My time i-is up-p.”

Then she vanished, carried off by the whispering winds, merging with the very sands of the desert, leaving only an echo of her presence behind.

I got up and followed, running with all my might into the abyss Lumi's soul was blown to.

On the spur of a moment, a strong gust of wind blew, and I felt weightless as it carried me away. I looked back and descended into panic, seeing my body lying lifeless on the sand.

Caught in the gale, everything around me sped up to a blur, and I saw unspeakable things, all happening to my comrades.

Tara was shot twice.

Ediz, our leader, was tortured by the Scarlet Brotherhood.

Little boys were clinging to our spices when bandits stabbed them repeatedly for the goods.

The nameless man who died beside me.

Lumi was beaten again and again.

An image of my lifeless body flashed in my vision.

Was I hallucinating?

No, I had to get up. Couldn't end up dead too.

I woke up to find the sky still dark, devoid of rising light. On the edge of my vision, there were 2 moving shadows. Dread rose inside me, not prepared for anything more to fight. Together, they turned towards me, and one of them lifted their head into the light of the moon.

His arms were smeared red, and his robe was torn, while his face seemed to have endured an endless slaughter, leaving scars everywhere. But none of that mattered. Ediz was back.

“Hello, Aari, *Nexus*,” Ediz stated serenely, “good to see you again.”

Hallucinations again?

The figure next to him lifted his head, and I realized he was wearing garb from the Scarlet Brotherhood. With a strong build, along with eyes of steel, I was afraid again.

He laughed and asserted, “Name’s Tareq. No worries. The brotherhood was plagued by starvation, which drove them into insanity. Those schemes took everything from me too, so here I am.”

“This bastard got me out of the place,” Ediz added with a chuckle, “so now we have a chance to bring everything back together.”

I glanced between the two and smiled, for now I know, only when it is dark enough can you see the stars.

Five Years, Five Years

Shanghai American School, Zhou, Kaixi Alisa – 14

Five years, five years' worth of silk woven through the weathered and wrinkly hands of the old craftswomen, the soft and humming sound of the sewing machine glided across the golden deserts of India, as if a thought half formed, as if a dazzling footprint that had left behind a trail of hope, as if a needle pulling thread, each telling its own story. Her meticulous strokes and painstaking attitude had achieved another masterpiece. Her long fingers looked more like driftwood than human flesh, but those hands could truly weave out her own piece of connection to humanity.

The last rays of the sun painted the hills with a hazy golden mist, and strokes of warmth had covered the solitary girl like a blanket, but today, she was drowned in thought. She looked up at the falling sun and then to herself; just like every other day, she questioned, she thought, and she infuriated herself. Why couldn't she be like any other girl, a girl who could walk and express herself to travel along the unprecedented Silk Road? Her eyes were debilitating and melancholy. If only she had not been paralyzed by the devil, she would be a tradeswoman and an adventurer, and she would be dauntless to leave her trail to the world. Yet, she lies captive in her chair, as if a prisoner and chained to despair. If only her ability for freedom had not been deprived of her. She raised her head slightly, and the camels were galloping away.

The following evening, the girl was carried back home. And tragedy struck; the monster had returned. Her strength had decayed, and the black birds outside had started croaking again. Her vessel of death had returned. "She does not have much longer to live." The cloaked doctor spoke quietly. As time went on, her health only deteriorated. The ravenous beast had landed upon her side, and the reaper's scythe was pointed at her heart. She knew that she wouldn't survive. The candle by her bed faded more than ever, but she was going to leave her path to the world.

In the nighttime, she was restless; she closed her eyes peacefully, and suddenly she was back by the gates. Lively with flourishing lotus flowers, the butterflies twinkled; inside, she knew, lived an elderly woman. A silk maker, a skillful artist. Her garden was quiet but filled with promises. When she was younger, she endeavored to enter, to see for herself, the harmonious blend of nature and love, the box bursting with hope. Yet she faltered; that's the witch's house. Rumors spread as if wildfire about the crazy women. That she had gone hysterically after the disappearance of her husband. Her life was a brokered mirror, a train off track. Her hair, once beautiful, had dangled down her face. In that ragged silk woven cloak. Her once twinkling eyes had lost their light; she was left with mental trauma and invisible scars.

The girl, tugged back to reality by the first sing of the cranes, had grown determined to seek the elderly woman at the last moments of her life. Despite the lack of strength, the girl had uneasily mounted the camel. Her eyes were drifting away at the faraway scene of the singing of the bird. How they would spread their wings, gliding through the wind. Occasionally, the leading bird would turn its head and croak. A high-pitched screech, as if mockingly, "Your wings are sawed, and your features are bent."

Once upon arrival at the gate of her childhood, the girl had tugged on the neck of her camel, lowering her body onto the ground. She had tried to push her body forward on the ground, but she hesitated. Would a hysterical lady welcome a crippled girl to enter her house? The house that had been frozen till the day of her husband's disappearance?

Lightly knocking her weakened knuckles on the madwoman's door, she shivered. What if she was truly mad? What if the traumas she had endured incarnated into a silver sword and thought of evil... The girl could not be more worried.

As the door slightly opened, wrinkly, elderly ladies emerged from the shadows. The once vivid, lively, and colorful cloak she was wearing was now a black piece of rag. Her brow raised, questioning her dying visitor. The girl spoke weakly, "Will you teach me how to master the arts of silk?" The elderly woman was astonished. Her jaws dropped, forming a wide smile. Nobody had ever asked to learn, to help her home regain hope, or to respect her arts. She invited her into the house, where the vibrant color had not faded as expected. Various needles of threaded silk works hung from the ceiling; the scrap pieces were as if a canvas itself. The shiny needles organized from stubby to sharp and silk rods in every hue painted the room. The kaleidoscopic pieces of art had lit up the home of this elderly lady. Inside, the abandoned house seemed to have regained its youth and life.

"Sit down, please." The women invited the girl, who had held her hand up and was struggling, to sit on her chair, gently stroking the silken robe. The old lady took a seat beside her and smiled, handing her out of a box of silkworms eating a mulberry leaf. "Time has finally come, and someone shall listen, to learn, to inherit their arts of silk."

The mentor had handed the girl a box of threads and a pointed needle, gesturing her to follow. The thread had gently pulled across the artwork. The first stroke was a shade of blue and grey, then red, orange, yellow, and green. The old woman was experienced; her strokes had articulated a story: a traditional Indian man with a camel. A cloak gently coated him and the camel, which was loaded with goods. He took one last look at the deserted land before he mounted the animal and galloped away to the unknown lands to the promises of hope and dreams...

Holding a needle in hand, the girl had realized how it had danced in the air, how the colors of nature had produced a work that was truly flourishing. The meticulous strokes pulling threads of hope. Moments later, the girl had felt no pain, no illness. Maybe the love of sewing had guided her to fulfill the last dream of her life. The girl knew that her embers were fading, but she felt an invisible hand guiding her to accomplish the majestic piece of art. In the painting, the sun was rising, and an orange glow had lit up hope for a new day. The birds were chirping, flying away further and further... Gradually disappearing from her sight... When the girl raised her head after completing her art, she did not know how much time had passed or how long she had been away in the women's house. She could see that it was dawn, perhaps the last she would live to see. A young tradesman had just passed by the old woman's house. The young girl crawled over to the front gates, and the tradesman, noticing the young girl, asked, "Do you have anything to offer me?" The girl smiled weakly, "Take this piece of silk as far as you can and fulfill my dream for me." Handing the tradesman her masterpiece, the young girl had felt her candle being blown out and her eyes closed, forever.

What she didn't know was that her silk-woven piece had reached the lands of Italy. In her short life, she never went anywhere, but her memory stayed forever.

Silk Road

Shanghai Community International School, Chung, Hailey – 12

Xingsha blinked. Where was she? Why wasn't she at the Forgotten Caves? Oh... right. Xingsha winced at the memory.

"You cannot stay anymore. This is the last time you will ever bring shame on the Forgotten Caves again! I was a fool to keep you here that long!" Shifu's anger vibrated the temple. "Leave!" He bellowed. "If you are found anywhere on Forgotten Caves by sunrise, we will treat you as an enemy. Go. Now!"

Where am I going now? Xingsha wondered. As she looked up at the stars, she noticed that they were weaker than usual. *Is my magic fading also?* It was her last thought until she fell asleep.

In the morning, a market stall opened near her sleeping place.

"Latest news! Silk Road's bandit's strike again!"

Who? Xingsha went to the stall. "Who's the bandit? Is this the first time they stole something?" She asked the vendor.

The vendor laughed. "Young Lady, if someone knows who the bandit is, don't you think he would have been caught? It's also the fifth time he has struck. You must have been born in a desert to never know this news!"

Xingsha gasped. *How had he known?* Xingsha was indeed born in a desert. She was part of an ancient Chinese family that practiced star-charting magic, the magic that maintained the Silk Road, and unfortunately, just before Xingsha left the forgotten caves, she heard the secret among the elders.

"The Silk Road is protected by ancient magic that keeps danger away from The Silk Road. And we are the forces that maintain it in place. Our whole family will. The dangers of the Whispering Sands..."

"Hello, are you Xingsha?" A scholar asked, breaking her thoughts.

Xingsha, surprised, replied, "Yes, I am. How did you know?"

"I used common sense. And the stars," she answered. "Come. We must talk."

As the scholar entered a small room, she said: "I am Safiaya, and I'm a scholar at the House of Wisdom."

"Why did you bring me here?"

"I told you. To talk. The stars on the maps are fading, and I think you know why."

"It's because of the Whispering Sands, isn't it?"

"Yes, and I received a prophecy long ago about this. We must go to the House of Wisdom to receive answers."

Safiaya pocketed a small amount of blue dust as they left the room.

"Really?" Xingsha asked suspiciously. "How did you receive it?"

"One of the other scholars read the stars for me. That's how I know."

Xingsha visibly relaxed. "You must be truthful," she decided. "How will we get there?"

"Aren't you in a hurry!" Safiaya laughed. "We can set out at dawn."

As they traveled, they found they had different perspectives on how the problem was made.

When they finally arrived at the House of Wisdom, they found every surface covered with maps. Not only maps of the Earth but also maps of the skies and planets.

"Look!" Xingsha exclaimed. "The stars above the Silk Road are fading!"

"And Whispering Sands are growing!" Safiaya said, as she moved across the room.

"The Whispering Sands are growing because the stars are fading." Xingsha said. But one thing still bothered her.

"Safiaya... What did your prophecy say?"

Safiaya looked uncomfortable.

"You will go west,
and face the king who has turned,
You will find what was taken,
and see it safely returned,
But despair for your life in sand,
And fail without friends,

And she will find what matters most,
in the end.”

“Go west, that’s the direction the Silk Road is in. The king who has turned? Must be the person causing all of this. What was taken was the Silk Road, and we will return it. Life in sand... Whispering Sands! Fail without friends... That must mean me! What matters most?” Xingsha’s brain raced a mile a minute.

“Look! There’s a document about the source!”

One of the earliest empires was lost in the sands. As the empire of sand grows, the king becomes more powerful, but beware, the king has no physical form. He must be contained with magic. Star magic.

“We must go west immediately! Star magic could be fading faster!”

“First, get sleep.” Safiaya ordered, calm as ever. “We’ll go west in the morning.”

The sun rose, and Safiaya packed a potion.

Xingsha looked at it curiously.

“To cure memories,” Safiaya explained.

Then they went out. As they traveled deeper into the Whispering Sands, the wind began to pick up.

What was once a place full to the brim with ideas was now an empty wasteland of ruins. Crumbling, Xingsha barely recognized the landscape that had once been hers to protect. The once colorful place was reduced to dust, and the sand was chipping the edges of the buildings.

“Wait... Who’s that?” Safiaya asked, breaking Xingsha’s thoughts.

“Who’s who?”

“Xuanzang!” Safiaya realized.

“Xua—what?”

“He was famous for his ability to translate Buddhist scriptures to Chinese.”

“Was?”

“You’re not the only one that can live long.”

“Hello!” Xuanzang said. “Where am I?”

“You’re on the silk road,” Safiaya replied.

“Yeah, that’s what I was here for, but I don’t know who I am.”

“You don’t know?”

“Of course I should but can’t.”

Safiaya turned to Xingsha, who was watching, eyes bouncing back and forth between her and Xuanzang like she was watching a very intense tennis match.

“His memory was wiped.” Safiaya hissed.

“Gee, thanks for figuring that out,” Xingsha replied sarcastically. “Now what do we do?”

“Well, we have that memory potion.”

They looked back at Xuanzang.

“Let’s give it to him.”

After he drank the potion, Xuanzang told them about the experience. “A white mist was in my mind,” he shuddered. “A voice was there, and I just wanted to drift away.”

“We’re going there.”

“Well, good luck. You’ll need it.”

Night fell, and Xuanzang traveled away.

As day arrived, the sands completely covered the whole area overnight. *Come...* the wind whispered.

As day slowly turned into night, the wind began to pick up, and the voice became clearer, and more sinister.

Finally, they arrived at a temple. An inscription read: 沙之地.

“The Place of the Sands,” Safiaya translated quietly.

As they went into the Place of Sands, the voice arrived.

What is here? *The voice sneered, amused.* A star ceremony? It’s too late for that. The Silk Road is going to become a place of the forgotten.

The sand swirls around Safiaya and Xingsha.

“You must use your powers!” Safiaya shouted over the sand.

“I’m trying!” Xingsha wailed

“Focus. You are stronger than you think!”

Xingsha took a deep breath and focused on her heart. Her brain screamed at her to run. But her heart knew better. The wind started to slow down. The stars came down. Then, the moon became brighter, rounder. Water sounds were coming from Xingsha.

Xingsha looked up. Her eyes were glowing blue. She was levitating in the air. I am the teller of stars, daughter of Nüwa and Shangdi, oracle of the sky, guardian of the forgotten caves, protector of the Tang Dynasty, tamer of water. I name you Emperor Emoxiong, Master of droughts, killer of memories, sorrow eater, god of nightmares. I bind you by the stars to the sky.

Nooooo!!! The voice screamed. The desert was withering. It was flickering, in and out like a mirage. The smoke disappeared. The town was restored again. People appeared. The Road was restored again.

The Trailblazer of the Silk Road

Shatin Tsung Tsin Secondary School, Huang, Chun Chak – 13

Once upon a time, during the Western Han Dynasty, there lived a legendary figure whose name would forever be etched in the annals of history – Zhang Qian.

The legend unfolded when Emperor Wen of Han entrusted Zhang Qian with a perilous mission – going to the Western Regions to seek alliance with Dayuezhi and repelling Xiongnu jointly. Before his departure, the emperor bestowed a jade pendant upon him, which was a token of the emperor’s trust and an amulet aiding him in danger.

As Zhang Qian and his soldiers ventured into the boundless Gobi Desert, the howling wind lashed their faces and the stinging sand blurred their visions, while the scorching sun blazed relentlessly day by day. However, their water and provisions dwindled day by day. With unyielding courage, Zhang Qian and his soldiers braved the sandstorms that threatened to tear them and endured hunger to forge a path to the Western Regions. After a long and arduous trudge, Zhang Qian finally collapsed from exhaustion and hunger. Moved by Zhang Qian’s resolution, the jade pendant worked its magic in the nick of time. It suddenly gave out dazzling green light. In the blink of an eye, an oasis appeared in front of Zhang Qian. The cool spring water and fruits pulled him from the brink of death.

Nevertheless, little did he know, greater peril awaited him ahead. Shortly after they resumed their journey, Zhang Qian and his soldiers fell into the ambush of Xiongnu. Though outnumbered, they still defended valiantly. Zhang Qian fought like a cornered tiger. His sword clashed with attacker’s giving out thunderous ring. His voice cut through the chaos: “Fight on——for the mission, for the Han!” The jade pendant at his neck glinted brightly, as if echoing his courage, empowering him with divine energy. Although they fought against all odds, Zhang Qian and his soldiers were finally outmatched by Xiongnu’s overwhelming troops. Although he was held captive, Zhang Qian never surrendered to Xiongnu’s intimidation and bribery. He bode his time and devised his strategies to escape. Finally, he seized the chance to escape and resumed his west journey. During his subsequent journey, Zhang Qian recorded geography, resources and trade needs from Central Asia, forging diplomatic ties with western countries. He established a bridge of trade between the East and the West, thereby marking the dawn of the Silk Road.

Although Zhang Qian hadn’t succeeded in forming alliance with Dayuezhi in the end, he blazed the trail for the world-famous Silk Road connecting East and West for centuries. He changed the course of history with his indomitable spirit – fearless, loyal and striving toward the unknown forever.

The Opening of the Silk Road

Shatin Tsung Tsin Secondary School, Lok, Sum Yau – 13

The evening, scorching hot sun shone down onto Zhang Qian and his men as it was slowly disappearing. Sweating, he sighed, “I will definitely NOT get kidnapped this time with this large group, will I? I have to accomplish my mission this time!” It was his second time travelling to the west, since he and his initial group were brutally held captive by Xiongnu for thirteen years.

“Sir, there is a pond nearby!” a man shouted. Zhang Qian nodded and made an acute turn towards the source of water. The men then all jumped off their horses swiftly and cupped their hands to drink. “Refreshing indeed!” the sounds of joy and cheerfulness echoed the area. It was the first time in two days since they drank any fluids. However, the relaxing atmosphere did not last long. Zhang Qian sat down under a tree next to the pond, observing the environment to see if it was suitable for camping. “Hey... are those... people?” He squeezed his eyes and looked into the distance, confirming that a large amount of humans was coming their way. “Everyone, look over there!” They immediately stopped gulping their water and looked where their leader was pointing at. His men were panicking, not expecting a fight, and jumped back onto their horses in a few seconds.

Minutes later, the approaching ‘enemies’ halted in front of Zhang Qian and his team. Clearly, they didn’t have any intentions of battling, as their hands were raised up into the air, showing no weapons in sight. Zhang Qian lowered his sword, the rest following his lead. “What are your objectives?” he asked coldly.

“The name’s Raj. We are from a southern country not far from here. We’re planning to head back right after a water break,” the young man opposite him replied. He was wearing a lengthy white piece of cloth with a wine red turban.

Zhang Qian hesitated for a while and said, “I see. Go ahead. We’ve occupied the area enough.” His men sighed from exhaustion, but dared to say nothing. One took out a silk napkin from his pocket, its texture soft and silky, reflecting the moonlight like rare diamonds. He hastily wiped his wet hands when suddenly— “Oh! What is that beautiful piece of cloth!” Raj beamed and walked towards the man. He froze and Raj casually took the napkin from his hands, admiring its unique texture. “Please, allow me to introduce this wonderful material to our king. I’m sure everyone will love it!” Raj pleaded. Zhang Qian immediately saw this as an opportunity and agreed, “I would be very grateful to meet your king and provide you with some silk.” “So this is silk! How interesting! Men, follow me! No time for a break. Let’s head out right this instant.” Then, Raj hopped back onto his camel and lead the way.

An hour of travelling later, the gates of the country opened for Raj. Zhang Qian and his men spent the midnight at the king’s temple, waiting for the next day to arrive...

“Rise and shine! King Ashoka has requested to see you,” Raj’s booming voice echoed the crowded room. Irritated because of the lack of sleep, Zhang Qian slowly opened his eyes. The sun was just barely out, lighting up the city with dim sunlight. He changed into some formal clothing he prepared in his bag, and followed Raj to the king’s palace while the others stayed.

“You must be the traveler from China, aren’t you?” King Ashoka’s deep voice said. Within an hour, Zhang Qian got to meet the king. To be honest, he was nervous. “Yes. Nice to meet you, King Ashoka. I am Zhang Qian, a traveler from China with my other men to trek westwards to exchange products.”

“I’ll listen to your proposal,” the king challenged.

“As your highness knows, Raj, your loyal citizen has introduced me because of a certain fabric called ‘silk’.” Zhang Qian took out a large silk towel to show the king. King Ashoka’s eyes widened. Eager to touch the silk, he signaled his servant to hand it to him.

“Interesting texture. Soft, silky and very shiny. This would be suitable for making comfortable and splendor clothes.”

“Very observant of your highness indeed! In fact we have 30 pieces of silk now. We would be happy to sell it to you for a low price. If you’re interested in buying, we will send some more from China,” Zhang Qian said confidently.

“I will gladly buy them all. My men will pay you the required amount of money. I look forward to further trades with China in the future, Zhang Qian. You may now leave,” King Ashoka grinned and ordered his soldiers to open the door.

As the trade was a success, Zhang Qian and his men set off to another country. After he bid farewell to Raj, he opened the map which Raj had gave him earlier. They were going to head northwest, to Europe.

A month of constant riding and resting later, they finally passed through numeral countries and arrived. They walked towards the city entrance and— “Halt! Who goes there?” a stern voice shouted above. Guards were on top of the city walls, holding weapons, staring at Zhang Qian with caution. He and all his men raised up both of their hands, representing surrender. “We’re not here to fight,” Zhang Qian politely spoke. “We’d like to seek for chances to trade and open a new route for convenience.”

The soldier whispered a few words to his comrade and softened his tight eyebrows to speak, “You shall wait here for an answer from our president, Alessandro.”

Minutes later, Zhang Qian and the others were fortunately approved to propose their products. “President Alessandro is inside to see only you,” the soldier who lead them said directly to Zhang Qian.

The doors opened, and Zhang Qian stepped in with awareness. “Over here,” a soft voice ordered. He was a young adult, wearing extravagant clothes and a heavy crown on his head.

“Zhang Qian, isn’t it? Welcome. Now hurry and show me your products. I don’t have much time,” Alessandro said lazily.

Zhang Qian startled and didn’t expect a young man to meet him. “Understood. This is the product we’d like to trade.” He pulled out the piece of silk fabric and put it on the table in front of Alessandro.

“These fabric looks like it would make my skin itch!” he complained.

“Oh, no Mr. President. This piece if fabric is called silk, soft and shiny. It comes in various colours and can be made into many fancy clothes!” Zhang Qian quickly responded.

“Hmm... Do you have an example? I would like to see a design.”

“Yes, of course.” Zhang Qian takes out his formal clothes from his bag and puts it on the table as well. “This is made out of silk.”

“... Very stylish indeed. Comfortable too...” Alessandro said.

Zhang Qian waited silently for a firm response.

“How much?”

“We now have 20 pieces. We can sell it to you in exchange for letting us opening this new route for further trades.”

“Fine. Talk to my servants afterwards. You shall leave.”

“Everyone! Our trip is a success. We have introduced our silk to the other countries and finally opened the route to trade! I shall introduce the ‘Silk Road’ to our emperor. Let’s head back!”

The Development of the Silk Road

Shatin Tsung Tsin Secondary School, Tsoi, Hei Lok – 13

Silk Road, Silk Road, Silk Road. Speaking about Chinese History, the Silk Road has always been one of the most famous things as it was the first route that led Chinese people into the west and eventually reached Europe.

According to historical literatures, China already had some influence with people in Xiyu before the Han dynasty. During the Han dynasty, The Silk Road was more developed by Zhang Qian. Let's take a look to it!

Let time rewind to BC138, it was the Han dynasty at that time. The emperor wanted to attack the Hun. However he wasn't strong enough to take them down, therefore, he wanted to had Tokhara to be their ally in Xiyu so that they could fight Hun together.

"I would like to head to Xiyu for the country, your majesty." Said Zhang Qian. "As you wish, I now order you to go discover Xiyu get Tokhara to be our ally!" Commanded the emperor.

And soon, Zhang Qian and his troop started their journey to Xiyu. However, they were caught by hun during the mission to the West Regions. Zhang Qian's life wasn't good there but he never gave in to the Huns. During the ten years in Hun, Zhang Qian even got a wife and had children. Soon, as there was civil unrest in Hun, they escaped from Hun successfully.

After days and days, months and months, Zhang Qian finally arrived Tokhara. "Please, I hope my mission will succeed!" Thought Zhang Qian. "Please, may you be our ally? We know that you are strong and want to fight Hun, let us fight with you!" Said Zhang Qian. Unfortunately, the Tokhara already had no will to fight against Hun and gave a "no" as the result. And Zhang Qian could only go back to Han.

Although he didn't succeed in his mission, he successfully brought a lot of information of Xiyu back to Han.

At BC119, "Zhang Qian, I now order you to go to Xiyu again! Go and form an alliance with Wusun so that we can take the Huns down!"

And so, Zhang Qian and his troop headed to Xiyu again. This time, they arrived Wusun "peacefully".

"Please! Please form an alliance with us, we know that you've always hated Hun! We can win them together!" Said Zhang Qian, trying to persuade the leader of Wusun. "How many times do I have to repeat myself, I said "No"! What if we still lose, they are are so strong!" Rejected the leader of Wusun. And...Zhang Qian got rejected again...

However, during their journey to Wusun, Zhang Qian sent other people to other Xiyu counties. Many of them sent an envoy to Han. Therefore, Han and order Xiyu countries built up a friendly relationship.

Despite that Zhang Qian didn't succeed to form an alliance to fight Hun together, he successfully made a path through Han and Xiyu. He also improved the connection and influence between Han and Xiyu. In economics, silk, lacquerware, ironware and other goods of Han began to spread to the West. In return, good horses, grapes, pomegranates, alfalfa, cucumbers, walnuts and other products were introduced into Han. And historical researchers name Zhang Qian's two missions to Xiyu "zao kong", which means "to open a path" in English.

New Tales of China's Silk Road

St. Joseph Secondary School 5 Macao (English Section), Chan, Pak In Dylan – 13

As time goes by, people start to forget about a famous event that heavily relies on world trading. Many centuries ago, the Chinese traced a long path through countries and countries while selling silk to foreigners, while trading to uncover new cultures from other worlds, especially local specialties, insane artworks and mostly creative inventions that will change the world forever! It remained for so long, disappearing after running for one and a half thousand years.

While the wholesome event remains important, history stays fossilised for so long... Until the 20s, when it revived from the dead, and the culture changing event went on and on, becoming the biggest international trade project worldwide, while having 150 territories willing to share new culture around the spinning globe. And now, we were taught a lot of new culture from miles away, and taught the foreigners what we have in our own land.

Welcome to the present, around year 25 to year 26. This cultural event is still going on, polishing the world from unknown to popular, and the recent discoveries are from not long ago, the recent archaeological uncover shows that the world has not been fully discovered, but we're slowly progressing through the path, pushing the wall to its limit and uncovering the whole spinning globe.

In the future, the tradition is going to continue passing by, revealing unshown histories that happened centuries ago. And historians will spit them out to the public, telling us the stories of other places, again and again, until everything is shown everywhere, but as time passes by, the culture is starting to grow and grow, learning more and more, which makes the culture unable to stop, even after we left the 20s. Due to the traders uncovering much more culture from the foreign countries, the Silk Road will continue passing by, eventually reaching its limit, making every country participate in this cultural event, making it immortal to stop.

If the event keeps passing by, a lot of events may happen, usually in industry. Either new farming methods or technologies can impact the world by improving the industry, technology can reduce the use of natural resources while using electricity instead. And this movement might reduce conflict and war for resources. Another thing is that the Silk Road is made for cultural uncovering so the world can be peaceful, so if we discover more and more, the world can be more peaceful, letting the relationship between us and the foreigners become better, this makes up with the dark history in the past. And new religions might show up in the future.

Our whole new world that is filled with a lot of lights and electricity while depression remains, a new culture means a new experience. The Silk Road is a beyond perfect event that happened around two thousand years ago for it to happen, having insane amounts of new cultures from other countries, this makes some ethnic groups in China to exist. This event can pass on generations and generations.

A history that happened so long ago, forgotten and revived, became a really important cultural event that let us learn more about the world.

The Desert, a Camel, and Rei

Tai Kwong Hilary College, Chan, Pak Yi Seby – 11

I'd much rather be home than here. If Father were just a tad younger, I'd be weaving silk scarves with Mother, their shimmering threads catching lantern light like captured moonlight. Or out with my brother Ming, lighting up small bushes with market-bought miniature dynamite, why not him, or anyone else?

WHACK! The camel's hoof clipped my shoulder, sending me sprawling into the dust. I grabbed its head, holding it still.

"Listen here, you stubborn thing I have to care for, though I don't want to. I'm not your toy. Now stay still, for China's sake!" I rubbed my throbbing head. The camel's grimy coat matted with sweat, dark eyes flashing defiance, shot me a glare, I glared back.

"Rei, is the camel ready? We're leaving at five." The lead cameleer's voice echoed in the humid dawn air, I gave a thumbs-up, shifting the silk-laden boxes on its back. It groaned, tipping them sideways. I'd sworn everything was balanced. Backing to its flank, I braced as it shoved like a sulky toddler on the verge of meltdown.

"Give me five minutes, this camel isn't appreciative of my efforts." Finally, the boxes settled. I whipped out Mother's tangerine, its citrus tang cutting the musty air. The camel snatched it, crunching contentedly. It worked. Soon we plunged into the dry Gobi Desert with a beast that clearly hated me.

My faded blue robes, once Mother's, now frayed at the hems, whipped against my sunburned legs. At sixteen, with braids tangled from the wind and a face smudged with ochre dust, I looked every bit the reluctant caravaner. Nobody trusted a girl my age to lead alone, so the lead cameleer roped my camel to his. Occasionally, it leaned sideways, trying to buck me off. Each time, I smacked its flank lightly. "Keep moving, brat."

Golden sands stretched endlessly, hooves crunching rhythmically. Nothing but sand, just sand, whispering secrets under a merciless sun. As it slid down the sky, draining the glow, the horizon bloomed into molten gold and oxford blue. The moon hung early, a pale lantern. Tall mud-brick walls rose as we approached.

"Let me guess a caravanserai?" I asked the lead cameleer. He eyed me like I'd asked if water was wet. "In short, yes." Inside, merchants haggled over spices and jade cinnamon air thick, laughter echoing off arches. We watered the camels amid bandit tales and mirages. Xin, that's what I named my camel, ignoring its eye-roll and groan, ignoring my chatter as the others started getting settled for the night.

"Rude. For your camel brain, it's Xin now. XIN. Clear?" No reply, just plodding steps.

Exhaustion crept in. I stared at the star-pricked sky, dozing against Xin's swaying hump.

Wind howled, jerking me awake. Sand stung my eyes. I looked back. No camels, no rope. Just Xin and me, adrift in blackness. "You escaped with me on you? Idiot!" I smacked him and slid off. A massive sand cloud loomed, devouring stars. Horror gripped me as I stared at the chewed up rope hanging there.

I'd never see home again.

I yanked Mother's silk scarf from my pocket. Its threads were embroidered with cranes, and blindfolded Xin. He snorted complaints, but survival trumped comfort. The storm hit like a thousand knives, sand flaying skin, wind roaring. I clung to Xin, sleeve over my face. He stood firm, no longer bratty. Minutes blurred into eternity. Silence fell. I shook sand from my braids, patted my robes. The horizon was clear, but we were alone.

No tracks, no group.

Thirst clawed first, a demon twisting my guts. The sun rose, a fiery eye scorching the endless dunes. "Xin, we need water. Or shade."

He nudged northwest, insistent, but I hesitated, my instincts screamed east toward Yumen. We argued in nudges and glares until I spotted a glint: my dropped jade hairpin, half-buried, pointing his way. Trusting the sign, I followed. Blisters bloomed on my bare feet; heat waves danced, birthing mirages of Mother's hands offering tea.

By noon, my lips cracked bloody, vision doubling. Vulture shadows wheeled overhead, patient reapers. Hallucinations gripped me. Ming waved from a dune, then dissolved into sand. I stumbled, knees buckling. "Xin... I can't."

But he wouldn't quit. Kneeling like the loyal Bactrian legends, he nuzzled my hand, then rose, sniffing purposefully. I tugged his lead rope weakly, spotting faint camel tracks etched in a rocky dip, our first clue together. "There!" Hours blurred: dunes wind-sculpted like dragon spines, my sweat long evaporated.

Xin halted at a shallow depression, pawing frantically. Sand flew. Heart pounding, I dug too, nails splintering on stone. My contribution, fueled by desperation. Fingers hit it: a buried ring, jade-inlaid, etched with ancient script: a coiled serpent and crane, the gods' mark. A faint wind carried a riddle.

"Scale the spine where waters sleep" that seems inaudible to me, but Xin's ears flicked, eyes locking on a dune ridge. He knew. I gripped the medallion like a talisman, whispering, "Together."

Bellowing triumphantly, he charged the ridge; I scrambled after, legs burning. At its crest: a hidden cistern, spring-fed, cool water bubbling. I drank greedily, splashing his muzzle. "We did it! you found it, but we survived together. All along."

Night fell as Xin traced an invisible path—instinct fused with myth. Dawn brought voices. The lead cameleer burst over a dune, camels thundering. "Rei! Xin led us straight!" His face split into a grin. "That old trailblazer's hauled silk since before you were born and now deciphers everything himself!"

Back with the caravan, Xin took point. Yumen's gates loomed, its emerald fields beyond. I stroked his neck. "No regrets, partner."

In the market, I traded lesser silks for fine crimson thread. That night, by firelight, I wove a scarf which is not for sale, but for Xin. Cranes danced across it, symbol of our survival. A homebound caravan crested the horizon under stars, mirroring the sky that'd betrayed us. Father would be proud; Mother, teary. The desert hadn't broken me, it forged me with a camel's ancient wisdom. Xin grumbled approval, grunting what sounded like my name.

For once, we spoke the same tongue.

Whispers of the Silk Road

The King's School Qianhai Shenzhen, Chan, Sum Yin Sammi – 12

Sammi was a seventh grader living an ordinary school life. Every morning, she hurried to class with her backpack bouncing on her shoulders, listened to teachers explain lessons, and copied notes into her notebook. Most days felt the same, but history class was different. When it came to history lessons, Sammi enjoyed listening to her teacher talk about ancient times, forgotten cities, and long journeys across deserts and mountains.

That afternoon, the history teacher was explaining the Silk Road. She spoke about ancient threads of silk, camel caravans, and trade routes that connected East and West. As Sammi listened, her thoughts drifted to a gemstone pendant hanging quietly around her neck.

The pendant had been a gift from her grandmother.

Sammi still remembered the day her grandmother gave it to her. It happened years ago, when her grandmother had travelled to Xi'an. The pendant was small, with a smooth gemstone set inside a simple metal frame. Her grandmother had held it carefully and said, "This pendant seems very precious, as if it was buried in the desert for hundreds of years. Keep it safe."

At the time, Sammi had only smiled and thanked her. Now, as she touched the pendant through her school uniform, she felt a strange warmth spreading across her chest.

The teacher continued speaking about the Silk Road—about Chang'an, the Western Regions, and merchants who risked their lives crossing endless deserts. Sammi listened attentively, imagining the stories unfolding in front of her eyes.

Suddenly, a strange wind swept through the classroom.

Loose papers fluttered into the air. A dilapidated newspaper blew directly in front of Sammi's face, blocking her view of the blackboard. Before she could move it aside, she heard something that made her heart race.

The sound of camels.

She pushed the newspaper away, but the classroom was gone.

All she could see was endless yellow sand stretching as far as her eyes could see. The sky was wide and clear, and the setting sun dyed the dunes a warm orange. The air was dry and filled with the faint smell of dust. In the distance, a camel caravan approached slowly. The camel bells jingled softly, creating a rhythm that echoed across the desert. The merchants' clothes were stained with dust, and their faces showed the deep fatigue of a long journey.

Sammi stood frozen.

"Whose girl is this? How could she be here alone?" asked a man with a full beard and a strong Western accent. He wore layers of silk, and a curved knife hung at his waist.

Sammi's heart pounded. She stepped back, her modern school uniform standing out clearly against the endless desert. She felt completely out of place.

Without thinking, she clutched the gemstone pendant tightly in her hand. It felt warmer than before, almost as if it were alive.

Seeing how frightened she was, the bearded man laughed softly, showing his white teeth. "Don't be afraid," he said kindly. "We are a caravan from Chang'an. We are travelling to the Western Regions to sell silk."

Chang'an? Western Regions?

Sammi's mind raced. Words from her history textbook flashed through her thoughts. Her legs felt weak.

She had really travelled to the Silk Road.

The caravan decided to take her with them. They gave her coarse cloth to wear instead of her school uniform and showed her how to lead a camel by holding the rope gently but firmly. At first, Sammi stumbled and nearly fell, but soon she learned how to walk in rhythm with the slow, steady animals.

She quickly discovered that the desert was a strange and dangerous place. During the day, the sun burned fiercely, and the sand was so hot it felt as if eggs could be cooked on it. Heat shimmered in the distance, making the land look unreal. At night, the temperature dropped suddenly, and cold winds swept through the dunes.

When evening came, the caravan set up camp among the desert hills. The merchants gathered around a fire, roasting lamb and warming their hands. The firelight flickered on their tired faces as they chatted and laughed.

They spoke Chinese, though with accents Sammi wasn't used to. She understood only part of what they said, but she listened carefully. They told her stories about the Western Regions, about the prosperity of Chang'an, about the beauty of Persian gems, and how silk was treasured by people far beyond China.

These stories felt alive. They were nothing like the cold words printed in textbooks.

On this Silk Road, the world was filled with blowing sand, crisp camel bells, and warm human emotions.

Days passed slowly. Sammi learned how to help pack goods, fetch water, and care for the camels. She grew used to waking before sunrise and sleeping beneath a sky filled with countless stars. Though her body was tired, her heart felt strangely full.

One day, dark clouds gathered suddenly in the sky.

The wind began to howl, rolling up waves of yellow sand that blocked out the sun. The desert disappeared behind a wall of dust. The camels neighed anxiously and tried to pull away.

"A sandstorm!" someone shouted.

Sammi felt fear grip her chest. The sand stung her face, and it was hard to breathe. In that moment, she truly understood how small humans were compared to nature. She stayed close to the caravan, holding onto a merchant's sleeve, afraid to take even one wrong step.

The caravan struggled forward, relying on experience and instinct. Luckily, before darkness fell, they reached one of the important towns along the Silk Road.

Calling it a town didn't feel right—it was more like a giant marketplace.

People from many lands gathered there. The streets were crowded with traders selling goods from their homelands. Colourful fabrics fluttered in the wind. Spices from distant lands filled the air with rich and unfamiliar scents. Languages mixed together, creating a lively and confusing melody.

The next morning, Sammi wandered through the market streets. Everywhere she looked, there was life. Glazed pottery shone under the sunlight. Vendors shouted loudly to attract customers. The smell of roasted meat mixed with the mellow scent of wine.

The caravan entered a shop, and the shopkeeper's eyes lit up the moment he saw their silk. He touched the fabric carefully, as if holding treasure. To him, the silk and brocades were more valuable than gold.

At that moment, Sammi understood why merchants risked their lives on the Silk Road. Every step, every danger, felt worthwhile.

Sammi stayed in the market for three days. She learned to thread beads with local women, watched street performers swing rattles and dance, and listened to storytellers in teahouses sharing ancient legends. For the first time, she experienced a life without exams, rankings, or endless homework—only learning through living.

That evening, the caravan returned to the market, excitedly preparing to buy goods to take back to Chang'an. As they walked through the stalls, Sammi noticed a small gem shop.

Her heart skipped a beat.

One of the pendants hanging in the shop looked exactly like the one her grandmother had given her.

She walked toward it slowly, her fingers trembling. Just as she reached out, a sudden gust of sand swept past her.

When she opened her eyes, she was lying on a classroom desk.

Dust clung to her face. The gemstone pendant was still in her hand, warm and real. The school bell rang loudly, pulling her back to reality. Sammi sat up quickly and brushed the dust off her textbook.

She looked around. Everything was normal.

Yet as she ran toward the next classroom, the wind rushed past her ears, and she swore she could still hear the faint jingling of camel bells.

That night, Sammi dreamed of the caravan again. Silk fluttered in the wind like colourful clouds blooming in the desert. Camels walked slowly across golden sand beneath a star-filled sky.

She woke up smiling.

She knew the journey had not been a dream. The gemstone pendant was a message left by history—a bridge connecting the past and the present. And now, when she opened her history textbook, she understood that the Silk Road was not just words on a page, but a living story waiting to be discovered.

The Silk Road Beyond Time

The King's School Qianhai Shenzhen, Chan, Wing Ki Vicky – 11

On a warm and sunny Saturday afternoon, Sammi went with her parents to a fascinating museum about the Silk Road. The museum was large and quiet, and the air felt cool after the heat outside. As Sammi walked through the exhibition hall, her footsteps echoed softly on the shiny floor. She liked museums, but this one felt special.

Inside a long glass case, she saw ancient silk brocades from the Han Dynasty. The silk looked soft and colourful, even though it was hundreds of years old. Golden threads shone under the lights, and the patterns of flowers, clouds, and animals seemed full of stories and secrets. Sammi leaned closer and studied them carefully. She imagined the hands that had woven the silk and the long journeys it had travelled.

She felt curious and excited. Without thinking, she slowly reached out her hand.

The moment her fingers touched the cold glass, everything went black. The noise of people talking and walking disappeared, and the ground seemed to fall away beneath her feet.

“Cough, cough!” Sammi covered her mouth and opened her eyes.

She was no longer in the museum.

Instead, she was standing in the middle of a vast desert. The sand beneath her feet burned like fire, and the strong sun shone down from the cloudless sky. The air was dry and hot, and her throat felt thirsty. In the distance, tall sand dunes rose and fell like golden waves, stretching endlessly in all directions.

“Where am I?” Sammi whispered. Her voice shook, and tears filled her eyes. She hugged her backpack tightly, feeling scared and confused.

Suddenly, a rough voice spoke from behind her.

“Whose child are you? Why are you alone in the Gobi Desert?”

Sammi jumped and turned around quickly. Standing behind her was a tall young man leading a camel toward her. He wore simple clothes tied with a rope, and a colourful silk bag hung at his waist. His face was dusty, and his eyes looked tired but kind. Beside him stood an older camel driver with dark skin and sharp eyes, holding a long wooden stick.

“I... I don't know how I got here,” Sammi said softly.

The young man frowned. “This place is dangerous for a child.”

He introduced himself as Jayden, a silk merchant from the Han Dynasty. The older man's name was Alex, an experienced camel driver who had travelled the Silk Road for many years.

Sammi nervously told them that she came from the future. Jayden and Alex exchanged doubtful looks and shook their heads. They clearly did not believe her. However, when they noticed her strange clothes, her school backpack, and the fear in her eyes, they felt sorry for her.

After a short discussion, Alex sighed. “We cannot leave a child alone in the desert.”

They agreed to let Sammi travel with them until they reached the next trading stop.

As the camel walked slowly forward, Sammi held onto the saddle tightly. The camel bells rang softly, creating a gentle rhythm. The desert road stretched far into the distance, quiet and endless. Sammi felt scared, but also excited. This was the Silk Road she had read about in history books.

To thank them, Sammi took out some chocolate from her backpack and shared it with Jayden and Alex. They looked at the small brown squares carefully before tasting them.

“This is very sweet,” Alex said, surprised.

“It’s called chocolate,” Sammi explained. “People in the future eat it as a snack.”

She then showed them her digital watch and used it to check the time and the sun’s direction. Jayden stared at it in amazement.

“Why do you have such strange tools?” he asked.

“Because people in the future have better tools,” Sammi replied with a shy smile.

Jayden pointed at her clothes. “What are you wearing?”

“These are school uniforms,” Sammi said. “Students wear them when they go to school.”

Slowly, Jayden and Alex began to trust her. As they travelled, Jayden told Sammi about his life as a silk merchant. His family had raised silkworms for generations. Silk was light, but extremely valuable, and it was traded across deserts, mountains, and many kingdoms.

“Silk travels far,” Jayden said thoughtfully. “It connects people who have never met.”

After a few days, Sammi became used to life in the caravan. She woke up early each morning when the sky was still pink and the air was cool. She helped pack the goods and reminded everyone to rest during the hottest hours of the day. At night, the traders sat around a small fire, sharing food and stories from distant lands. Sammi missed her family deeply, but she enjoyed listening to the travellers talk about places she had never seen.

One afternoon, the air suddenly became very still. The wind stopped, and even the camels became restless. Sammi felt a strange heaviness in her chest.

Alex looked at the sky and frowned. “This silence is not good.”

Dark clouds soon appeared on the horizon.

“Oh no!” Alex shouted. “A sandstorm is coming! We only have half a bag of water left!”

Before they could react, the wind grew stronger. Sand filled the air, turning the sky yellow. The camels panicked and ran away. Bags of silk and water rolled into a deep ditch. Alex rushed to save them, but he slipped and cut his leg badly on sharp stones.

“It’s over...” Alex said weakly, blood soaking into the sand.

Sammi dropped to her knees and cried. Jayden stood frozen, unsure what to do.

Suddenly, Sammi remembered her science lessons.

She wiped her tears and stood up. “Jayden!” she shouted. “Use the silk cloth to wrap Alex’s leg. Silk is clean and can stop bleeding!”

Jayden quickly followed her instructions.

Sammi then pointed to a thorny camel thorn nearby. “There is water under that plant. Dig near the roots.”

She took a small shovel from her backpack and began digging. Her hands hurt, and sweat ran down her face, but she didn’t stop. Soon, the sand felt wet. When they squeezed it, a few drops of water appeared.

Alex smiled weakly. “You really are a little genius.”

Not long after, the lost camels returned. A nearby caravan heard their calls and came to help. The caravan leader shared water and bread and helped recover the scattered silk.

That night, Sammi sat by the fire and looked up at the stars. They were brighter than she had ever seen. She realised that the Silk Road was not just for trade—it was a road of courage, teamwork, and learning.

The next morning, they continued their journey. Along the way, they met traders from many lands. Sammi helped translate and explain prices. People were amazed that a child could speak so many languages. Some gave her small gifts, and others taught her songs from their homes.

Finally, they reached the busy Western Market. The streets were filled with people selling silk, jade, spices, animals, and tools. Jayden sold his silk and earned enough money to support his family.

Later, Sammi followed Jayden into a quiet temple. Inside hung a silk brocade exactly like the one she had seen in the museum. She reached out and touched it.

Everything began to spin.

When Sammi opened her eyes, she was back in the museum. The brocade lay quietly behind the glass. People walked past her, unaware of what had happened.

Sammi looked down at her hand. She was holding a tiny piece of silk with a lotus pattern.

She read the information sign beside the display:

“Western Han Dynasty silk brocade, donated by merchant Jayden. A small scratch was found in the fabric, believed to be marks of survival.”

Sammi smiled softly.

She now understood that the Silk Road was not just a trade route. It was a road made by brave people, shared knowledge, and endless journeys.

And this adventure would stay with her forever.

The Bronze Key of the Silk Road

The King's School Qianhai Shenzhen, Chen, Ke Xin Karen – 13

I am a Grade 7 student, and this term we learned about the Silk Road in our China Studies class. I was fascinated by how one road could connect so many countries, cultures, and people. One day, our teacher took us on a field trip to the Silk Road Museum, and I felt excited as soon as we entered.

As I walked through the museum, my eyes were immediately drawn to a bronze key lying inside a glass display box. The key was beautifully made, with complex and almost ghostly patterns spreading across its surface like thin vines frozen in time. The metal looked old, yet it shone with a soft, ancient glow under the museum lights. Its edges were smooth but clearly shaped, as if every curve and angle had been carefully crafted by a skilled artisan hundreds of years ago.

The patterns were fascinating—tiny, detailed designs that looked like flowers or perhaps symbols from a long-lost language. Each line was carved so precisely that it felt as if the key was hiding secrets, waiting to be unlocked. I wondered who had once held it and what doors it had opened.

I moved closer, my breath almost fogging the glass. The key seemed to pulse with a faint, strange light, casting dancing shadows on the display around it. I imagined its weight—heavy, yet perfectly balanced, fitting exactly into the hand that was meant to use it. The air around it felt charged, as if even the smallest particles carried the history and magic of the Silk Road. I felt a strange connection to it and couldn't look away.

As I continued staring, everything suddenly began to spin. Colours swirled together, and my head felt dizzy. When the spinning stopped, I blinked in disbelief.

I was no longer in the Silk Road Museum.

I looked around and saw ancient buildings, people wearing unfamiliar clothes, and long caravans of camels moving slowly through the streets. The air smelled of dust and spices. My heart raced as I realised what had happened. *Oh my goodness*, I thought, *I've travelled through time—to Chang'an, the ancient starting point of the Silk Road!*

At first, I was completely shocked. I pinched myself to check if I was dreaming. It hurt, which meant this was real. After the surprise faded, excitement rushed in. Since I had already travelled through time, I decided to be brave and experience this journey fully.

Nearby, a group of traders were preparing to set off. They carefully loaded silk, porcelain, and other valuable goods onto their camels. I walked over, trying to stay calm even though I felt nervous and excited at the same time.

"Hello," I said politely. "May I join your caravan? I want to travel along the Silk Road."

The traders looked at me with curiosity. One of them, a kind-looking man with a thick beard, asked, "Where are you from? We have never seen you before."

I didn't know how to explain the truth, so I replied, "I'm from a faraway place, and I really want to see the Silk Road."

The man studied me for a moment before smiling warmly. "Alright. You may come with us—but you must help take care of the camels and goods."

“Of course!” I answered quickly.

So I joined the caravan. Every day, we walked under the burning sun, following endless paths of sand and stone. At night, we set up tents and gathered around small fires, sharing food and stories. The traders told me about the cities we would pass through, such as Dunhuang, and the different people we might meet.

Everything amazed me. The desert was vast and silent during the day, but at night the sky was filled with stars brighter than I had ever seen. The camels were gentle and patient, and although the journey was tiring, I felt strong and alive. Each day brought new challenges and discoveries.

After many days, we arrived in Dunhuang, a small town surrounded by sandy hills. We entered caves filled with paintings of flying fairies drifting through colourful clouds. The walls were covered with stories of belief, travel, and hope. Standing there, I felt how important the Silk Road was—not just for trade, but for culture and ideas.

We rested for two days before continuing our journey. Suddenly, a woman dressed entirely in black appeared in front of us.

“She is called Doris,” one trader whispered nervously.

“Give me the key!” Doris shouted sharply.

My heart pounded. I held the bronze key tightly, stepping back in fear. Suddenly, it slipped from my hand and fell onto the sand. The traders rushed forward, and Doris, startled by the crowd, turned and ran away. I quickly picked up the key, my hands shaking, and held it tighter than before.

Soon after, dark clouds gathered in the sky, and a violent sandstorm swept across the land. Sand struck my face painfully, and it became hard to breathe. The traders quickly formed a circle with the camels, and we hid inside. An old man handed me a small bottle of water. I took a sip—it tasted sweet and comforting, giving me strength.

When the storm passed, we continued our journey, singing songs to lift our spirits. But danger appeared again—quicksand.

One of our companions stepped onto soft sand, and his leg sank immediately. “Help! Help!” he cried as the sand slowly pulled him down.

Fear spread, but no one panicked. We grabbed long wooden sticks and threw them to him. He held on tightly, and together we pulled with all our strength. The camels leaned back and helped with their powerful bodies.

Our arms ached, our legs trembled, and the sun burned above us. Still, we encouraged one another, shouting, “Keep going! We can do it!”

At last, we pulled him free. Covered in sand but safe, he smiled weakly. We rested together, drinking water and breathing heavily. That moment taught me how dangerous the Silk Road could be—and how important teamwork was.

That night, we lit a small fire. The traders shared flatbread and raisins, played music, and told stories from their homelands. I listened so closely that I forgot to eat, feeling peaceful and grateful.

After many more days, we finally reached the end of the Silk Road. There stood a grand building with a shining roof, filled with gold coins and bright stones. Inside, I saw another bronze key resting on a table, exactly like the one I carried.

I walked forward slowly and placed the two keys together.

A low buzzing sound filled the air, and everything began to spin once more.

When I opened my eyes, I was back in the museum. The bronze key was gone.

My teacher walked over and asked, “What are you doing standing here?”

I felt dizzy as my classmates gathered nearby. “Come on, let’s go,” the teacher said, smiling.

As I walked away, everything felt unreal—the ancient streets, the long journey, the sandstorms, and the shining building. Yet I could still taste the sweet water and hear the traders’ songs in my mind.

It must have been real, even if no one would believe me.

What a magical, exciting, and unforgettable journey it was.

Journey of a Thousand Roads

The King's School Qianhai Shenzhen, Cui, Emily – 12

It's midnight on new Earth B1C2, and Kelly— who should be sleeping— is wide awake. She's laying on the jelly sofa in the family living room, watching the annual seahorse competition. Her mom, Ms. Garfungle, makes her way downstairs to the living room. "Why aren't you sleeping?" she asks with a sleepy voice.

Kelly looks at her mother, with boredom on her face and says "I could go to sleep, if you tell me a bedtime story." Ms.Garfungle gently rests Kelly's head on her lap and she starts telling her a story.

Once upon a time, there was a sixteen-year-old boy named Dawson, who lived in a small house in Chang'an. After a long day of catching and selling fish, he went deep inside the meat market to his usual pork stall. Mr. Linken welcomed him with a tight smile, holding a meat cleaver in his hand. "Any good sales today?" asked Dawson.

Mr.Linken replied "Same old, same old." Shaking his head. "Let me see if I can wrap something up for you," He added, as he rummaged for some meat scraps.

Dawson asked, "Is Luigi home today?"

"Yeah, you can stop by the house on your way back," Mr Linken answered as he handed Dawson a piece of pork wrapped in a banana leaf.

"Thank you!" Dawson shouted behind him as he took off running, he missed his best friend and couldn't wait to see him again. As he arrived at Luigi's home, he shouted "Luigi! Guess who?!"

Inside the home Luigi answered, "Is that you, Dawson?" as he opened the door.

"What did your cousin say? The healer said my brother only has six months left," Dawson said.

"Don't worry Dawson, my cousin wrote to me, his letter just arrived today, so we will read it together." As they read the letter, Dawson finally found the answer he'd been looking for, so he ran home quickly to tell his mom.

When Dawson arrived at home, he was sweating and panting trying to tell his mother what he had found. Dawson said, out of breath, "I found a method that could help him!" Dawson helped his mom to a chair, because his mom was blind and couldn't see, Dawson kept on talking.

"Luigi's cousin told us there is a special magic flower called Majiang; it's at the eastern end of the world, and this is our last chance." Dawson added, "There is a way to go called the Silk Road, it connects every place."

His mom said worriedly, "I don't want you to be in danger."

Dawson answered, "Everything will be okay, and Luigi will go with me." Finally, his mom compromised but Dawson needed to promise he would come back in two months.

Next morning, Dawson got up early, and he found a way to borrow a donkey because he couldn't afford a horse. Suddenly he saw Luigi coming with a large bag of food and supplies. Luigi said loudly, "Hey Dawson! let's go!" Dawson nodded firmly to Luigi and then they embarked on their journey.

They went straight east along the river, from day to night, from sunrise to sunset, from city to suburbs. After one month, they were only halfway through their journey. They had no idea how long it would take. Luigi's cousin had only said that if they see a big tree full of yellow apples, it means that they have arrived.

Luigi asked "Well... Dawson, do you really know where we are now?" The long journey made Dawson exhausted. He didn't even notice that Luigi was talking to him. Luigi, who didn't get a response, asked again. "Dawson? Are you listening?"

Dawson finally turned his head and answered, "What do you mean by that?" with an irritable tone.

Luigi didn't understand his tone and continued, "Do you have any problems with me?"

Dawson muttered, "Maybe I should go on by myself," Luigi knew that Dawson said it loud enough for him to hear on purpose.

Luigi and Dawson quarreled, and they didn't want to talk to each other, but they continued to walk tacitly. It would be dark soon. They found a place to sleep. Dawson knew that he had a bad attitude in the morning, so he took the initiative to invite Luigi to sleep in the tree hole he found.

But Luigi was still angry, so he refused him. Dawson felt guilty, and had no choice but to go back to sleep.

The second day, Dawson got up in a daze. He looked into the distance as usual, looking for the figure of the yellow apple tree. This time he finally found it! He saw a tree not far away. He couldn't wait to tell Luigi the good news. He looked around for a long time, but he couldn't find Luigi. He only saw the hat that Luigi often wore and some huge footprints. Dawson followed the footprints and came to a mysterious tribe.

Dawson crawled into the village, and found that Luigi was tied to a wooden stake. He saw that there was no one around, so he decided to rush up immediately and try to help Luigi untie the rope. He didn't notice that someone was watching him.

Dawson was busy untying the rope and didn't see the indigenous people who were slowly approaching him, until he felt something sharp poked his shoulder. Dawson turned around and found that he had been surrounded by a group of indigenous people with spears in their hands. Dawson slowly raised his hand and looked at them timidly. After a while the leader asked, "Who are you? what do you want?"

Dawson said cautiously, "we are from Chang'an. my brother has a seriously illness, and I heard that there is a flower in the east called Majiang that can cure my brother. We have come here to find it!"

The leader of the village thought for a while and didn't say anything. Dawson seemed to have made up his mind and said, "Sir, can you let my friend go and let him find the flower and bring it back? In exchange, I will stay here."

The leader said, "You don't have to sacrifice yourself for this, I will make an exception for you. Our village holds a warrior competition every year. The winner can make any request. Would you like to try it?" The leader's words were like a ray of light shining in the dark world of Dawson's mind, which made him cheer up again.

By noon, the competition was ready to begin. Luigi was stunned, he didn't know what happened, and he was so worried about Dawson. Outside the room the referee was explaining the rules.

"There are two games in total, the first game tests your skill at diving. The second game is a test of tacit understanding. This time, the winner not only has the right to make a request, but also will be named the new Guardian of the Silk Road!" When the referee finished speaking, there was a warm applause.

All the contestants came to the riverside. This time there were ten warriors, but only four iron plates lay submerged in the river— which meant most of them would be eliminated in the first round. With the sound of the horn, the game began. This was Dawson's strength; he used to go fishing very day. Dawson quickly dived into the water; he soon saw an iron plate laying on a stone.

Unfortunately, he was not the only one who saw it, and several people swam desperately towards the stone. Some people floated to the surface of the water to breathe, which made it easier for Dawson to get the plate. Dawson eventually became the first person to get the iron plate.

Then came the second test. Dawson teamed up with a strong young man from the village. They needed to take turns climbing over the obstacles and strived to complete the course the fastest. Dawson's team took the lead. Dawson's teammate ran very fast, about ten meters in front of the other team, and Dawson rushed out like the wind. This was the first time he had ran so fast. Unexpectedly, Dawson's team won. He and his teammate decided to give the right of making the request to Dawson, while the young man would take the title of Silk Road Guardian.

In the end, Dawson and Luigi brought the Majiang flower back to Chang'an. Thanks to the flower's magic, Dawson's brother slowly regained his health. And Dawson kept his promise to his mother— the entire journey, there and back, only took him a month and a half.

As Ms. Garfungle finished her story, she heard the soft sound of Kelly's snoring. She smiled to herself and decided they'd spend the night curled up on the living room sofa, right where they were.

The Journey of a Lost Trader

The King's School Qianhai Shenzhen, Fraser, Madeline – 13

The desert became silent before it became dangerous. Jacob realized this when the wind stopped and the sound of the caravan's bells faded into nothing. The air felt heavy and the land around him looked the same in every direction. Sand stretched endlessly under the bright sky, with no trees, no buildings, and no signs of life.

Only hours earlier, Jacob had been walking beside camels and merchants, feeling proud as he guarded his valuable cargo. Now he stood alone, his heart beating fast, realizing for the first time that the Silk Road was not just a place of trade— it was a place where mistakes could cost lives.

Jacob had waited years for this journey. His father was a respected trader who travelled the Silk Road many times. When Jacob was younger, he listened to stories of faraway cities filled with gold, spices, and silk. He dreamed of becoming a great trader himself. When his father finally allowed him to join the caravan, Jacob felt ready.

He believed he was strong enough, smart enough, and brave enough to succeed.

Before the caravan left, his father placed a small wooden chest into Jacob's hands. Inside were fine rolls of blue silk, carefully wrapped to protect them from sand and heat. The silk was worth more than Jacob could imagine.

"Stay close to the caravan," his father warned. "Watch and listen. A trader learns from others before trusting himself."

Jacob nodded, but inside, he believed he already knew enough.

The caravan travelled for many days. Jacob enjoyed the movement of the camels, the noise of the merchants, and the feeling of importance he had when people noticed the chest he guarded. At night, the traders shared food and stories. Jacob listened but spoke little, thinking he would soon have stories of his own.

One afternoon, the caravan stopped at an oasis. Palm trees surrounded a pool of water, and travellers rested in the shade. Jacob felt safe. Curious voices and unfamiliar music drifted through the air. Wanting to explore, Jacob walked away from the group, promising himself he would return quickly.

Then the wind changed.

A wall of sand rose suddenly, blocking the sky. People shouted as the storm rushed toward them. Jacob ran for cover and hid behind rocks, pulling his cloak over his face. The sandstorm lasted longer than he expected. When the wind finally stopped and the air cleared, the oasis was silent.

The caravan was gone.

At first, Jacob believed they would return. He waited and called out, but no one answered. The sun burned his skin, and fear slowly filled his chest. He walked around the oasis, searching for tracks, but the sand had erased them.

As the day ended, Jacob understood the truth: he was alone.

That night, Jacob slept poorly. Every sound made him wake in fear. He clutched the chest tightly, wondering if the silk was now a blessing or a curse. In the morning, he chose a direction and began walking, hoping it would lead him back to the road.

The days that followed were the hardest of his life. The desert tested him in every way. The sun was cruel, and the nights were cold. Jacob learned to walk early in the morning and late in the evening. During the hottest hours, he rested in what little shade he could find. He took small sips of water, knowing that every drop mattered.

His sandals broke after several days. Using cloth torn from his clothing, Jacob tied them together. His hands became cracked and sore. His confidence disappeared, replaced by fear and careful thought. He tried to remember his father's words but wished he had listened more closely.

On the fourth day, Jacob saw a thin line of smoke in the distance. Weak but hopeful, he followed it. Soon, he reached a small group of nomadic herders resting near a shallow well.

They spoke a language Jacob did not understand, but they saw his dry lips and tired eyes.

Jacob bowed deeply and offered a piece of silk as a gift. The oldest man studied the silk, then looked at Jacob and smiled. He waved him closer.

The herders gave Jacob water and food. He ate slowly, careful not to make himself sick. One of the women showed him how to find water by watching animals and plants.

That night, Jacob slept beside their fire, feeling safe for the first time in days.

Before he left, the old man placed a small charm into Jacob's hand. "This road is not kind," he said in broken trade speech. "Remember— no one survives it alone."

Jacob thanked him and continued his journey.

Several days later, Jacob met a Buddhist monk walking quietly across the desert. The monk owned very little and walked calmly, as if he did not fear the land. They shared water and rested together. That night, under a sky filled with stars, the monk spoke.

"Loss teaches us more than comfort," the monk said. "You lost your caravan, but you found yourself."

Jacob thought about this as he walked on.

At last, Jacob reached a large oasis town. Traders from many lands filled the streets. He heard languages from every direction and smelled food from distant places. Relief washed over him. He had survived.

That night, thieves tried to steal his chest. Instead of panicking, Jacob stayed calm. He spoke carefully and offered them information instead of fighting. After a long pause, the thieves laughed and left him alone.

The next morning, Jacob joined a new caravan. When he delivered the silk, the buyer nodded in approval and paid him well. Jacob accepted the silver, but it no longer felt like the most important thing.

When Jacob stepped back onto the Silk Road, dust on his boots and scars on his hands, he knew he had changed. The desert had taken his pride but given him wisdom.

The Silk Road was not just a path for goods—it was a path of people, knowledge, and survival. And as Jacob continued forward, he knew that no matter where the road led, he would never truly be lost again.

Lost and Found

The King's School Qianhai Shenzhen, Gong, Selo – 12

Alden ran into the post station, closed the gate, and put the wooden plank behind the gate, out of breath. The robbers kicked the door, hit it, and attacked the gate with their swords, but the gate would still not open. The robbers went away. And Alden sighed with relief. When he went to his room, arrows suddenly pierced through the gate from two holes. The people in the post station all screamed loudly. Some of them rushed out to fight back. They were surprised that there were only two bowmen on the street, and they fought them with their swords.

"Ouch!" the two bowmen screamed and fell down, bleeding heavily.

Alden was a smart boy who was also brave. He lived in a big house, but his mother passed away a long time ago. His father went missing on the Silk Road, so he decided to go to find his dad. He made a lot of preparations for this adventure. He read a lot of books about the Silk Road, and he did a lot of exercises, and kept a sword from his father at hand all the time.

He started the first day of his journey on the Silk Road. After traveling more than ten kilometers. He found a bazaar. Out of the blue, one person shouted, Thief! Catch him! Then a man ran past Alden. Alden saw he was wearing a lot of jewelry. Alden also saw a group of people chasing him. Alden tried to help catch the thief. He ran extremely fast, and then pounced on the thief and tackled him to the ground. The group of people caught up too. They got the jewelry, thanked Alden, and gave him a horse to express their gratitude.

Alden moved more quickly by horse. The time flew by, and he was very hungry, so he used his sword to try and kill a wild bull on the prairie. But the bull saw him and ran away from him. Alden followed it and tried to catch up, but the bull didn't stop until it reached a cliff. The bull turned to face Alden and then charged at him. Alder quickly dodged the bull and used sword to kill it. The bull screamed and fell down, and Alden pulled the bull back where his horse was. He made a fire with some wood. He roasted some beef over the fire and had it for dinner. He quenched his thirst with stream water from the river. Then he fell asleep beside his horse.

The next day, he set off early to continue his journey and reached the desert around noon. He saw a lot of sand foxes, and approached them, when all of a sudden, a rattlesnake came into his view. He turned around instantly, jumped onto his horse, and rode away as fast as he could. But the rattle snake chased closely behind. It leapt and bit the horse's hind leg, and the horse fell to the ground after a few meters, unable to get up again. Alden did not hesitate; he ran as fast as he could. But the rattlesnake still chased after him. Alden was very scared and terrified. But he did not stop; instead, he ran faster and faster until he reached a field of cactus. The rattlesnake stopped, but Alden walked into the cactus patch. He made a small cut in a cactus and drank the water inside. He made sure that the rattle snake was gone, then walked out of the cactus patch.

He kept going without any stops till night He found the post station. However, bandits attacked the post station. Luckily, they defeated the bandits. But the next day, when Alden set off on a camel he got from the station, he was attacked by a group of bandits again. He was completely unprepared, so the bandits knocked him out, and captured him.

When he woke up, he found himself in an iron prison. Across from his cell was another, with a man inside. The man waved at Alden and spoke. "You're finally awake!"

Alden grabbed the iron bars, shook them and asked, "Why are you here? Are there any other people in the cells?"

"My name is Solen, I have been in this cell for 5 years. I used to be a spy among the bandits—pretending to be one while helping my friend Edward. We defeated the bandits in the end, but some remaining bandits captured

me and killed my companion, Edward. Now there are only you, me, and the ten bandits. But the bandits are gone now— they must have gone out to rob people.”

Alden was confused, because his dad was called Edward. So, he said, “My name is Alde

“Wait! Are you, his son ?” Solen asked.

“Yes, I am.” Alden replied.

After talking for a while, the two became good friends. Alden found the bandits had not taken the sword. He drew the sword which his father had left him, struck the prison bars with all his might, finally breaking them. He then helped Solen escape as well. They hid in a cave near the bandits' base. They found Edward's dead body, and in his clothes, Alden found a letter.

It said, “Alden, if you're reading this letter, you must be a brave warrior already. You've set foot on the Silk Road and surely overcome countless hardships. Keep going! Defeat those bandits! Beat them up! Show them how powerful you are!”

Alden put the letter in his pocket, and found a bow on Edward's body. He gave the bow to Solen and said, "Take this bow! Let's defeat those bandits together!"

While they waited for the bandits to come back, they used sticks and stones to make a lot of strong arrows. When the bandits returned, Alden and Solen charged at them in anger, Alden took charge of close combat, while Solen was handling long-range attacks. They worked together seamlessly and defeated the bandits one by one.

After the battle ended, they set off home and returned to their home town. Alden and Solen became best friends. They helped each other, helped those in need, and worked together to catch a lot of bad guys. Alden realized everything has two sides. Though his father had passed away, he gained courage and a true friend.

One could not have happened without the other.

Peace or Revenge

The King's School Qianhai Shenzhen, Han, Johnny – 13

As the sword struck Rafa's shield, he thrust his blade into the enemy and breathed heavily.

"Are there more?" Rafa asked.

Rafa stood in the Byzantine camp as the battle ended, a man of God who had joined the Crusades not for glory, wealth, or even faith, but for vengeance. His father had been killed in battle, and Rafa believed only revenge could ease his pain. After a brutal ambush by a Muslim army, Rafa questioned his choices. *Why did I ever join the Crusades?* he wondered. The answer came quickly—he had come to avenge his father.

Later that night, under the cover of darkness, Rafa packed his belongings and slipped away from camp. His plan was to travel to Damascus to gather information about his father's killer. The only details he knew were that the man was missing an ear and had a scar on his right cheek.

Rafa approached a traveling merchant and asked, "Do you know anything about a man with a missing ear and a scar on his right cheek?"

"Hmm," the merchant said. "I may have seen someone like that. I'll need something in return."

"What?" Rafa asked.

"Dinars."

Rafa paid reluctantly. The merchant leaned in and said, "You may be looking for Imran, a Muslim soldier turned trader."

Rafa recognized the name. His father's old comrades had spoken of Imran before.

"Where did he go?" Rafa asked.

"Along the Silk Road, trading," the merchant replied.

At sunrise, Rafa began his journey, moving from caravan to caravan, walking mile by mile. Along the road, he met a Hindu trader named Amir. Amir's camel was injured, and since they were traveling in the same direction, they decided to camp together.

That night, they spoke about life, politics, and family.

"Do you have family?" Amir asked.

"Yes," Rafa replied. "A sister, an older brother, and my mother."

"And your father?" Amir asked.

"He died in the First Crusade," Rafa said. "Killed by a man named Imran. I try to forgive him, as my Lord commands, but the anger inside me is too strong."

Amir nodded. “I understand. I was once a slave. I lived under many restrictions, but when I was freed, I finally felt peace. Rafa, you are free to choose your path—but your actions should come from joy and compassion.”

Rafa was stunned by Amir’s words.

Suddenly, thirteen raiders attacked their camp. Rafa fought fiercely, cutting down enemy after enemy, but soon he was surrounded. One raider knocked his sword away. Rafa believed his life was ending.

Then Amir acted. With no battle experience, he grabbed Rafa’s fallen sword, struck down a raider, and threw the weapon back.

With renewed strength and courage, Rafa defeated the remaining attackers. After the battle, Amir and Rafa were no longer just companions—they were brothers.

Once Rafa’s wounds healed, he said farewell and continued on. In Samarkand, he entered a tavern and met Mr. Lin, a Chinese merchant selling silk. Over time, they became close friends. Mr. Lin shared Chinese poetry and philosophy, especially teachings about calm, balance, and peace.

Slowly, Rafa began to change. His anger faded with each conversation.

One day, Rafa saw Imran—the man he had hunted for so long. Yet Imran was not acting as a villain. He was feeding the poor and caring for the needy.

Rafa stood still, torn by his thoughts. In the end, he turned away. Instead of choosing revenge, he joined Mr. Lin’s caravan.

Over the years, Rafa found peace. He learned the purpose of the Silk Road—not just trade, but connection and understanding. He learned Mr. Lin’s language and defended travellers from raiders. Once a man driven by vengeance, Rafa became a guardian of peace.

When Rafa finally died, Amir and Mr. Lin carried his body to Constantinople. He was buried beside his father, close to his family—his journey complete.

The Silk Road of My Family

The King's School Qianhai Shenzhen, He, Alice – 12

Back to 138 BC. The streets of Chang'an were full of people and noise. I am Lin, a 14-year-old boy. I wore an old shirt, and I had a small bag of jasmine tea on my belt. That day, I stood at the city's western gate. I held the rope of my camel, Doudou, tightly. My hands shook a little. "Stay close to me," my uncle said. He fixed the silk bundles on his camel. "The Gobi Deserts are dangerous. It doesn't care if you are a child or a man." I nodded, but my eyes looked far away. Golden sand dunes stretched to the sky. I could see other caravans moving slowly. That was my first trip on the Silk Road. I felt scared, but also very excited. For the first seven days, we walked a great deal. The sun blazed down relentlessly. The heat penetrated my cloth shoes, making my toes ache. When the wind blew, fine grains of sand flew into my eyes and mouth. I used my old shirt to wipe my face again and again. We stopped for short breaks now and then. I drank jasmine tea from my small bag. My camel Doudou nuzzled my hand, as if she knew I was tired. Every night, we sat around a small campfire. Elderly merchants told stories. They talked about thieves who lurked behind sand dunes, and ancient cities buried under the sand. I sat next to my uncle and listened carefully. The camel bells rang softly in the dark, like a quiet lullaby. The fire's warm glow shone on their wrinkled faces. I felt safe, even in the vast, empty desert. On the fifth day, we climbed a big sand dune. We spotted another caravan far away. Their camels were draped in colorful cloths. Their leader was a man named Karim. He had a thick black beard and a hat trimmed with thin gold threads. He laughed when he saw me staring at his glass bottles. The bottles contained a yellow spice called saffron. "Have you ever seen this spice from far away lands?" He asked. He poured a little into a small cloth bag and gave it to me. I put the bag to my nose. It had a warm, strong aroma — nothing like the mild ginger we used at home. My uncle smiled and handed Karim a piece of bright red silk. Karim's eyes lit up. He held the silk up to the sun. "This silk is like soft sunlight!" He exclaimed. "My wife will be overjoyed when I take this back to Persia."

We shared some flatbread and dried figs with them before we left. Karim told me to keep the saffron as a gift. I tucked the small bag into my pouch, glad that we crossed paths with them. "My wife will be very happy," he said. "In Persia, we make carpets, but your silk is like soft sunlight." That night, we ate bread and dried fruit together. Karim told me about his home—about rivers with crystal-clear water where you could see fish swimming at the bottom, and musicians who played lutes that sounded like birds singing. I told him about Chang'an, a city of 100,000 people where palace roofs curved like dragon wings. "The Silk Road is not just about silk and spices," Karim said, tapping his chest. "It is about stories. We carry each other's hearts across the desert." I did not fully understand his words until a sandstorm hit three days later. The sky turned pitch-black. The wind howled like a wounded animal. Our camels stampeded in fear. I let go of Doudou's rope and stumbled through the sand, coughing violently. Then a strong hand grabbed my arm. It was a nomad woman, her face covered by a blue scarf. She pulled me into a small stone hut.

Inside, her family sat around a fire. Their children stared at me with wide eyes. She gave me a bowl of warm goat's milk. Her husband had scars on his arms. He pointed to the sand outside. "The storm will stop by morning," he said, using a few Chinese words he had picked up from travelers. "We have lived here for many years. We know the desert well."

When the storm passed, our caravan was scattered. My uncle was overjoyed to find me safe. He gave the nomad family a piece of silk as a thank-you. The woman smiled and gave me a wooden comb carved with camel patterns. "For your hair," she said. "Remember—the desert can be kind." I kept that comb for the rest of the trip, touching it whenever I felt scared. We reached Kashgar a month later. The city was filled with the scents of roasted lamb and mint tea. The market burst with colors. Vendors sold jade stones, clay pots, and sacks of pistachios. I met a girl my age named Zara. She taught me to weave a small rug with blue wool, and I showed her how to make a paper crane. "My father says the Silk Road brings people together," Zara said, tying a knot in the wool. "Even if we speak different languages, we can still be friends."

When we returned to Chang'an, our camels carried more than just silk. They were loaded with glass bottles, Persian carpets, and the stories of all the people we met. I learned that

the Silk Road was not merely a road—it was a web of friendships, connecting China to the rest of the world. Now it is 2026. I am Xiao Lin, Lin's great-great-great-grandson. I sit in a classroom in Almaty, Kazakhstan. Next to me is a girl named Aisha, her hair braided with colorful beads. We are part of a "Belt and Road" program that links China with other countries. Today, we are working on a project about the Silk Road. Aisha shows me a photo of her grandmother, who still weaves carpets using the same techniques Zara taught my ancestor. "My grandmother says the Silk Road never died," Aisha says. "It just transformed into something new."

Last week, we visited a train station. Cargo trains from China bring smartphones and solar panels, and take wheat and sunflower oil back. The station manager, Timur, tells us: "Once, goods took months to travel by camel. Now, they take just a few days by train. But the heart of the Silk Road remains the same—we still share what we have and learn from one another."

After school, Aisha and I go to a café. We share a plate of laghman, a noodle dish from Central Asia. She teaches me to say "hello" in Kazakh: "Salam!" I teach her to say "ni hao" in Chinese. Outside, children play soccer in the park. A street musician plays a tune on a dombra, a traditional Kazakh instrument. The music reminds me of Karim's stories about lutes that sound like birds singing. That night, I take out the wooden comb that given to me by my grand grande grand mother. It rests on my desk. I trace the camel patterns with my finger and think about how much the world has changed. The Silk Road began with a boy and his camel, carrying silk to distant lands. Now, it is a network of trains, ports, and online connections. But its spirit endures: to reach out, share, and make friends. As I write this story, I know a new tale is unfolding somewhere. A girl in Kenya uses a Chinese solar panel to power her school. A boy in Portugal eats jasmine tea cookies sent by his pen pal in Hangzhou. The Silk Road is not a story of the past. It is a book we are still writing, one friendship at a time. So, I pick up my pen and start: "The year is 2026, and the Silk Road is alive."

The God Under The Road

The King's School Qianhai Shenzhen, Hu, Oscar – 11

As the guardian swept its hand to the group, despair had barely just begun...

In a world stitched together by peace and love, there lay a legendary legacy by Zhang Qian a Han Dynasty explorer whose journey changed to the annals of history. This was the Silk Road: not only of dirt and stone through deserts and mountains, but a living, breathing marketplace where the air hummed with laughter, the clinking of coins, and the sweet scent of fruits carried from a million valleys. It was a place where countries changed from weak to strong. Where a Han trader could swap bolts of silk, and threads of gold for grapes so juicy they burst like sunshine, brought by a merchant from the distant Western Regions; where jewelers displayed necklaces strung with rubies that glowed like captured fireflies, glistening in the market's golden light. Zhang Qian had first gone west not for profit, but to weave bridges between powerful kingdoms, and his legacy bloomed like a flower in spring and proved that kindness was as valuable as any gem or spice. The road brimmed with treasures that fit for emperors' jewelry carved from jade, each piece a silent storyteller, whispering of the craftsmen who'd poured their hearts into its curves. But the true magic of the Silk Road was not in its goods—it was in the people. A Han weaver might teach a Western artist the secret of dyeing silk with petals, the color to the fabric like a dream; a Western philosopher might tell tales of wisdom with a Han scholar, the liquid dark and rich as ancient knowledge; children from distant lands would chase each other through the market's bustling lanes, their chatter mixing a dozen languages into a melody sweeter than any orchestra. It was an endless fair where every exchange was a gift; every conversation was a time that you could learn, and every step was a reminder that peace was not just a distant dream, it was something you could achieve. One silk thread, one sun-warmed grape, and one sparkling jewel at a time.

Life was as perfect as a shiny polished dagger, until jealousy that is a venomous snake sank its fangs into the heart of the Han emperor.

"The Silk Road is too short!" he roared, his voice echoing off the palace walls like thunder.

"Extend it! I want more jewels, more rare spices, more wondrous technologies from other kingdoms!"

So, he sent his merchants to stretch the road further west, into undiscovered deserts where even the bravest soldiers feared to step on. Time slipped in the blink of an eye, but not a single merchant returned. As the emotions changed to impatience, the emperor sent a second group to find where they went. Days later, a lone merchant named Steve stumbled back to the palace, his face gaunt and streaked with tears; his lips wobbled like an earthquake. Before the emperor could shout out a single word, the man's voice slowly told the truth:

"When we reached the halfway point of the Silk Road, we spotted what looked like white branches from the desert sand," he gasped. "But when we drew near... they weren't branches. They were the bones of the first group of merchants."

His words violently struck the emperor's heart. "Then a sandstorm erupted—violent, furious, a monster with razor-sharp claws commanded swirling sand that swallowed the sky. I heard screams loud and in despair, fading into the wind. I ran as fast as I could. When the storm finally ended, my friends were gone. I am the only one left."

The emperor was furious he exploded like a volcano, "Find out what happened and I will reward you with your lives!"

The merchant shuddered as his blood stopped flowing around his body and nodded before leaving the court.

Days later, he knew he could not face the monster alone—not when it had swallowed two caravans whole. He gathered a team a mythologist named Garret, whose mind was a library of ancient tales and whose eyes could read the secrets of legends; a soldier named Henry, as strong as a bear and as quick as light, his sword fast enough

to slice the air in half; and a wise man, whose calmness was unbreakable, even in the face of death. With four camels loaded with supplies, the group set off, with hope that glowed like a torch in the dark. As they trekked along the Silk Road, the mythologist pored over his tattered scrolls; his brow furrowed with concentration. “There is an old legend,” he said, his voice low and grave, “That when a road is stretched too far, too greedily, it awakens a guardian a god who claims the road as his own and slays anyone who dares cross its halfway mark. They call him the Titan.”

“How can we defeat this beast and get revenge to our friends?” the merchant asked

“The scrolls do not say,” the mythologist admitted, “but I suspect he has a hidden weakness maybe we will find when we face him.”

As they reached the spot where the merchants had vanished. The sky, once as blue as a diamond, turned pitch-black in a second, and the wind howled like a wolf. Sand whipped through the air, slapping their faces. As a sandstorm rose up, a large group of dust blocked out the sun. Lightning split the sky into two halves, and thunder boomed like an exploding bomb. Then, a beam of blue light shot from the ground to the clouds, so bright they couldn’t open their eyes. A huge hand lunged from the sand palm wide as a city square, fingers thick as rocks blocking the entire sky like a giant net. Then came a head, its eyes glowing red like lava, The Titan had awakened. He swung his arm with his hand. The blast threw the team several meters away; their bodies slammed into the rocks like puppets. But they scrambled to their feet, as the wise man’s mind started to think of a plan.

The soldier charged first, his sword raised high, but his blade struck the Titan’s skin and bounced off, just like a useless ball that bounced off of the wall. Then, the mythologist, the wise man, and the merchant leaped onto the Titan’s back, their weapons stabbing and slashing like a group of angry bees. The Titan let out a painful mumble his wounds bleeding a black liquid like ink. He shook his head angrily, and the four of them went flying, crashing into the sand. The mythologist cried out, his leg twisted. Before they could recover, the Titan’s hand shot out like a bullet again, grabbing the soldier and swinging him into the distance. The wise man and merchant jumped forward, they stuck to the Titan’s arm, but it swung them away like flies. The wise man’s head hit a rock, and he crumpled to the ground. The merchant was left alone his left hand broken, his body trembled in fear as the feeling of death overtook his body, he knew he couldn’t beat it. He stumbled toward the Titan his steps unnatural and raised his trembling hand to the god’s face. In that moment, something changed. The Titan’s red eyes softened, turning green, his gaze suddenly gentle. The beast froze, his massive body going still. What had stopped the god? It was love, a warm, golden emotion that flowed from the merchant’s heart like a river, and flowed to the god’s heart dissolving anger. The merchant smiled and the Titan stared at him, his face softening. The Titan’s gentle expression reminded him of his own family of a time before. But the Titan’s wounds were too severe. He let out a soft sigh, and slowly sank to the sand, his eyes fluttering shut like a withering flower. The sky cleared; the storm vanished. The sun emerged from behind the clouds, its light covering the world, painting the Silk Road in warm light as if nothing had happened.

And somewhere, in the desert, the legend was born. A story that love, even at the most despairing of times, can calm the strongest things and the Silk Road changed to normal again.

A Lesson Saved in Time

The King's School Qianhai Shenzhen, Jia, Rui Jia Rika – 12

We were learning about the Silk Road in our history class. Our teacher explained that the Silk Road, also known as the Silk Route, usually refers to the land Silk Road. In a broader sense, it can be divided into the Land Silk Road and the Maritime Silk Road. It was a huge network of Eurasian trade routes that existed from the 2nd century BCE to the mid-15th century, stretching over more than 7,000 kilometres.

The teacher explained that the Silk Road began during the Western Han Dynasty. It was pioneered when Emperor Wu sent Zhang Qian on important missions to the Western Regions. Starting from Chang'an, the imperial capital, the road passed through Gansu and Xinjiang, reached Central Asia and West Asia, and finally connected the countries near the Mediterranean Sea. The Silk Road played an extremely important role in world history. It was not only a trade route, but also a bridge for cultural exchange, political cooperation, and social development between East and West.

As the teacher spoke, I tried to imagine what it would be like to travel along such a road. Endless deserts, tall mountains, strange cities, and people from many different lands filled my mind. Compared to that, sitting in a classroom felt very ordinary.

Just then, the teacher reached into her bag and took out a shiny CD. Holding it up, she said, "This is called a *Time Archive*. It can preserve historical events, and when activated, it can fully recreate them."

The classroom instantly became quiet.

A student raised his hand and asked, "So... is everything inside the Time Archive real, or is it just like watching a movie?"

The teacher paused for a moment, thinking carefully. "I don't know for sure," she replied honestly. "I only have a rough guess. The Time Archives created in the past were probably designed to affect the past of our current timeline. The ones we create now might influence the past of the future. It's a very complicated idea."

She continued, "Think of it like loading a save file in a game. You overwrite the existing timeline with the one stored in the archive. Once the file is loaded, the Time Archive is completely destroyed."

The class whispered excitedly.

"But don't worry," the teacher added with a smile. "We're not going in to change history. We're only going to observe and gain first-hand experience. That will help you understand and remember the knowledge much better than reading it from a textbook."

Then she clapped her hands. "Now everyone line up. Those who've used a Time Archive before, go first. First-timers, stay behind and watch carefully how the others enter. I'll be the last one to make sure everyone gets in safely."

She placed the CD carefully on the desk. One by one, students stepped forward and disappeared as if they were being absorbed into the air. My heart beat faster and faster as it got closer to my turn.

When it was finally my turn, I took a deep breath and stepped forward.

The moment I entered the saved file, my vision blurred. When everything became clear again, I found myself standing on a wide street in ancient Chang'an—today's Xi'an. Tall city walls rose around me, and people in long robes walked past carrying baskets and scrolls. The air smelled of dust, food, and smoke.

But something was wrong.

My classmates and teachers were nowhere to be seen.

I stood there, unsure what to do. The street was busy, but I felt strangely alone. Just as I was starting to panic, a group of people approached from the distance. They were leading camels loaded with heavy goods.

I gathered my courage and stepped forward. “Excuse me,” I said politely. “Are you merchants travelling the Silk Road? I got separated from my classmates. Could you please take me with you?”

The merchants looked at me in surprise. They exchanged a few quiet words, glancing at my unfamiliar clothes. Finally, one of them nodded. “Alright,” he said. “You can come with us.”

Relief washed over me.

After a short rest, we set off. Leaving Chang’an behind, we travelled through Gansu and Xinjiang. Day after day, the scenery changed. Lush land slowly turned dry, and the air grew thinner.

When we reached the grasslands of Xinjiang, I was stunned. Flocks of cattle and sheep grazed freely across vast emerald-green fields. The grassland stretched endlessly beneath the blue sky, like a colourful oil painting. The wind brushed gently across my face, carrying the smell of grass and earth. I stood there admiring the view for a long time, until the merchants laughed and urged me to hurry.

As we continued westward, the journey became harder. We crossed deserts where the sun burned fiercely during the day and the cold bit sharply at night. We climbed rocky paths and rested beside small oases. Every step reminded me how brave the ancient travellers were.

Finally, after many months, we reached our destination—a trading market in Rome.

The city was unlike anything I had ever seen. Tall buildings stood beside wide roads. The market was crowded and noisy, filled with people from all over the world. The merchants began trading immediately, unloading silk, porcelain, and tea.

One of them turned to me and said, “We’ll be busy for a while and won’t be able to watch you. You can explore the market on your own, but stay close. We’ll return to Chang’an together when we’re finished.”

With that, he walked away.

I wandered through the market in amazement. There were silk fabrics shining in the sunlight, delicate porcelain bowls, piles of spices with strong scents, colourful gemstones, gold and silver tools, fresh fruits, horses, camels, and unfamiliar crafts from distant lands. People spoke different languages, laughed, argued, and traded.

Days passed slowly. At first, everything felt exciting. But after a while, I began to feel restless. I missed my classmates and worried that something had gone wrong.

Just as I was starting to lose hope, the merchants finally returned. “Let’s go back,” one of them said.

And so, we retraced our long journey across deserts, grasslands, and mountains, all the way back to Chang’an.

A few days after arriving, everything around me suddenly blurred. When I opened my eyes, I was back in the classroom.

At last, I saw my teacher and classmates again.

My teacher rushed over, grabbed my hands tightly, and said, “That save file must have been stored for too long and glitched, sending you somewhere else. I was terrified when you didn’t appear with the others. Thank goodness you’re safe!”

Hearing this, I finally understood what had happened. I smiled, though my heart was still racing from the experience.

That night at home, I lay awake in bed, replaying everything I had seen and felt inside the Time Archive.

I realised that the Silk Road was far more than just a trade route. It was an important channel connecting the East and the West. Through it, goods circulated across continents. China's silk, tea, porcelain, and paper were exported to the West, while sesame, walnuts, grapes, and other goods were brought into China.

This exchange helped cities along the route, such as Chang'an and Samarkand, become prosperous trade centres filled with life and opportunity.

Culturally, the Silk Road connected ideas as well as goods. China's four great inventions spread westward, while Western knowledge in astronomy, mathematics, and medicine reached the East. Religions such as Buddhism and Christianity also travelled along this route, promoting cultural understanding and integration.

Politically, diplomatic relationships between Eastern and Western countries were strengthened. Alliances formed during the Han Dynasty encouraged cooperation and communication across regions that had once been completely isolated.

Before this lesson, the Silk Road had only been words in a textbook. But after experiencing it myself, those words came alive.

I knew I would never forget this history lesson. It taught me not only about the past, but also about courage, curiosity, and the power of connection across cultures and time.

The Silk Road Quest

The King's School Qianhai Shenzhen, Li, Laughing – 12

Alex was looking at a star to check the path, while Jeremy, a burly blacksmith, checked his sword and shield. Laughing was checking his Persian dictionary to prepare for the journey ahead. Berlin, an alchemist, prepared a potion. Their mission was seemingly simple: to deliver a crate of luxury medicinal herbs from Chang An to Rome.

“We can finally get together and go on adventures,” Alex said.

“Yes, we need to finish our mission and get money to celebrate!” Laughing said.

“Okay, fine. Let's enjoy our journey,” Jeremy said.

“I hope we can arrive in Rome safely,” Berlin said.

Three days into their journey they were setting up camp near a dried-up oasis. Suddenly, four wolves emerged from the debris. Their eyes were blood-red and they looked hungry.

“What bad luck!” Jeremy said. He smiled, looking to us. “Ready to fight with these beasts?”

The lead wolf lunged at Alex, its jaws snapping inches from his throat. Jeremy roared. Laughing darted between them, throwing sharp and small daggers at the wolf's neck. Jeremy seized the right moment and unsheathed his sword to hack off a wolf's head. The rest of the wolves could not escape, so they attacked more excitedly and looked fierce as demons.

“Their leader is dead. Why are they still fighting?” Berlin asked.

Alex reluctantly said, “Guys, our main goal is to deliver medicine to Rome. Could we try to escape?”

Four people began running, but unfortunately these wolves ran behind them.

“They seemed to regard us as a delectable food. This won't work in the long run! They are too fast! We don't have the stamina!” Laughing said.

“Wait, wait. I have an idea!” Berlin said. Berlin took out his mysterious package from his bag. Inside was a black bottle. “Catch it!” he said to Alex.

Alex caught it and threw the mysterious potion into the wolves' eyes. Their eyes were swollen, and they couldn't follow any more.

“Berlin, you are a genius!” Laughing said.

“Ok let's go and quickly and finish our work,” Berlin said.

“Where are we? Jeremy asked.

Alex was looking the stars. “According to my hypothesis, we are on Jade Mountain. We need go through the cave.”

Suddenly, a giant monster came from the ground and stood up. It stared evilly at the group. Its craggy skin was crusted like a torch, its fingers coiling like bars.

Alex, Jeremy, Berlin and Laughing felt a lot pressure.

“Regardless, we need to protect our medicine and defeat any evil monsters,” Laughing said.

Unexpectedly, the giant monster’s eyes became purple. Alex had to stare into its eyes. Suddenly Alex thought about his life. “Where am I?” Alex said. “This place was so cozy, is it home? I don’t want any more battles or adventure. I just want to accompany my dear parents. I love them. On the outside, Alex was just standing there. The giant monster slapped Alex. Alex was dead.

“No! Alex! You beast! I will kill you!” Jeremy said.

“Wait Jeremy, I have an idea again! Trust me, and follow my instructions,” said Berlin.

The giant monster used its hand to slap at the travelers. However, Laughing was sneaking up behind the giant monster. Laughing used Berlin’s mysterious bottles and threw them. Fortunately, the black bottles crashed into the giant monster’s eyes. The giant monster couldn't move.

“We succeed but also lost a crucial member,” Jeremy sank to his knees, tears streaming down his face. He couldn't even find the strength to speak further.

“It's fine, Jeremy, we need to keep going. The next station is a cave,” said Berlin.

Next, they arrived at a mysterious cave. “We must go through the cave,” said Laughing. Suddenly five old men came from the cave.

“Are you heroes? Can you help us to defeat an enormous snake?” the leader man asked. The travelers agreed. They needed to pass through the cave too.

The cave was dark, terrifying and sometimes strange sounds could be heard. They didn't know that crafty snake was behind them.

Berlin suddenly stopped, and realized something. “Wait, does anyone hear any sound at all? Why is the cave so quiet? It must be because of the monster!” Berlin said.

After he finished a massive snake was above him looking down. It had sharp teeth and poison, and its eyes are frightening. The snake was long and flexible.

“Jeremy, kill it,” Laughing said. Jeremy unsheathed his sword and jumped toward the snake's head.

However, the snake was very agile. The snake used its toxic teeth to bite Jeremy's arm.

No! Jeremy!” Berlin shouted. Contrary to expectations, the flexible snake escaped.

Jeremy used his last strength to say, “You have to take the medicine to Rome! When you arrived in Rome, please to tell my parents I love them.”

“I will! My teammate,” Berlin said sorrowfully.

“We just said goodbye to two heroes, follow me old man,” said laughing.

After 10 hours, Laughing and Berlin finally arrived in Rome with the two old men from the cave.

“So! That must be Rome, right?” asked Laughing.

What greeted them were powerful and solemn navy ships. The old men stepped forward and took off the disgusted clothes and they put on exclusive, luxurious, gold clothes.

“What? What is happening? Why are you wearing those clothes?” Berlin asked.

“Actually, we are the emperors. We had a secret mission but we got lost, so we were in that remote cave. Regardless, thank you heroes—you saved us and delivered important medicine from Chang An to Rome. Thank you. What do you want? We must repay you,” the emperors said.

“We just wanted to take Jeremy’s remains to his parents,” Laughing said.

Two days later, Berlin and Laughing sat at the bar. They ate food and chatted with each other.

“I hope Jeremy and Alex will go to paradise. I hope they will be happy every day,” said Berlin.

“Yes, I hope we won't have any more perilous adventures. Let’s celebrate delivering the invaluable medicine and to our lost friends,” said Laughing.

Treasures of Hope

The King's School Qianhai Shenzhen, Ma, Angelina – 12

A nomad group's leader asked them to take and keep the group's most important valuables in a safe place, but they disappeared in a severe sandstorm in the Taklamakan Desert, and no one saw them again. Before they vanished, they asked a traveling merchant friend to give Jack an old yellow Silk Road map and one last wish: find the valuables and return them to their rightful owners. This became Jack's reason to keep going. He clutched the map tightly and set off alone on the great Silk Road.

The Silk Road was full of dangers, with yellow sand swirling everywhere. Jack journeyed west with the courage of a young man. He drank from small oasis lakes when thirsty, and ate dried bread and wild fruits when hungry. Yet he knew little about desert survival. As he neared the Taklamakan Desert, a sudden scorching dry wind blew with thick sand. His water bag tipped over and all water spilled out. Exhausted by the heat, he collapsed on the burning sand and passed out.

When he woke up, Jack was lying in a warm wool tent. Beside him sat a dark-skinned boy with bright eyes named Tom. Tom was from a local nomad group and also an orphan. He helped Silk Road travellers and had found Jack lying in the sand. After Jack told Tom his story and mission, Tom's eyes grew a little red. He said he was the son of that nomad leader who had entrusted Jack's parents with the valuables. His group had guarded those items for years, and his father had also gone missing searching for them after that same sandstorm. Tom had been quietly looking for the valuables ever since.

Both were without family and shared the same goal, so they decided to travel together at once. Tom knew the desert well—he taught Jack to read wind directions with poplar branches, store fresh water in animal-skin bags, and navigate by stars on cold, windy nights. Jack was careful and used the road skills his parents had left him to spot and avoid robber traps along the way. They helped each other and became close friends on the Silk Road.

Following the map, they crossed endless deserts and rocky badlands, enduring countless hardships. When a massive sandstorm struck, they huddled under a poplar tree, encouraged each other, and survived with the windproof blanket Tom had prepared. Greedy merchants also trailed them, craving the valuables. But Jack used secret signs his parents had taught him to get help from a nearby kind camel caravan, and they escaped the villains. Along the way, they also aided lost travellers and gave food to struggling villages. The sand and wind of the Silk Road made them stronger, and their friendship deepened with every step.

The map led to a secret cave with an underground river deep in the desert—the hiding place of the valuables. But as they arrived, the greedy merchants caught up. The ringleader held a long knife, forcing them to hand over the valuables and claiming he would take everything for himself.

In danger, Tom pulled Jack into the cave. He knew the hidden switches his ancestors had left, pressed a hidden stone on the cave wall, and the underground river surged rapidly. Jack helped Tom block the cave entrance with boulders, trapping the villains with the rising water. The men panicked in the dark, wet cave and fled in a rush.

After the ordeal, they opened the chamber holding the valuables. To their surprise, the "valuables" were not gold or gems—they were fine crop seeds, medicinal herbs to cure the sick, and small tools to help the nomads trade safely on the Silk Road. These were vital for the nomads' survival. The group had hidden them to escape wars long ago, and Jack's parents had died protecting these "treasures of hope".

They brought the items back to Tom's group, giving the seeds and medicine to the people, and the trade tools to the elderly leader to restart the group's Silk Road trade. The nomads thanked them deeply and invited Jack to

stay, as he had no family of his own. Jack settled with the group, and he and Tom continued traveling the Silk Road together, delivering supplies to needy villages and safeguarding travellers. Their quest for valuables turned into a mission to keep the Silk Road peaceful, and their desert-forged friendship became a warm tale told by travellers for years to come.

The Key to the Future Silk Road

The King's School Qianhai Shenzhen, Qiao, Angela – 11

'In the 25th century on Earth, people began to vanish slowly without a trace, into a world just on the edge of reflection, hidden from sight. You trace the patterns on the frosted glass, bored. For a restless soul like you, this mystery is your only chance to defeat boredom and find the dangerous secret hidden within your ability. This is the start of your journey... and only you can decide what kind of hero you'll become.'

"What?!" Gasping with horror, Chloe jumped out of her bed. The message on the golden ticket slowly fades away into her dress-up mirror, leaving Chloe in a world full of boredom again. 'Was it a dream?' Chloe thought doubtfully. Suddenly, Chloe's mom flung open the door, "What happened, sweetie? I heard you shouting. Was it a nightmare again?" Her mom's voice was soft; her brows wrinkled with worry. "Yes," Chloe replied, her voice automatic. "Okay, go back to sleep. It wasn't even morning yet," her mom said and left the room. Chloe tried desperately to sleep, but that image lingered in her mind like a nail driven firmly into a plank of wood.

Out of the corner of her eyes, she saw the dress-up mirror glow a pale, silvery light. Chloe rubbed her eyes; the mirror's glow had vanished! Now, Chloe was really curious for the first time in her whole life; she gathered up her courage and reached out slowly with careful, slow fingers. Abruptly, a beam of light rapidly wrapped around her shuddering body. Chloe felt warmth and a sense of security blossom in her and spread to every part of her body.

Seconds later, the warmth faded. Chloe found herself standing in a floating, magnificent market with people from all over the world selling silk, tea, ceramics, robotic camels, and robots sitting on maglev caravans. Her eyes scanned the chaos until they locked onto a sign with big, bold words. "The Silk Road," it read. She was so stunned by the sight that she accidentally tripped over a unique stone with strange letters written on it. She focused on the stone as hard as she could, and her concentration yielded a great reward! She saw a glimpse of light flicker; it was the same kind of light that the mirrors gave! Chloe snatched the stone and hurried to a less crowded area. She glanced around quickly, hoping the owner hadn't seen her take it. Chloe read the letters on the stone and in amusement, she realized it was the same as the letter she thought she dreamed earlier on the golden ticket! "It matches!" Chloe squeaked with excitement. "It said to find two things, this is the first one, so perhaps I need one more golden object!" She thought.

Suddenly, Chloe realized something strange. Far north on the end of the Silk Road, a humongous prison stood in the darkness. It was built to lock away rebels who knew the Silk Road's oldest secret, isolated from the noisy, spice-scented market. The prison walls rose like an unbreakable barrier against freedom. Unexpectedly, Chloe felt hot blazes gathering in her eyes like erupting volcanoes; her vision blurred, then cleared, and there, standing before her, was a robotic camel. Amazingly, she could see through it! "This is so weird! So now, I have the ability to look through things?!" Chloe yelled with excitement. "From now on, I really don't need to worry about difficult tasks!"

After a few seconds of celebration, Chloe concentrated on the prison again. Now, with her ability to see through things, the grim interior of the prison was revealed to her: a windowless, run down, fortress-like gloomy building with pungent air full of rotten foods, decayed meats, and putrid sewer water. Chloe clapped a hand over her mouth, her own shriek echoing in her ears, "I can't imagine prisoners living in such a dreadful place!" She cried. Then, she focused on the prisoners, who were crowded into one small room, trapped with rusted chains and guards who never blinked. She scanned face after face, her heart pounding, until she froze, as if she would die if she moved a single twitch. There, in the crowd, was her long-disappeared classmate!

All of a sudden, a frightening and unpredictable idea flashed across Chloe's mind. She quivered desperately like a precarious candle flame. 'What if the robots captured people who knew the old Silk Road's deepest, darkest secret and captured them from Earth, and I'm on a planet undiscovered by humans...? Oh no! I've got to save the prisoners and get out of here!' Chloe's mind buzzed continuously, and she could not stand there longer,

doing nothing as she witnessed the prisoners die. On the corner of her eyes, Chloe saw a dim, faint light glowing on top of the prison tower. It was a shimmering golden key! 'Maybe it is the second object for the two things I need for opening the door to escape!' Chloe thought carefully as she murmured with a sense of pride. But the hardest, most dangerous task had only begun. What Chloe didn't know is that her survival now depends on the kind of person she is.

Chloe was great at thinking through problems because her family believes in 'every problem has two or more solutions', so this is an exact moment for her to think. Chloe spent her pocket money, which was always in her pockets wherever she went, on a long bamboo stick, then she sought the opportunity when nobody was looking at her and the huge prison. As quick as lightning, Chloe sprinted toward the prison wall.

4 meters! 3 meters! 2 meters! 1 meter! With all her might, she lifted herself up with the bamboo stick she bought and sprang up vigorously to the exact point where she could reach the key, her heart pounding out of her chest. "Phew, I made it!" Chloe panted out of breath and reached for the golden key...

Just as she was about to touch it, a robot with one flickering eye and dented metal plates looked up and straight into Chloe's eyes. They stared at each other for a moment and then the robot yelled in an alien language. Soon, all the robots dropped everything and gathered together like a rumbling volcano, ready to erupt. Chloe quickly grabbed the key. At that moment, a strange thing happened: as the prison's walls slowly began to crumble, Chloe could feel them groan as they shed dust like tears. The small room's ceiling caved in, and the prisoners burst outside to feel the warmth of sunlight. Chloe jumped down from the collapsing walls and was rushed by the prisoners. They hugged her and even threw Chloe in the air to celebrate!

The robots, however, were not happy. In fact, they were VERY frustrated to see their regimented prison collapsing, and prisoners all rushing out. Suddenly, the golden key in Chloe's hand escaped and flew away in lightning speed to the busy market, away from the isolated, run-down prison. Chloe and the prisoners chased after it. The robots didn't show weakness either. They dashed to follow Chloe and the prisoners. Their goal was clear to guess—they were stopping Chloe and the prisoners from escaping. The magic key stopped in front of an alley. Gasping for breath, Chloe glanced around the surroundings. It had high-tech lights, patterns full of mystery of the old Silk Road, and an odd-looking door that glowed softly. "This must be the door to Earth! It has the same glowing color as the light that glowed on my mirror!" Chloe announced with delight. Suddenly, Chloe found a hole in the door, and her unique looking stone glimmered. Chloe had an idea. As quick as a jaguar, Chloe tucked the stone in the hole, then she put the golden key in and turned with all her might. The magic door crackled like a laughing child. Slowly and peacefully, the door opened. Chloe took one last view of the robots scrambling in horror, and shouted to the prisoners "Let's go, the robots are coming!"

Suddenly, the image was blurry for a second and Chloe felt disconnected from her own eyes. The memory of the Silk Road was fading like ink on wet paper. All of a sudden, Chloe felt something lick her hand. She bolted upright to find her dog curled up beside her. "Was it a dream?" Chloe thought, her heart pounding as if a frantic drumbeat started in her chest, "But it felt so real!" Her eyes darted around the familiar room, then froze. Something was glimmering on her desk. It was the same golden key she had taken from the future Silk Road! A gasp caught in her throat. It really had happened!

My Interesting Trip to the Silk Road

The King's School Qianhai Shenzhen, She, Cindy – 12

The summer of 2025, my parents and I traveled to the Silk Road. It was a long and interesting journey. The Silk Road is an ancient route. A long time ago, people traveled along it to sell goods, such as Chinese silk, which is how it got its name. It is not just a single road but a network of many paths that stretches from China all the way to distant countries.

Our journey began in Xi'an, a very ancient city. My dad said it was the starting point of the Silk Road long ago. We visited the Terracotta Army, and it was absolutely stunning! There are hundreds of clay soldiers, each with a unique appearance—some wearing large hats and others carrying long swords. The guide told us the emperor had these soldiers crafted to guard him even after his death.

Next, we went to Dunhuang. It is very hot and dry there, covered with deserts everywhere, yet it was a crucial stop on the Silk Road. In ancient times, traveling merchants would rest and get water here. We rode camels in the desert; they were so tall that I was scared at first, but they walked slowly and steadily. The sand was golden, and tiny grains would blow in the wind. We watched the sunset over the desert as the sky turned red and orange—it was the most beautiful sunset I've ever seen.

In Dunhuang, we also visited the Mogao Grottoes. There are countless caves in the mountains, their walls covered with colorful murals depicting people, animals and ancient stories. Some murals show Silk Road merchants riding horses loaded with silk and tea. The guide said these paintings were made hundreds of years ago, yet their colors remain so vivid, and I'm amazed how well these ancient artworks have been preserved.

We also tried local delicacies. I had handmade pulled noodles—chewy and flavorful, especially delicious with local spicy sauce. Mom ordered golden, crispy baked buns filled with tender, juicy mutton that had no gamey taste at all. Dad drank local Fu tea, which had a rich aroma and warmed him up nicely. We also tasted sweet and sour apricot peel drink, which refreshed us, cut through greasiness and quenched our thirst, instantly relieving the summer heat. The people here are very warm and hospitable.

One day, we walked on an ancient path that was part of the old Silk Road. The path was paved with stones, some of which were extremely smooth from centuries of foot traffic. My dad said ancient merchants led camels along this path, carrying Chinese silk, tea and porcelain, traveling for days or even months—I can't help but admire how hard they must have worked. They met people from different countries, sold their goods and brought back items like grapes and melons, which is how many fruits made their way to China from faraway lands.

We passed vineyards along the way, with big, sweet and juicy grapes. A farmer told us these grapes were introduced to China from distant countries via the Silk Road long ago. It's incredible to think how many fruits we eat today came through this ancient route.

This trip taught me so much. The Silk Road was more than just a trading route—it was a path for sharing stories, food and ideas. People from different countries met here, chatted, made friends and learned from each other, which is why we have so many things from around the world today.

I sincerely hope more people will learn about the Silk Road, walk this ancient path, see the grandeur of the Terracotta Army, feel the romance of desert sunsets and admire the exquisite Mogao Grotto murals. I also hope everyone can try the unique foods along the Silk Road and experience the vibrant culture rooted in daily life.

The Silk Road holds countless precious histories and warm stories. It is not just words in textbooks but real scenery and living heritage—you can only truly appreciate its beauty by experiencing it firsthand. I want to share this trip with everyone around me, so more people can discover the charm of the Silk Road and ensure this ancient path of friendship is always remembered and cherished.

Underprepared on The Silk Road

The King's School Qianhai Shenzhen, Shi, Jamie – 11

1200 years ago, there lived a merchant named Wang, who was a short, kind, Chinese man. He was planning to travel along the Silk Road with two trustworthy camels: one for riding and one for carrying his heavy load of water, food, silk, porcelain, tea, papermaking supplies, and more. The items were in an old backpack. Wang hoped to trade for important supplies, such as metalware and glass. He thought it was going to be a nice, easy trip that took a few weeks, but he didn't know the harsh, uneasy environments he was going to face. His plan was simple: go 600 kilometres west and head back.

Today was the day of Wang's journey of a lifetime. He was unfortunately underprepared and headed for trouble. Wang set off, riding his camels into the desert. He glanced at his map, then at his compass. He needed to travel 30 kilometres west to reach the next trading station. He rode until his bottom started hurting. Wang was untrained in camel riding. He realised his mistake and walked beside the camels instead. He reached the 15-kilometre mark at nightfall. Wang took out his leash and tied the camels to his tent, where he rested. He started a small, red fire and cooked some of his meat rations. Wang had gone far, very far, for just one day of travelling.

On the second day, Wang woke to find one of his camels missing. He looked around and saw nothing. His pack camel had disappeared! He checked everywhere, from his tent to far away—no sign of the animal. Then he saw them: cut ropes, strange footprints, and a few dropped items. The robbers had taken the camel but, in their haste, had left the heavy load of trade goods behind. The heavy load made it hard for the remaining camel to walk, so Wang had to carry some of it himself. Wang felt exhausted, walking slower than ever.

He arrived at Yarkand Trade Station (now commonly known as Shache, China), an old post with water, food, and shelter. It was like a village, but without houses, only shops. Wang introduced himself as an 'experienced' merchant here to trade. First, he asked a trader, "Where could I keep my camel?" The trader said, "Thirty-five meters from here, there should be a stable keeper named Batu." Wang followed the instructions, renting space in the stable for 3 grams of silk and some paper. Batu told him the traders were by the shop with a red sign. Wang went there and spoke to a keeper. "Greetings, my name is Wang. I am a traveller and trader from the east, and I have some good paper and silk to tra—" "Paper and silk, yes, yes! Everyone has paper and silk! Haw haw! I'm not trading with a useless peasant like you!" said the impatient trader.

Wang turned to leave when the trader called after him. "Wait. You have one thing I need."

Wang's heart leapt. "Information," the trader said, leaning in. "You came from the east. Are the seasonal rains late this year near Dunhuang? Did you see any military patrols? Tell me what you saw, truly, and I will give you a fair price for your paper."

Wang froze. He had been so focused on his own fears that he had paid no attention to the land, the weather, or the road. He had nothing of value to share.

The trader saw the blank look in his eyes and shook his head, turning away. This time, his silence was worse than his laugh.

That night, as Wang ate his bread, he overheard two successful merchants at the stable. They weren't talking about silk; they were trading news. Wang recognised his mistake. On the Silk Road, information was a currency more valuable than silk.

In the morning, Wang saw another traveller like him, but this one seemed comfortable and happy, eating ordinary meals and trading effortlessly. Wang knew what he had to do. He, on the other hand, had been wandering aimlessly. Wang left Yarkand and continued his journey, this time noting everything to tell the next

trading village: the weather, the animals, everything. That night, he did everything differently. He dug a shallow trench around his tent, tied his camel securely, and took notes on all he saw and heard. When he observed a thirsty caravan master, he noted it—a detail he would later use. The next day, Wang took off, heading for Kashgar (modern day Kashi, China), where he planned to find a caravan for protection.

When he arrived, he was starving and thirsty, as he had not consumed any food or drunk any water for a day. He went directly to the part of Kashgar where food was traded. The market was filled with people trading gold, silver, and silk, but nothing was worth as much as Wang's information. Wang smelled the bread and fruit, his stomach growling with hunger. He told a seller, "Greetings. I would like some bread."

The seller replied, "Do you have gold or silver?" Wang had none. He decided to trade useful information, telling the seller that a caravan master would come and pay double for the bread. The seller gave him a loaf of bread and some fresh fruit. Just then, as if on cue, the caravan master arrived, bought up all the fruit, paying triple, and headed off. The seller was overjoyed; Wang's words were true, and the seller was rich. "Here, take all this bread," said the seller, handing him a basket of fresh bread.

Wang was overjoyed, and so was the seller. Wang then used his newfound credibility to secure a place in a caravan for his journey home. On the way back, Wang had learned his lesson. Silk and paper were important, but information was more important.

A few days later, he saw his home gates at last. Wang was back, now changed and wiser. He would not underprepare again, or think silk was the most important thing in the world!

The Smell of Tea on the Silk Road

The King's School Qianhai Shenzhen, Wang, Candy – 12

Ming's throat was as dry as sand, and it hurt to talk. "Grandpa," he whispered weakly, "How much farther?" Grandpa Li was still fiddling with his leather water pouch. "Just follow the camel," his voice was dry but steady. "They know where the water is."

Ming stared at the first camel. The sun hung in the sky like a gold disk. They had left their hometown with several boxes full of the best tea from Jiangnan. Their goal was a famous market in the Western Regions. People said tea cost a lot of money there.

But the desert was cruel. The sandstorm had buried most of their food. Now even the water was almost gone. The camels took two more steps forward.

"What if the camel is wrong?" Ming asked quietly. Grandpa looked at him. His eyes were kind but firm. "Then we dig," he said. "We keep digging deeper and deeper. A brave person won't stop because of a little sand."

Hours passed. The sun went down slowly in the west. The camels stopped suddenly. They scratched the sand with their front foot. Grandpa's eyes shone right away.

"Dig!" He shouted excitedly. Ming dug hard with his hands. The sand burned his hands, but he didn't stop. He dug and dug. At last, his fingers touched the cold, fresh water.

Ming put his face in the water and drank a lot. He felt all the effort were worth it. Grandpa was smiling at him, looking proud. "See that?" Grandpa said happily. "You found this water with your own hands."

Ming didn't feel shy anymore. He felt like a brave traveler. That night, they made tea and drank it. The tea smelled amazing— fresh and nice, just like home.

"Tomorrow," Grandpa said, "we'll get to the market. Then we can sell this nice tea and buy something good to eat."

Their tea was very popular. They used the money from selling the tea to buy a lot of new things. Some things they had never seen before. They wandered in the market. Ming was shocked again and again. He felt incredible.

"There is such a thing in the world," Ming muttered to himself as he shopped the wonders. He bought a jeweled ring for his mother, and some medicine to aid sleeping for his father. He also bought a warm leather coat for his grandpa. He bought some walnuts and grapes for his friends.

As Ming walked on, he found an old man who sold pottery. The old man saw Ming looking at the bowls, and picked one up and gave it to Ming. "Young man, these bowls are strong. They're good for rice and soup." Ming thought of the cracked bowls at home— his mom always sighed when she washed them. So, he bought two bowls. The man gave Ming a small bunch of dried chrysanthemums. "Put them in tea, it can relieve internal heat," the old man said.

This journey changed Ming a lot. He thought that he would never forget this meaningful journey.

The Silk Star Map

The King's School Qianhai Shenzhen, Wu, Vivian – 12

When are you coming back?” Ruby asked sadly.

“Honestly, this will be a long journey, but guess what I made for your birthday gift— star map silk,” Robert said handing Ruby the map.

“A map?” Ruby asked. “What’s it for?”

“I will miss you and mommy, just take care of her.” Robert said softly while looking towards Luna, Ruby’s mom, who was lay weakly on the bed.

Luna came from a silk-making family in Chang’an, that has been weaving silk for generations. Unfortunately, Luna was sick and the money they earned in Chang’an was not enough, so Robert, an experienced silk merchant, needed to search for other silk resources.

What Robert was looking for was the legendary fire silkworm. Since he was a merchant who traded frequently along the Silk Road, he had gathered information and rumours from fellow merchants, and learned that this rare species could be found near the Flaming Mountains.

Robert didn’t tell Ruby why he wove a map and what secrets it held. The truth was he knew it would be a long journey so he wove his longing of his wife and daughter into this map. This map was a route on the Silk Road, perfected by him through years of travel, the fastest and safest path made of precious silk.

Days stretched into weeks. Weeks into months.

“Mommy, why isn’t Daddy home yet?” Ruby’s voice trembled, “He promised he’d send us letters.”

Luna’s heart ached for her husband too, yet she pulled Ruby close, softening her tone. “It’s all right, darling. We have to trust Daddy will come back safe and sound.”

Luna sighed, turning to the wooden chest by the bed. She pulled out that silk star map Robert had left, pressing it into Ruby’s hands. “Your dad gave this to you for a reason. He said it marks the way home, always.”

Ruby embarked on her quest to find her father, making Dunhuang her first destination. She hired a 21-year-old Sogdian guide named Ahura, paying him in silk; he was kind and sharp-witted.

Ruby began by telling Ahura the purpose of her trip, then handed him the silk star map to look over so he’d understand.

Since it was Ruby’s first time in Dunhuang, Ahura suggested showing her around to see its highlights. As they wandered, they reached a market—stalls were brimming with colourful wares, but Ruby wasn’t interested.

Suddenly she spotted a post office, tugged on Ahura’s sleeve and said, “I want to go ask if anyone’s seen my dad.” Ahura agreed and went with her. Inside, letters were jumbled in piles of unclaimed mail; the elderly clerk at the counter looked half-asleep. Ruby asked if there were any letters from her father, Robert.

After handing the letter to Ruby, the old clerk went back to his recliner and fell asleep again.

She checked the date on the envelope; it had been sent by her father nearly a month ago. The letter said he missed them dearly, and that he was in Turpan working with local veteran artisans. He’d found some fire silkworms and was collaborating with them to research and develop the craft of weaving silk with fire silkworm thread.

Once Ruby and Ahura confirmed their final destination, they headed for Yumen Pass. Since they’d have to cross the White Dragon Dunes, they bought water, provisions, and camels there before setting off.

After fifteen days, they safely embarked on their trek across the White Dragon Dunes. Suddenly, a hand tapped Ruby's shoulder.

Ruby cried out, spinning around fast to see who it was. What met Ruby and Ahura's eyes was a well-groomed man with a pleasant look.

The man said apologetically, "I'm sorry to intrude. I'm a Persian jewellery merchant, Azar. A sudden sandstorm scattered my caravan, and I've lost my food and water. Could you spare some supplies if you have extra?"

Ahura didn't want to give the man any food or water and planned to send him away. But kind Ruby took pity on him, jumping in first, "We have some— I'll fetch them."

He took the food and water Ruby handed over, then added, "Could I tag along with you?"

"No," Ahura said sharply.

But Ruby cut in, "It's fine, no problem. You poor guy."

As night fell, they came upon an abandoned post office, dropped their packs and planned to camp there for the night.

By evening, Ruby slept but Ahura lay awake. All of a sudden, there was a crash. A cup had tipped over. Ahura tensed instantly.

He kept his eyes fixed in Ruby's direction and saw Azar's hand reaching for her bag. Ahura roared, "Stop!"

Azar's hand froze mid-air. Ruby woke with a start and instantly knew his intent. Azar snapped back to his senses and slunk away into the night.

Following the scare, Ruby trusted Ahura completely.

After a gruelling ten-plus-day trek, they finally stood before the Flaming Mountains.

Hurriedly, they herded the camels to a rare patch of shade cast by a jagged rock outcrop, dousing the animals with precious water before taking small sips themselves.

Ruby pulled out silk star map, tracing the caravan route with her finger. "It's 15 to 20 kilometers from here to Turpan on the main trail."

Suddenly, camel bells jingled ahead— a caravan approached.

Ruby and Ahura exchanged glances.

They soon reached Turpan. According to the letter, they were to go to a seemingly very simple weaving workshop.

Just as she was about to knock on the door and step inside, harsh shouts and curses drifted out from within.

What met her eyes was utter pandemonium: a mob was wreaking havoc in the workshop, smashing weaving tools and trampling on piles of silk, as her father and the other workers fought frantically to fend them off.

Most importantly, she spotted Azar among them.

"Stop!" Ruby shouted at the top of her lungs.

Seeing the chaos die down for a moment and everyone's attention turn to Ruby, Robert spoke up in confusion, "Stealing fire silkworms? I don't get it. I didn't steal any of your things!"

Upon hearing this, Ruby immediately realized it was all a mistake and fixed Azar with a fierce stare.

The men causing trouble cooled off bit by bit.

Seeing them leave, Robert hurried over to Ruby. "You're actually here, my daughter, were you hurt on the way?"

"No, I'm fine dad because Ahura was with me the entire way."

Ahura explained about Azar.

Ahura's words had scarcely faded when one of the rioters crashed through the door.

They had no choice but to follow the man to meet the king.

Azar confessed everything.

Upon meeting the king and him learned the whole story, the king asked, "May I have a look at that star map silk you spoke of?"

Confused, Ruby handed the silk star map to the king.

No one expected the king to be so fond of the silk star map.

The king then asked Robert, "Sir, did you really make this?"

"Yes, sir. I've been in the silk trade."

"Would you consider weaving silk for me in my palace?"

"It's truly my honour, but I must sell the fire silkworms I've collected. My wife is ill at home."

"Be at ease. I'll pay you three times the ordinary earnings of silk traders."

When Robert showed the king his fire silkworms, the king was overjoyed with them and invited Robert to stay and weave.

Robert soon brought Luna and Ruby to live there, and they lived happily without a care.

The Legend of The Silk Road

The King's School Qianhai Shenzhen, Wu, Woody – 12

The wind blew the sands away, the sands flew over the sky. There was nothing in Talkimakan desert,

“Zhou! Time to wake up! We still got a long way to go,” said an old trader. Zhou was a young trader who was traveling to Rome to sell silk with an old trader, because he needed to get money. He had already traveled for three days; from Changan to the middle of the Talkimakan desert,

“We still need five days to get there”, said the old trader.

“I know,” muttered Zhou.

The weather was no longer nice to them, the crazy wind danced around them, and the sands sprinted to them like lions. The sun appeared dead, the moon took over, as snow surrounded them, Zhou and the old trader were petrified.

“Can we make the way to Rome, Sir?” asked Zhou

“I th...th..think n...n...n...not shall w..w..we go back? Replied the old trader trembling. When Zhou wanted to reply, he remembered his sister, his mum, and his dad, they were waiting for him to save their lives.

“No, we can make it,” said Zhou.

“OK, let’s go!” shouted the old trader.

They walked, they walked, they walked.

The morning arrived, the shiny, yellow and burning hot sun looked at the ground. Zhou found an ancient house, the moss climbed on it, its colour was as brown as the sand. He called the old trader. They saw a thing that they never wanted to see, human.

The person went out he was so skinny that they thought he was a skeleton, his face was as white as a ghost. Suddenly he fell. After an hour, he woke up,

“Are you ok?” asked Zhou.

“Food! I need food” whispered the skeleton– looking boy. The old man gave him a piece of bread,

“Who are you?” asked Zhou.

“I am Cui, I came back from Rome, but my group got attacked by the savages I am the only person who survived,” explained Cui.

“What do you mean by the savages?” asked Zhou

“You will find out later,” said Cui.

“Well, you can follow us,” said the old trader.

After one day, they realized, their water escaped! ; they had no water ! Zhou and the old trader was dying; the desert is stealing their lives, the wind was singing a song to “celebrate” their tragedy,

“I think we cannot make It, let’s go back with Cui,” whispered the old trader desperately.

“Sister, mum, dad, family” mumbled Zhou.

“I know a place where you guys can get water; my team went to that place to get water“said Cui. When they reached there, there was a pond which was as round as the full moon, it was clean and it was...empty.

“Where is the water?” cried the old trader

“It should be here.” said Cui miserably

“Guys look! There is a group of traders! Why don’t we go there!” said Zhou, pointing to the west. When they got there, there were about ten or more traders, Persian, Indian, Arabian...Black people , white people...

“Excuse me, can you guys give us some water?” said the old trader, “We are so thirsty.”

“Sure, come here,” said a Persian trader with a thick Persian accent. After drinking the water, an Indian trader came to them,

“Hello, would you like to buy a slave? He’s very strong.” The slave was very strong indeed, but blood climbed on him, his face was as white as snow seems like he hadn’t eaten food for a long time,

“No thanks,” said the old trader, “Can we trade stuff here?”

“Yes, this is like a small trading centre,” replied the Indian trader. They went into a wet, stinky and dirty house where gnarled branches were matted together, an Arabian trader was inside,

“Would you like to buy some silk?” asked the old trader.

“How do you know that I need silk?” said the Arabian trader, “Yes please.”

“They went out of the camp continued their journey. The hazy sun climbed up the sky.

“How many days do we still need to walk?” asked Zhou and Cui.

“One day, answered the old trader. Suddenly, the sound of the drum roared, and thousands of people shouted like a tigers,

“Run! They are the savages!” cried Cui. They ran like horses; death was racing with them. They were right behind them, the savages, they were a pack of wolves! Arrows shot at them like rains the sound of sword swooped in the air ran to them. Horses were racing to them,

“No!” cried the old trader, he got shot by an arrow, the fall of him was like the mountains fell, another amazing person, was dead. Luckily because of him, the savages stopped.

“What should we do now?” asked Cui, “He is dead.”

“Walk to Rome, we cannot go back,” said Zhou.

After one more day of walking, they made it to Rome. They went to a shop and sold some silk,

“When do we go back?” asked Cui.

“After we sell all of our stuff,” said Zhou.

“Cui, is that you?” shouted a woman

“Zhou, that is my aunt!” They had a big hug and she invited them to her palace,

“Very big isn’t it if you want to stay here, you may,” said Cui’s aunt. Zhou wanted to live in here but he needed to go back to give the money, he decided, no.

While he was walking back, he got attacked by the savages. He ran like a frightened dog the savages chased like ghost. The sound of the devils were playing badminton with the air. He hid under a huge rock, he was playing hid and seek with the death. The sun jerked at Zhou the howling of the wolves were telling the savages where was he hiding. Luckily, they left.

The sun climbed up the sky, finally, he went to Dunhuang, he met his mother, they had a big hug, he told her what happened during the trip, he gave the money to his family member and started a new life.

A Magical Journey on the Silk Road

The King's School Qianhai Shenzhen, Zeng, Wen Tao – 11

I loved reading *Journey to the West*. Although it was a fiction, I really enjoyed all the tales in it. My dad told me that the Monk Xuan Zang was a real person in history. He travelled alone to the West through the Silk Road to get Buddhist scriptures and was respected by many people. After that, I became very interested in the Silk Road. One day, I was reading a book about the Silk Road with great interest. It was full of history and many interesting stories. I thought, “Oh, I wish I could be a part of it and experience the Silk Road!”

Suddenly, a deep voice sounded around me. “Do you really want to go there? If you do, just make a wish.” I was surprised and looked around, but no one was in my bedroom. With strong curiosity and a little fear, I said, “I want to go back to the starting place of the Silk Road! I want a magic backpack that has everything I need for this trip! I also want to understand and speak all the languages of the countries on the Silk Road.” All at once, the pages of the book seemed to have a strong pull. Whoosh! I was sucked right into it.

When I opened my eyes, I found myself standing on a busy street. The marketplace was full of people and fancy goods. Even though the people there spoke a language I didn’t know, I could understand every word they said. I thought, My language skills work! As I wandered around, I saw a caravan getting ready to leave the marketplace. I talked to the leader, and I found that they were going to their destination by the Silk Road. The leader thought I was a foreigner because of my clothes and my accent. So, he agreed to take me along the Silk Road.

On the way, I asked, “Where are we going, and what goods are we carrying?”

The leader said, “This road ends in Rome. It’s an old path that connects Asia and Europe. At the very beginning, we mainly traded silk. Later, we started trading other things like spices and tea too.” Then I asked, “Did Monk Xuan Zang also take this road to the west?” The leader nodded and said, “Yes, he overcame many difficulties on this road—climbing mountains and crossing ridges, and he might have even met sandstorms. Sandstorms happen a lot in this season. A sandstorm is a kind of bad weather. Strong winds blow up sand and dust, making the air dirty. If we meet one, we won’t be able to see far. Some of our caravans were caught in sandstorms before and suffered huge losses. We must be very careful.” When the caravan members heard this, their faces turned pale and looked really worried.

About a month later, we entered a vast desert. As far as my eyes could see, there was nothing but a golden carpet of sand—not a single tree or blade of grass. The hot sun burned the ground. Walking on the sand felt like walking barefoot. Our feet felt like they were going to be burned by the heat. The sunlight was like thousands of needles stabbing our eyes, making them hard to open. The caravan went forward for a while, then the sky turned dark little by little, and the wind and sand suddenly grew much stronger. After walking a bit further, the leader shouted loudly, “A sandstorm is coming! We’re lost, and the camels have no idea which way to go. The post station isn’t far from here. Does anyone have a good plan?”

The members heard what the leader said, but no one responded. It seemed we were in the most difficult situation!

At that moment, I yelled, “I have a plan! Come here!” I took a compass and several packs of face masks out of my backpack. The leader was shocked and asked, “What are these? We have never seen them before.” I explained, “This is a compass. It can tell us the exact direction no matter how bad the weather is. And these are face masks. They can stop you from breathing in sand and dust, so you won’t get sick easily.”

The leader took the compass and put on a mask. Then he said, “It really works! Come and put on the masks, folks! Hurry!” Everyone quickly put on the masks and followed the compass toward the post station.

By nightfall, the post station was close, but it was dark outside. With only the torches we had prepared, we could see only a short distance. So the caravan moved extremely slowly. We were about to be trapped by the sandstorm

and the darkness. I had another idea. I took some solar-powered flashlights out of my bag and gave them to the caravan members. Everyone was amazed by my tools again. I quickly explained, “These are flashlights. They charge using sunlight during the day, and they can light up at night.”

Right away, everyone held the flashlights and moved toward the post station as fast as possible. A few hours later, we finally reached it! Everyone cheered happily and shook my hand or gave me a hug. The leader came to me and said, “Thank you for your tools. Our caravan might have been destroyed by the sandstorm without you.”

After resting well, we continued our journey to Rome. On the way, I used compressed food to feed the caravan members when they were short of food. With my language skills, I helped the caravan communicate with people from different countries. I also used my first-aid kit to treat many caravan members who suddenly got sick. Day by day, everyone liked and respected me more and more.

Eight months later, our caravan overcame many difficulties and finally reached Rome, the end of the Silk Road. When it was time to say goodbye to the leader, he gave me a beautiful piece of gold jewellery. He said to me, “Thank you for taking care of us on this trip. Our caravan couldn’t reach the destination safely without your tools. This jewellery is a symbol of our friendship! I hope to see you again in the future!”

After I said goodbye to everyone in the caravan, I held the jewellery and looked at it carefully. Suddenly, I heard that deep voice again—it had been a long time since I last heard it. The voice said, “Congratulations! You used modern tools to help the caravan reach the end of the Silk Road safely. Now you can go back home!” Just then, a bright white light flashed. When I opened my eyes again, everything around me felt so familiar. I was home! I looked at the clock on my desk and found that only two hours had passed. “Was it a dream?” I whispered to myself.

Suddenly, I felt something hard in my hand. I opened my palm and looked down. It was the gold jewellery the leader had given me! I shouted, “It wasn’t a dream! It wasn’t a dream at all!” I thought to myself, even though this journey was over, I had learned a lot about the Silk Road. I would remember this magical trip forever.

The Silk Road Wanderer— Althea

The King's School Qianhai Shenzhen, Zhang, Demi – 11

It was a peaceful afternoon, I dragged my tired body back from school and buried myself in my bed and looked outside to see the warm sunset as clouds turned golden, birds flew freely outside. I turned to hear a knock at the door, it was my mom “ Althea, this is the book that your great-grandmother had for you, she wrote this when she was young, about the Silk Road.” she said gently, as she passed me the book. I brushed away the dust to see 4 words --The Silk Road Wanderer, the old leather cover with molds and holes deeply attracted me, as if there was some kind of power in there.

“I’ll leave you alone to study.” My mom said as she closed the door. I opened the dusty book with a puzzled frown only to see old parchment with handwriting, she wrote really detailed about camels, all her surroundings, I was truly fascinated with all she wrote, my eyes were wide opened, with light shining, but wait --it isn’t from my eyes, its from the book! The second I realised, the light shined brighter and brighter as if the sun, I covered my eyes. But then, a kind of force or wind pulled me closer and closer, just like a black hole, until I was entirely sucked into the book. The book slowly closed as light still shined from the book, but in the title, like writing something with gold, suddenly, the word was revealed -- The Silk Road Wanderer, Althea.

I was woken up by a ray of sunshine, I slowly opened my eyes only to be blinded by the sun, I sat up as my eyes widened up by the view in front -- hot sand stretching to the horizon, heat waves everywhere, camels resting in the sand. I looked around, it was just where my great-grandmother described. A bell rang, “ Lets get on the road!” A man shouted, that’s when I realised, I was on the Silk Road, I time traveled through the book, I was confused and shocked at the same time, I was interrupted by a young boy, “ Hey! You should get going on your camel, we’ve got a long way to go! I’m Kai by the way.” He said friendly, “ Yes, sorry I just woke up” I responded as I climbed up a camel. “ Hold on tight!” The man yelled as camels stood up, I almost fell off but I grabbed the camel tight. The camels walked onto the hot sand as I appreciate the astonishing view around me, the sun shined on my back not quite hot but warmly.

As I sat on my camel almost falling asleep, I was confused where we are going, so I asked Kai, who was right in back of me, “ So where are we going?” I asked Kai “ We are going to Rome to give them silk, tea plants, and things” Kai said. “ Okay” I said. I looked as the sun set and turned the clouds into pink and purple. We settled down with our blankets on the sand for the night. The cold air brushed against my face like knives, I curled myself in my blanket beside the fire we made. “ Tomorrow we will finally arrive in Rome after this long journey” Kai whispered beside me. “ Yeah finally, I can’t wait to arrive in Rome!” I said as I slept beside the fire place.

I was woken up by the bell in the next day, the sun shined on my blanket, I climbed on my camel half-awake, but still got shocked by the beautiful sunrise, we set on the journey to Rome, birds flew on top of my head swirling in circles. I closed my eyes and dozed off, when I woke up, I found myself in Rome, with castle like buildings around me, the sky as blue as the ocean. We went to trade with people and sold all our goods, the people were really friendly, me and Kai went to play and look around the town. It was complete the opposite of China, they sold red wine, grapes. Their clothing is the complete opposite too, they had gold and marble everywhere, it was crowded everywhere, we got goods from others too, like bread, red wine, and grapes, but wait, how am I going to go back? It was time to tell the truth to Kai, I said “ Kai, I have to tell the truth, but I actually time traveled to here, through my grandmother book that she wrote. Now that I have to go back.” Kai look puzzled but then replied “ Okay..... But how to make you go back?” “I don’t know.....” I said confusedly “ We should get a book and study” Kai said. We rushed to the nearby library to find the book, we looked up and down in the library, we couldn’t find it anywhere, so we decided to ask the librarian. She said that it was taken by Maya Sharma -- wait, that’s my great-grandmother! I realized and told Kai, so I asked the librarian where she is going, she was at a town miles away.

We went outside and decided on our plan: First, steal a horse, then go to the town while riding the horse. We put on our capes and went to a horse's shop, and when the owner wasn't looking, we jumped on two horses, Kai and I rode off but the owner saw us and the guards were chasing us, with fire in their eyes closer and closer they went, but the good thing was we successfully gotten away, " Sorry!" I shouted with a smile on my face as we successfully complete the plan. Minutes later we arrived in the town, we ran through crowds, through shops asking searching for my great-grandmother. Then, I saw a person that looked familiar in a shop writing on a book. Me and Kai rushed inside to ask her " Hi, are you Maya Sharma?" I asked and the answer was indeed yes. I said excitedly " Yes! Long story short, I am your grand-daughter in the future and I time traveled through that book that you wrote, so can I please borrow that book to go back." she looked confused and surprized, " I have a grand-daughter? Okay you can borrow the book." She said after hesitatng for a few seconds, " Yes! Thank you so much!" I said with excitement as I hugged her with warmth. Me and Kai went to a dark corridor with no people and opened the book just like at home, the light shined brighter and brighter, at the last second, I said " I had fun with you, Kai, see you in a couple years !" And just like that, I disapeared into mid-air.

I slowly opened my eyes as I felt dust on my hands, it was the book, but wait -- the cover said The Silk Road Wanderer, Althea. I was back in my room, a familiar knock was at the door, it was my mom, " How was the book?" She said

" It was pretty good", I said " I felt as if I was in the real Silk Road, riding camels feeling the hot air, my great-grandmother wrote a really astonishing book....." I said looking at the book as if it was winking at me, I smiled.

A Dream of Traveling to the Western Regions

The King's School Qianhai Shenzhen, Zhang, Dong Chen Daniel – 11

My name is Ganfu. I am Lord Zhang Qian's most loyal servant and his closest friend. As long as I can remember, I have followed him everywhere—from the busy streets of Chang'an to the quiet corners of the imperial palace.

As a servant to the Emperor, Lord Zhang Qian worked very hard every day. He was always the first to arrive and the last to leave the palace. One cold winter morning, a big fire broke out in the west wing of the palace. Everyone ran away in fear, but Lord Zhang Qian grabbed a bucket of water and rushed into the flames. He helped carry out the old servants and put out the fire with the guards. The Emperor saw this and praised him loudly: "You are brave and responsible!"

Lord Zhang Qian never forgot to help others. When a young palace servant fell ill and had no money for medicine, he gave his own salary to buy it. He always kept his promises too. If he said he would finish a task by sunset, he never stopped until it was done.

The Emperor noticed all these things. He often said to his ministers, "Zhang Qian is not just a servant—he is a man of courage and honour. I can trust him with any important job."

When the Emperor gave Lord Zhang Qian a great mission to go west and find the Dayuezhi people to fight against the Xiongnu, we accepted without hesitation. In the third year of Jianyuan, we set off with one hundred brave men, enough food for a year, and gifts of silk and gold.

The road west was dry and dusty. We walked through high mountains and endless deserts. The sun burned our skin by day, and the cold wind froze us at night. But Lord Zhang never complained. At night, he would look at the stars and say, "Ganfu, the Emperor trusts us. We must not fail."

One morning, as we crossed the Hexi Corridor, a group of warriors suddenly jumped out from behind the rocks. They yelled and waved their swords. We fought as hard as we could, but there were too many of them. One by one, our men fell, and our food was stolen. At last, only Lord Zhang and I were left, and we were captured.

The Xiongnu took us to their camp on the cold grasslands north of the desert. Their leader was tall and fierce, with a long beard. He locked us in a small tent and gave us rough leather clothes to wear. Every day, we herded sheep and cows. The work was hard, and the food was scarce, but Lord Zhang never lost hope.

At the very beginning, life with the Xiongnu was so difficult that we almost gave up. The Xiongnu people stared at us with cold eyes and never smiled. They shouted at us when we moved too slowly, and sometimes they even took away our small pieces of bread.

Every morning, we had to wake up before sunrise to collect water from the icy river. My hands froze so badly that I could barely hold the bucket. Lord Zhang Qian always tried to help me—he carried the heavier buckets and shared his last piece of fruit with me.

Slowly, the Xiongnu people began to notice his wisdom and courage. They stopped giving us cold stares, and some even shared hot milk with us on freezing nights. They did not fully trust us, but they no longer shouted or pushed us around.

Many years passed. The Xiongnu leader grew to respect Lord Zhang and even offered him a wife, animals, and a high position. But Lord Zhang refused every time. At night, he would look east toward Chang'an and sigh. I knew he had never forgotten his mission.

I learned the Xiongnu language and became friends with some young warriors. They told me stories of their land. Quietly, I helped Lord Zhang listen for news of the Dayuezhi and watched for chances to escape.

One snowy night in the sixth year of Yuanguang, heavy snow covered the grassland. The wind cut our faces like knives. The Xiongnu drank too much wine and fell asleep. Lord Zhang woke me quietly. His eyes shone with excitement. "Ganfu," he whispered, "now is our chance. Let's run."

I was scared but happy. We took our hidden horses and ran west as fast as we could. The snow was deep, and soon our horses could hardly move. Behind us, we heard guards shouting. Their torches looked like ghost lights in the dark. "Faster! Run faster!" Lord Zhang yelled.

Suddenly, my horse tripped on a rock, and I nearly fell. The guards were getting closer. "Don't stop! Keep going!" Lord Zhang shouted. We ran until the shouts faded into the wind.

When the sun rose, the snow stopped. We were far from the Xiongnu camp. Lord Zhang stopped his horse and held up the Emperor's staff. Tears ran down his face. "Ganfu," he said, "we are free." I cried too.

We walked through the desert for many days. Our water ran low, and we had little food left. Then a powerful sandstorm hit us. The wind was so strong it felt like knives in the air. I held my horse's neck tightly and closed my eyes.

When the wind stopped, I opened my eyes slowly. We were no longer in the desert. Instead, a wide road stretched before us, filled with carriages and tall buildings.

We had finally reached the Western Regions. We travelled from kingdom to kingdom, meeting kings and traders. We told them about the Han Empire, and they gave us gifts of grapes, seeds, and beautiful jade. Lord Zhang wrote everything down, and I helped him speak with the local people using the Xiongnu words I had learned.

After a year of travelling, we decided to return home. The journey back was dangerous too, but this time we were wiser. When we finally saw the walls of Chang'an, Lord Zhang and I both cried. The city looked brighter than ever. People cheered as we walked through the gates.

The Emperor himself came to meet us and praised Lord Zhang for his courage. We had been gone for thirteen years, but we brought back stories, seeds, and a new path for the Han people to connect with the world.

Not long after our return, the Xiongnu and the Han Empire began to fight again. They raided border villages and stole food. The Emperor was angry and called on Lord Zhang, because he knew the western regions better than anyone else.

Lord Zhang joined the army as a guide. He showed the generals where to find water and grass for the horses and which paths were hidden from the enemy. In the great battle, we used his knowledge to surprise the Xiongnu. We attacked from directions they did not expect, and soon they ran away in fear.

Several years later, the Emperor asked Lord Zhang to travel west again. This time, we took more men and more gifts—silk, tea, and beautiful pottery. The people there remembered us and welcomed us with smiles. We traded silk for horses and colourful wool.

But the long journeys made Lord Zhang very weak. When we returned the second time, he could barely stand. He spent most days in bed, and one night, he passed away.

That night, I lay in bed, tired and sad. I thought about the cold grasslands, the deserts, and the joy of reaching the Western Regions. I held a small stone I had picked up long ago.

Suddenly, a loud beep woke me up. I was in my modern bedroom in Xi'an. My history textbook lay open on Zhang Qian's page. The sound was my school alarm, and I was wearing my school uniform.

It had all been a dream.

But as I smiled at the textbook, I knew one thing was real—Zhang Qian's journey truly happened.

Hope Beyond the Dunes: A New Year's Tragedy

Wellington College International Shanghai, Bang, Cassie – 12

The sun beat down on the small caravan as ten-year-old Mei and fifteen-year-old Ming watched their parents haggle with customers over prices for their precious jade and spices in the bustling trading city of Dunhuang. The Silk Road, a network of routes connecting the East and the West, was their home. They travelled in a caravan with other merchants for safety against bandits and the harsh environment or climate conditions, which included brutal winds and extreme temperatures. Their mother was a professional weaver of the exquisite Chinese silk, and their father traded it for valuable goods from the West, such as Roman glassware and gold. The siblings ran around excitedly with their ruby red lanterns that lit up the smile on their faces. The light transferred from the lantern to their eyes, sparkling like the stars in the sky.

That day was special to the East, It was a traditional Chinese event where children would roam the streets and watch dragon dancers perform, enjoy fireworks, receive red envelopes, then eat dinner with their whole family. They called this event the Chinese New Year festival.

That night, when all the merchants and their children were huddled around a circular wooden table eating dumplings, and the caravan was camped near a series of rocky outcrops, a group of masked bandits attacked. Chaos erupted. Mei and Ming's parents, always protective, shoved their children toward a narrow crevice in the rocks, urging them to hide and run once the fighting drew away. The children huddled together, Ming clutching a small, intricately carved wooden chest his parents had gifted him. The sounds of the raid were terrifying, but the shivering children stayed put, as instructed.

Once the sounds of the firearms and screaming stopped, Ming cautiously peaked through the narrow opening, his heart pounding against his ribs.

The caravan was silent, except for the crackle of the dying campfire. The bright red lanterns lay discarded in the hungry dust. The bandits had vanished, taking with them the precious jade, spices, and silk. Worse still, their parents and the other merchants were nowhere to be found. A wave of fear drowned Ming, but he quickly steadied himself for his sister. He was the older one now; the one responsible for both their survival.

"They're gone, Mei," Ming said with a hushed tone, holding his sister's shaky hand. "The bandits took them."

Tears streamed down Mei's overwhelmed face. "What do we do, Ming? We're alone."

Ming gripped the tiny wooden chest. He had to be strong for his sister. "We will find the next caravan," Ming declared, his voice filled with newfound dedication. "The Silk Road connects everyone. We will follow it to the next trading post."

Ming clutching his small treasure—the last connection to their family—the siblings emerged from the rocks. The moon hung high above the Dunhuang desert, illuminating the ancient path. They began their seemingly endless walk, two miniature figures navigating the vast, unforgiving, yet hopeful expanse of the legendary trade route, determined to find their family and home along the endless road of exchange and destiny. They knew the journey would be arduous, filled with hardship and danger, but they also knew the Silk Road offered a promise: help and hope were always just around the next dune or over the next mountain pass.

For days, the siblings had been continuing their prolonged walk, leaving a trail of footprints in the vast land of sand. They were surviving on scraps of dried fruit and the few coins Ming had in his pocket. A strong squall of wind blew towards Mei and Ming, erasing their footprints from the ground. Just as hope began to wane, they saw the shape of Jiayu guan standing near the horizon.

The siblings had finally made it to the city square gates.

Ming felt his strength weakening, the world tilting sideways with every step toward the small town connected to Jiayu Pass. He had been battling the darkness closing on in his vision while he was travelling with Mei, continuing with a single, desperate promise.

"Wait here for a second, Mei," Ming panted, leaning against a wobbly stone wall while merchants pushed their carts around to advertise. "I ... I need something to drink. I'll be right back." He just needed hydration, then he could find help for himself and Mei.

He stumbled the centre of the square, where a crowd was beginning to gather, drawn by the loud, rhythmic clattering of a cymbal. A makeshift stage had been arranged in the centre of the square, with enormous drums placed in front. Ming soon realised this wasn't a festival performance. It was an execution platform, a cruel form of public entertainment for the locals.

His breath tightened in his chest.

On the stage, with their faces bruised but still instantly recognisable, were his beloved mother and father.

They were pale as a ghost, their eyes wide with terror that tore apart Ming's heart. The masked bandits hadn't killed them; they had sold them. A roar ascended from the bloodthirsty crowd as a guard swung around a heavy, curved sword, ready to end their lives for the amusement of the city dwellers.

Ming didn't have time to think. He dropped the chest and lunged forward, his eyes darting between the platform, his parents' petrified eyes, and the glint of the sharp blade.

"No!" he screamed, his voice cracking, a raw sound of desperation that silenced the crowd momentarily. He pushed his way onto the stage with an adrenaline-fuelled burst of energy.

He tackled the guard from behind his parents, attempting to reach for the weapon.

The people in the square turned from excited spectators to an angry mob, screaming at the guards to stop the boy.

He was only fifteen years old, wounded, and alone against an armoured city guard.

Another guard, spotting the outburst of chaos, didn't hesitate. A gun fired, the crack echoing and made the audience flinch. The bullet hit Ming square in the chest, stopping his strike instantly. He collapsed at his parent's feet, his body still absorbing the impact. He raised his head to look at his parents one last time, managing a weak, apologetic smile, before his eyes closed forever.

The horrific scene, the boy's useless protest, ended as quickly as it started. The execution proceeded without further interruption.

This is how Liam, a friend from their previous merchant group, found Mei waiting by the city gate, the small carved chest sitting in silence where Ming had dropped it moments before he ran into the square, ending the journey of the boy who died trying to free his family from a death they didn't deserve.

Twenty years later, Mei was laid an elegant bouquet of white roses in front of her family's gravestone, as her child Ming, stood quietly beside her, listening as she updated her parents and brother about the life she had built in their absence. She knew that her parents would be proud of everything she had achieved. Mei had started a trading empire with her husband, using her inherited silk weaving skills to rise to the top of the business chain. Although she would never be able see her parents and brother again, Mei would continue journeying with her husband Liam, not across a desert of sand, but through a life built on hope, remembrance, and the simple truth that even in the darkest of times, light can always be found.

Journey to the Wild

Wellington College International School Shanghai, Carvalho, Carol – 12

The silk road started when Cami was young, around 3 years old. Cami's parents were called Jennie and Robert. They were filthy rich; Jennie would trade gold for silk. She would use that silk to make Cami's clothes and bed sheets. Cami lived in a giant mansion in Rome. Nannies and maids were all over the place. Cami's cries would echo through the hallways. There were statues and frames made of gold.

Cami's parents Jennie and Robert were rude, cold, and horrible to people. Unlike Cami's parents, Cami grew up to be a kind, wise girl full of spirit. When Cami was 16 her parents were still awful to slave's maids and other people. The only thing that would keep Cami happy was her horse, Stormi.

One day Jennie and Robert bought a slave from China she was 16 years old, and her name was Ping. When Ping was young, she was abandoned by her parents. She came to Rome for help but all she did was become a slave. Secretly Ping and Cami became friends. They planned to escape Rome to go to the UK with Cami's horse Stormi.

The day came, Cami told her parents she was feeling unwell. Worried about their child, they set off to the market to get some medicine. Cami took her chance, and after a bit of searching she found Ping. They ran to the chic yet rusty stables. Once they found Stormi, they quickly went on.

They started galloping off until Ping heard men yelling in the background. "Get them back." Said one of the men. Guards were alerted; the girls went faster trying to lose the men. Arrows flung through the air perfectly. There were two turns at the front, and to lose the guards they had to confuse them.

Stormi galloped faster on the dusty forest floor; she kicked dirt up into the air and blinded the men. "We lost them." Said Cami, they cheered quietly. Then it started getting dark, it was foggy, and it even started raining. Cold nights passed by crossing steep hills and dark valleys.

After 2 weeks of rough traveling, they found themselves in a city in the UK. It was still quite foggy; they entered a small valley with a bunch of little houses. It was cold outside, but the feeling was warm. It felt cozy even when it was thundering. The girls needed money to settle in, but they didn't know what to do. Cami, Ping, and Stormi continued to look around.

Soon they found a house next to a stable. Cami looked at her horse unsure if she should do it or not. "I think I have to sell Stormi so we can get some cash." Said Cami. Cami loved her

horse Stormi, but she didn't really have a choice. Ping and Cami stumbled up to the house they rang the doorbell, waiting for what felt like hours. An elderly couple opened the door, encountered to 2 girls soaking wet, and a black and white horse. The couple were bakers Danny and Lora; they were kindhearted people. They owned a bakery and a stable next door. They had 2 horses, Lola and Lory.

They greeted the girls with a smile and asked, "what's wrong." Shivering Cami said, "no mean to bother but can we maybe stay at your place for a bit we have no money we are being chased by guards I'm willing to give you my horse Stormi." "Oh no need sweetheart we would be pleased for you to stay here." Said Lora "please come in and take a shower we have two horses as well and a big stable I'm sure they can share." Said Danny

They led Stormi to the stable to rest and eat. While Ping and Cami took a shower and changed clothes. The house was small but big enough to fit 4 people. It was cozy looking; it had brown furniture, a warm fire, and comfy beds. Cami and Ping shared a bedroom in the house. The 4 sat down to have some tea while Cami and Ping shared their story with the couple. Lora told the girls to stay for as long as they needed.

One week passed by and Danny and Lora decided to give Ping and Cami a job at the bakery. They learned how to bake and soon started working at the store. One day, 2 guards came into the bakery. They looked angry and

determined. "I'm looking for Cami." Said a buff guard. "And a slave." Said another. Lora was the only one working at the time because Danny was busy at home teaching the girls how to make croissants. "I'm sorry sir I don't know those 2." Said Lora shaking inside the guys left as they walked off Lora saw them leave the town with their horses galloping off, and hopefully never coming back. A month after the incident, the girls had enough money to buy a small apartment next to the stable. The girls continued working at the bakery and taking care of the horses.

The Jade Empire

Wellington College International School Shanghai, Cheung, Jia – 12

“You owe me thousands, not a couple bucks.” Kai’s voice was calm, but deadly.

“I know, I’ll have the money soon,” Josh lied.

Kai snatched the few bills from Josh’s hand. “When?”

“Soon, I just need time.”

“You’ve got seventy-two hours. Every cent. Or you know what happens. You had years to pay me back.”

He shoved Josh out into the rain. The door slammed, leaving him alone, heart pounding. Seventy-two hours to find thousands. No room for mistakes.

Josh walked through the dark night, his nerves raw, haunted by every mistake that led him here. Banished to live with his uncle after his parents discovered his addiction, everyone had hoped distance would change him. It didn’t. His family fell apart; his parents divorced. His sister went with his mother, and he became a forgotten shadow in their lives. At his uncle’s, he tried not to think about home—until he met Kai, who fed his addiction even when Josh had no money. Until now, when Kai was demanding every cent back. Josh had seventy-two hours to find it or face the consequences.

By the time he reached his uncle’s house, the sky was bleeding orange and red, the porch light flickering weakly. His hand trembled on the doorbell. When his uncle opened the door, the look in his eyes said everything—disappointment, fear, maybe pity.

“I didn’t know where else to go,” Josh whispered.

Inside, the air smelled of coffee and dust. The sound of the lock turning made Josh flinch.

“I screwed up,” he said. “I owe a guy named Kai. Thousands.”

His uncle went still, his face tightening. The silence stretched until Josh thought he’d break.

Finally, his uncle muttered, “Your mother’s never going to forgive me for this.” Then, louder: “Follow me.”

They walked through the narrow hallway, past old family photos, smiles frozen in time. His uncle led him into the study, a dim room where yellow curtains looked too bright for the gloom. He sat behind the desk.

“Have you ever heard of the Jade Empire?”

Josh frowned. “The fairytale? Mum used to tell me that story—the city that turned everything around it into jade.”

His uncle opened a drawer and pulled out a small green stone, its surface pulsing faintly like it was alive. “It wasn’t a story,” he said quietly. “It was a warning. And it might be the only way to save you.”

Josh stared at the stone. “You can’t be serious. You think a fairytale will save me?”

“It’s not just a fairytale,” his uncle said. “It’s a message passed down from our ancestors. Legend says it can save anyone, if you make it in time.”

He pulled out an old, fragile map. “There,” he said, pointing at a circled spot.

“The Jade Empire,” Josh whispered.

“And your only chance,” his uncle replied. “It lies on China’s border, where the Silk Road enters. Once there, read the story aloud before the gate. The guards will ask your name, and the emperor will summon you. Bring an offering—something valuable from the Silk Road’s start.”

“You’re not joking, are you?” Josh asked.

“Hurry. You must leave before it’s too late.”

“Are you crazy? We don’t even know if this place exists!”

“Do you have another plan?” his uncle countered. When Josh stayed silent, he added, “Then trust me. Follow the Silk Road—you’ll know when you see it.”

He handed Josh the map and a small green stone in a worn pouch. “Go.”

Without another word, Josh left, grabbed his bike, and rode to the nearest bus stop. On the bus, he studied the map. The Jade Empire was marked in the corner, but doubt lingered. It was still just a legend.

Hours passed before the bus stopped. “Final stop!” the driver called.

Josh stepped out into a crowded market. Vendors shouted, buyers bargained, and chaos surrounded him. He looked at the map again. Nothing matched the Silk Road.

“Useless,” he muttered.

Then, from behind him, a soft voice spoke.

“You’re holding it upside down.”

Josh turned. A girl stood there, maybe his age, maybe younger. Her dark hair shimmered like ink, and her eyes gleamed faintly green. She wore a faded red scarf embroidered with gold thread.

“You’re looking for the Jade Empire,” she said, like it wasn’t a question.

Josh froze. “How do you—?”

“You carry the stone,” she interrupted, nodding toward his pocket. “It called to me. It calls to all who once belonged.”

He backed up. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. I’m just trying to—”

“Save your life,” she finished softly. “Yes. The Empire can do that. But it never gives something for nothing.”

“What do you mean?”

She pointed toward the mountains in the distance. “Follow the old caravan road past the red cliffs. When the sun sets, you’ll see the first gate. But be careful—the price of redemption is always paid in what you value most.”

Before he could ask her name, she slipped into the crowd, vanishing as though she’d never existed.

Josh exhaled shakily, clutching the map. Maybe he was losing it—withdrawal, exhaustion, fear. But the green stone pulsed again, faintly warm against his palm.

He started walking.

By the time he reached the cliffs, the world had gone quiet. The market’s noise faded behind him, replaced by wind and dust. The road narrowed, winding between crimson stone spires. The jade’s pulse grew stronger with every step.

At sunset, a shimmer appeared ahead—a faint outline of gates carved from green crystal. They glowed faintly, humming with an otherworldly rhythm.

Josh stepped closer. “So it’s real,” he whispered.

He remembered his uncle’s words: *Read the story aloud before the gate.*

His hands shook as he unfolded the scrap from the map’s corner—the tale of the Jade Empire his mother once told him before she stopped telling stories at all.

He began to read.

“Once there was a city where greed turned hearts to stone. The emperor wept for his people, and the gods, hearing his sorrow, turned the city into jade—pure and eternal, so no man could harm another again.”

As he finished, the gates shuddered. Two figures appeared, carved from living stone, their eyes burning with green fire.

“Who seeks the emperor’s mercy?” one asked, its voice echoing through his bones.

“Josh Reynolds,” he said. “I seek to be saved.”

The guardians studied him. “What do you offer in exchange for your salvation?”

Josh froze. He had nothing—no money, no family, no clean slate. Then he remembered: *something valuable from the Silk Road’s start.*

His hand went to his pocket, pulling out the green stone. It pulsed brightly now, like a living heart.

“This,” he said, holding it out. “It’s all I have.”

The guardians bowed their heads and opened the gates

The city beyond was breathtaking. Everything glimmered in shades of green—walls, trees, even the rivers cutting through the streets. People moved like echoes, translucent and graceful, their faces serene.

At the city’s center stood a figure cloaked in gold, wearing a crown that shimmered like a flame trapped in jade.

“The Emperor,” Josh whispered.

When he approached, the Emperor’s voice filled the air. “You have come seeking salvation, mortal. Few make it this far.”

“I’m in trouble,” Josh said. “I owe someone dangerous. I’ll die if I can’t pay him back.”

The Emperor tilted his head. “Debt, guilt, addiction—they are the same chain, forged by your own hands. Do you wish to be free?”

“Yes,” Josh breathed.

“Then surrender what binds you.”

Before Josh could ask what that meant, the jade beneath his feet glowed. Memories flashed—his mother’s tears, his sister’s laughter, his uncle’s disappointment, the first lie, the first hit. The stone pulsed faster, brighter, until it burned in his hand.

He screamed, dropping it, but the light consumed him, flooding his veins, turning fear to stillness. For the first time in years, the noise in his head went silent.

When the light faded, he stood alone. The Emperor was gone. So was the stone.

He woke on a park bench in the market, sunlight blinding his eyes. His clothes were damp from rain, but his hands were clean, the tremors gone. The map lay beside him, blank.

For a moment, he wondered if it had all been a dream—until he looked at his reflection in a puddle. His eyes gleamed faintly green.

A voice echoed faintly in his mind: *The price of redemption is always paid in what you value most.*

He didn’t understand—until he reached for his phone.

No contacts. No photos. Nothing.

He couldn’t remember his sister’s name. Or his mother’s face.

The Jade Empire had kept its promise. He was free—of guilt, of memory, of the past.

But as he walked away from the market, he couldn’t shake the hollow ache in his chest, like something precious had been carved out of him.

In the distance, under the golden morning light, a girl with a red scarf watched him go. Her green eyes shimmered. She smiled faintly, then turned and vanished into the crowd.

Silence

Wellington College International School Shanghai, Maghularia, Daniel – 12

He was waiting for a huge explosion, everything was planned perfectly so he started sprinting away, but the only thing he heard was SILENCE...

He was sitting at a local beer shop planning the riskiest murder of his life. Yassen was the most wanted criminal in the silk road history, he was a quick sleek and a cold-hearted person. Yassen was abandoned by his parents as a baby, he was raised at an orphanage and didn't really have feelings. He didn't even know what love meant or parents meant. As he grew up, the only way he could survive was to steal.

He was at the exact location where he had planned the murder. He was contacted by a mysterious person who offered him huge amount of money and a mansion in if he murdered the emperor of the Tang Dynasty himself. His plan was to hide timed explosives under the sewage system below the most expensive and authentic jewelry store where the emperor was going to buy a jewelry for his son's wedding. Everything was going perfectly fine; the explosives had been set up ideally and Yassen was waiting outside pretending to be a new guard that the store had just hired. He had told the real guard who was standing beside him, that he had been hired by the owner of the store the day before the emperor's arrival so nothing bad would happen. The emperor finally arrived with all of his companions, thousands of people gathered around him cheering and applauding. The air was filled with chaos and joy as the emperor started approaching the store. Yassen nodded at the emperor with a smile as he entered. He was expecting a huge explosion anytime soon, so he started running away from the store towards the crowd, the audience fell silent and everybody was staring at him. This happened to be the silliest mistake of his life.

Yassen had been outsmarted! The day before the emperor's arrival, he had sent a group of undercover agents to check every little crevice of the store and everything below it. Guess what he found, the explosive that had been set up for the exact date and time as the emperor's arrival. Nobody knew who set it up, but Yassen made everything obvious. After a few minutes, he found himself in the hands of the emperor's companions. The fingerprints found on the explosive perfectly matched Yassen's, and the store owner had said that he didn't hire anybody except an old man who worked as a cleaner. All the evidence was against Yassen and so he got sentenced to 5 years of labor for attempted murder. As he got carried away by the guards, he felt embarrassed and angry of how silly he had been.

As the guards dragged Yassen through the crowded street, people whispered and pointed, their cheers for the emperor now became boos and disgusted faces. Yassen kept his head down, his hood was slipping off as they forced him forward. For the first time in years, he felt something unfamiliar rising in his chest not fear, but embarrassment. He had always believed that he was smarter than the world, sharper than any guard or emperor. But now, he looked like nothing more than a thief who'd been caught red-handed.

They locked him in a cage on wheels and transported him to the middle of nowhere, where the emperor's labor camp stood like a scar against the mountains. When the gates opened, Yassen saw hundreds of prisoners hacking at stone, hauling carts, and collapsing from exhaustion. The overseer, a muscular man with a scar running across his face, smirked as Yassen was pulled out.

"So this is the criminal genius who tried to blow up our emperor," the overseer said mockingly. "You don't look like much."

Yassen didn't reply. He was thrown a pickaxe and a small bottle of water. The days that followed blurred into endless hours of sweat, dirt, and aching muscles. He barely slept, the nights brought freezing winds that easily went through his thin clothing.

He started watching the other prisoners how they survived, how they helped each other, how they laughed despite their suffering. It confused him. Why would anyone waste time caring for someone else? He had spent his life believing that compassion was weakness. But here, in this miserable place, kindness seemed to be the only thing keeping people alive.

One night, an older prisoner collapsed near the quarry. The guards ignored him. Yassen hesitated, then against every instinct he had, he walked over and helped the man sit up. The prisoner stared at him in disbelief.

“Why... why are you helping me?” the man croaked.

Yassen didn’t have an answer. He just shrugged.

Word spread quickly. The infamous Yassen the emotionless criminal—had shown mercy.

Weeks turned into months, and bit by bit, Yassen changed. He found himself talking to others, sharing food, learning their stories. For the first time, he began to wonder who he could have been if life had given him even a sliver of warmth.

And then, one morning, everything shifted.

A messenger arrived at the camp, carrying an imperial scroll. The overseer read it aloud, eyes wide with shock.

“By command of the emperor,” he announced, “prisoner Yassen is to be released immediately.”

The entire camp fell silent.

Yassen froze, gripping his pickaxe.

Released?

But why?

The overseer continued reading.

“It seems,” he said slowly, “the emperor wishes to speak with you personally.”

And just like that, Yassen’s fate twisted once more, into something he never expected.

China's Silk Road

Wellington College International School Shanghai, Mei, Evie – 12

Dusts billows, and the chaos of war sweeps all in its way.

Under the ruins lies a small infant wrapped in fabrics. If you look closer, you will see the little key shaped locket around its neck. Though covered in dust, all alone and seemingly an orphan this is no ordinary baby. A sheet of rusted paper lies next to it but half was ripped. No sooner had everything went back to quiet then a pair of hand reached towards him...

A dozen years were gone in the blink of an eye, now that baby has grown into a young man, his name is Rui. Rui has lived in a farmer family with his father for the past 17 years, but he always wondered how his real parents were like. Although he was told that they abandoned him when he was a baby, he still hoped that he could find them one day.

As he was imagining about his parents while working one day he heard a shout.

"Rui! Come your fathers sick, come and see him!" It was Tian his best friend.

"What how? He was just fine when I left home this morning." Shouted back Rui while running towards his house. Soon he arrived at their broken house.

"Rui come here" said his father lying breathlessly on his bed.

"I just want to tell you something before I die, I knew this day will be here but unexpectedly this early, you weren't abandoned by your parents. Your parents both had a noble statue, and I was their housekeeper, during a civil war your father told me and the others to keep you safe and left for Jiang Nan, I hid you under rocks and brought you up. I guess now it's time for me to give you your things back" hands trembling Rui's father handed him a golden locket. It was a beautiful one even the erosion of time couldn't hide its delicacy. Under it lies a map half ripped, the blood stains turned into a dark red and the paper rusted at the edges.

Stunned, Rui looked at those objects the information given to him in the last minute changed his life fully...

Soon after he buried his father and said goodbye to others. He started his journey to find his parents and discover the mystery of that war 17 years ago.

With the money he received from selling his land and house he traveled to Chang Zhou the first location shown on the map. His nails pressed deeply into his palm, the familiar road that he always passes showering in the sun now seemed cold and deathly.

Chang Zhou, a place full of opportunity and hidden secrets lay Infront of Rui. Inside his eyes reflects the grand city gate carved with time. Entering, inside the gate is another type of view people there wore the most fashionable cloth and laughed with enjoyment but Rui had a mission undone.

"Hey! Who are you? Haven't seen you before, come here to see the 20th anniversary of Man Yue Lou?" A young man wearing a delicately designed robe and with a huge smile on his face called out to Rui.

"No but I really want to join!" replied Rui, he has heard of this place before the most popular restaurant down in Jiang Nan also with the latest and most reliable news. Maybe he could find some hint for his parents there.

Following the crowd soon he saw a magnificent building, every detail of it was carefully designed and the woods used fills the air with a unignorable luxury at first glance.

After a long time of waiting it was finally his turn in the line.

"Hi sir how can I help you?" asked a old man.

Slowly and carefully Rui lifted that golden locket but before he could have said anything he realized that the old man stood in shock admiring the locket.

Turning back and whispering to another lady beside him he now looked at Rui with a sense of curious and daunt. Leading Rui up the stairs passing all the delicate furniture he now stood Infront of a man. He brought the authority of the one in power and looked down at Rui as if looking at an ant that he can kill at any time.

Suddenly, he raised his hand and turned it towards Rui's face! Rui closed his eyes and prepared for the pain but all he received was a gentle touch on his cheeks.

"Oh yes you looked just like your father when he was younger, with passion and ambition in your eyes."

Without having time to think Rui responded “You knew my father? Please tell me where he is, is he okay and where’s my mother?”

“Yes, yes I did that young man the most talented in Chang An with a such a beautiful wife. He was popular back when younger and his wife would do anything for him.”

With hope in his eye Rui waited for his next sentence but what he received was a pitiful and sorrowful look in the mans eye.

“ Oh poor child your gorgeous mother died the night giving birth to you, it was such a chaotic year, civil wars everywhere. She just wouldn’t come back then she would’ve lived.” “Your father left you with his servant and came here along his pure white robe stained with blood searing my eye.” “ This arrogant person left his pride and begged me to help you when you come, then without hesitating he left but also left you a letter.”

Tears flowing in Rui’s eye he couldn’t believe what he heard, his father was such a brilliant man and maybe he is still alive somewhere.

“Where, where’s that letter, please he’s the only one I have.”

With the fainting writing Rui held the letter and it read:

Dear Rui,

I know I might not be next to you when you read this but remember you are named after one of our most successful emperors, you are born with great expectations. Find me and you will see what happened seventeen years ago.

Walking out of Man Yue Lou Rui miserably held the letter tight in his hand. Then he felt a rough mark on the back flipping the letter around he saw the other half of that map! Flipping through his luggage he took out the map and soon they were put together and now he understood.

His father must have handed this to the servant with such a hurry he ripped half and came here for help! The full map showed the destination at Su Zhou, the heaven on earth.

Finally, he was here music and laughter filled the city everything was unreal and enjoyable.

Following the map he passed a sea of emerald and arrived at a especially awkward empty space with no trees or plants as if carefully built by someone. Rui waited and waited but no one nor anything came or passed.

However, just when he sat down he heard a creak and swiping the leaves away he found a hole a hole that perfectly fits the shape of his locket. Hands trembling and heart beating he placed the locket in and creak, the wooden floorboard opened from inside.

There sat a man not old but just as how the owner of Man Yue Lou has described to Rui he could imagine how he would’ve looked like when he was younger, he had light in his eye but dimmer then it used to be.

No one said anything.

Rui imagined a million times of how he would rush towards his father and hug him as hard as he could but now he just stood still. Tears blurred his vision he clung to his clothes, knuckles white, and there he stared at the father he had missed every single day.

“Rui is that you my dear son?” voice trembling he held out his hand towards Rui.

“Yes father, but why?”

Only until now did Rui know the truth. Back in seventeen years ago civil war happened, Rui’s fathers name was Qiao their family worked for the emperor but secretly they were also merchants selling salt on the silk road. That year Rui’s mother Yue gave birth to him and died in the abandoned temple, giving Rui to their servants but only one lived protecting him. Rui’s father was at Lan Zhou trading salt when his mother died, to protect his family he had to hide the evidence from the emperor that they were merchants and that’s when he begged the old man who was Yue’s father to help him. Years ago, Yue’s father named Man Yue Lou after her but he disagreed on the marriage of her and Qiao, so they never seen each other again until her death.

Watching the blood red sunset, they sat on the dusty floor, and what next?

Threads of Friendship

Wellington College International School Shanghai, Sun, Yiyi – 12

1200, China, An Xi

Vibrant stands stretched endlessly from the entrance of the bustling market, with scents of foreign spices and tropical fruits filling the air thickly. Delicate chimes and bells were jingling from bags and camels, bathing the bustling market with a touch of excitement and joy. Among the busy buyers and sellers was Gui Yi, a young trader here to sell the glimmering silk piled on the back of her old camel. She wore loose silk pants and shirts, and around her neck she carried a piece of silk that her mother had given her. She wasn't here for money, riches, or fame, but to become something bigger, a carrier of the ancient silk technique that was slowly disappearing.

Her handmade silk was valued and rare, costly, and appealing. Many curious onlookers stopped just to admire the shimmering silk placed in the small booth, similar, but distinct when compared with other silk pieces. As Gui Yi carefully set out her rusty weaving machine, the market slowly quieted down, abandoning their trading, cautious not to miss a second of the creation of the weird, glowing silk. Careful not to break the worn strings on her weaving machine, Gui Yi sat down and started creating with grace and fluency. Her eyes fluttered shut, enjoying the momentary silence. She thought of her mother, who taught her how to read, write, and weave. She missed her, her cheerful teacher. After all, she was the one who had passed the tradition down to her along with a small piece of her handmade gold silk.

Buy or no buy, pay or no pay, she was truly happy doing this job. However, she wished for just one thing: a friend whom she could trust and talk to. She felt afraid. Her hands even shook when she spoke with someone or at least tried to. But little did she know that her wish would be granted — soon.

Cautiously, Tian Xi moved to the small stand at the start of the market that had caught her eye. Filled with bright, detailed tapestries and golden silk pieces placed on delicate wooden tables and display cases, a long-haired girl sat in the middle, weaving away with patience on a weaving machine. As a girl raised by a silk trader family, Tian Xi knew best what she was weaving: the legendary golden silk technique. The girl's soft features had kindness and a calmness that amazed Tian Xi. Her hands flowed among the weaving machine, *fluent as water*, she thought. She wondered how she sat there, just weaving. *Was she tired? Or maybe bored?* She didn't want to disturb her with her weaving, so Tian Xi sat beside her waiting for her to finish her piece. She laid out her bag by her side and rested her head on a table. And slowly the world faded away.

Gui Yi's hands shook, and her mind was dizzy; she had managed only to sell two pieces of silk in the gloomy weather. A dull ache began to spread in her body. Nowadays, fewer and fewer people visited golden silk shops, asking for stories and legends, as silk has become common and is rarely treated as a legendary material anymore. The gasps and admiration Gui Yi would have received a few months ago vanished; people carried on with their trades, chatted, and only a few paid attention when she began to weave. Night was dark and sulky, the only sound was silence and the quiet rustling of the wind blowing against the market stalls. Adding to her sadness, her fingers were trembling, but she was persistent in finishing the last piece of the silk.

Gui Yi opened her eyes as her tired hand plucked the last string, ending the piece of delicate silk tapestry she'd been working on. She opened her lidded eyes, expecting to see a deserted shop full of dusty cloth and silk, but instead found a young girl sitting next to her, head resting on a table, eyes closed. Gui Yi's mood lightened, sadness washed off, and was replaced by hope and excitement. Her eyes focused on the girl, golden-haired, with long lashes and plain clothes. She had longed for a friend, and this could be her chance.

When the girl woke up, she learned that her name was Tian Xi, who was destined to continue the family legacy: Silk trader. She wanted to escape and become a teacher of silk technique. Gui Yi was reminded of herself, and the more they chatted, the more they found they had in common. Gui Yi respected her and honored their friendship. She began to trust her more and more every day. They shared secrets, laughter, and days began to flash between her eyes with her new friend by her side. She was worried less about the disappearing tradition she had carried on her shoulders since her mother passed away. With the full support of her friend, she was confident she would carry on the traditional handicrafts into the next generation.

The stars were shining, lighting up a pathway to her hut that sat just outside the village. Willows waved their branches, swaying to the music the wind played. Cold wind blew, but the scent of flowers remained strong in the air. She strolled, enjoying the silence with a light heart. The wind halted to a stop as she entered her small hut. The light smell of fruits and flowers greeted her. Gui Yi felt tired, more than ever. Her eyelids felt heavy, her

mind drowsy. Seconds turned into minutes as she nestled in her small bed, curling around in a warm silk blanket. Eyes drooping, she let the smell of roses take her away to a land of happiness and love.

Flowers grew on the hillside of her mother's garden, lining up to the hut where they lived 3 years ago. Warm sunshine shone on the road, dropping down to enrich the vibrant colors nestled amongst flower beds. Gui Yi trotted alongside her mother; her face was blurred as if she couldn't remember her mother's face, but you could tell she was smiling. They headed up to the small hut, where Gui Yi's mother tucked her into a small, soft bed decorated with flowers and plants. She snuggled with her warm blankets, and her mother sat beside her, cooing her to sleep as she sang a soft song.

Quiet melodies filled her mind, a rhyme that she knew well. She listened closely.

"Be true, be kind, be the bravest among them all "

Blackness filled her sight, but the rhyme called her forward. Her hands shook, and she trembled. Shadows and secrets poured out of the blackness; her deepest nightmare played. People were laughing at her from the shadows, giggling about the weird passion that Gui Yi had for silk.

Gui Yi shouted at them to stop. A heavy rock was bearing upon her back; she was kneeling now, and the laughter was getting louder and louder. But now Tian Xi's words echoed in her ears.

"Wow, that's amazing. "

"You're my best friend, of course, I trust you to carry on the technique."

The rock she called her burden lifted, and the weight was shared by someone who really understands her. She could feel sadness, pain, but where there was that, there was also happiness and joy. A helping hand that always picked her up when she needed it. She felt lighter; a light spread from her body. The darkness cowered at the bright beams; she was strong and she was brave.

She wasn't afraid now, not of beasts under her bed or talking or anything. Something has changed — something inside of her. She accepted laughter, and she accepted her true self. She wasn't scared but determined. As she woke up, the morning sun greeted her, sunbeams lighting up her path. Gui Yi changed and hurried onto the roads.

"Be true, be kind, be the unique one in the sky." Her mother's song called to her. She knew she would keep the ancient tradition going, and this time she wasn't alone.

Tradition is hard to carry alone, but with a friend, you'll find the weight lifted.

The Silk Road

Wellington College International School Shanghai, Tadamasa, Josh – 11

Kane walked through the bustling market, his senses overwhelmed by the vibrant chaos around him. The sun was high, filtering through breaks in the clouds, casting patches of warm light onto the crowded scene. Everywhere he looked, traders shouted over the noise of the crowd, offering everything from delicate silks to exotic spices. The air was thick with the mingling smells of roasting meats, pungent durian, and fresh herbs. Kane breathed in deeply, not minding the overwhelming scents. It was all new to him. This was the famous Silk Road market, the kind of place he had heard about his whole life but never imagined he'd visit.

He was a man in his twenties—strong, fit, and with a kind face that could light up a room. He had a wife and two children back home, and every decision he made was for them. Today, he was here to make some money, to sell what he could, and hopefully bring home something special for his family. His heart swelled with pride as he thought about them. This market was everything he had hoped for—bustling, alive, and full of possibility.

Kane wandered through the maze of stalls, his eyes lingering on the silks, the hand-carved wooden statues, the spices that promised to make every meal unforgettable. He smiled at the vendors who called out to him, trying to lure him into their shops. But something else caught his attention.

Near the edge of the market, a figure moved swiftly between the stalls. It wasn't a man—not exactly. The person—or whatever it was—glided between vendors like a shadow, moving with an unsettling fluidity. It darted between crates, disappearing behind a bookshelf before slipping into a drain that ran beneath the street. Kane's curiosity sparked, but as quickly as it came, he brushed it aside. *It's probably nothing*, he thought. *Just some thief or wanderer.*

Still, his instincts told him something was off. The figure had been too... deliberate. And then there was that drain. The way it opened so easily, as if someone had been there before. But Kane shook it off. *I should focus on setting up my stall*, he told himself.

He found a small corner, unoccupied by other sellers, and set up his table. His hands worked quickly, arranging what little goods he had to offer. As he worked, his thoughts kept drifting back to the figure. He glanced over his shoulder but saw nothing unusual. The market had grown busier, the chatter louder, and he forced himself to concentrate on the task at hand.

That evening, as the market began to wind down and vendors started packing up, Kane couldn't shake the feeling that something was wrong. The full moon hung high in the sky, casting long shadows over the now quiet market. With most of the traders fast asleep in their tents, Kane found himself standing at the edge of the market, staring at the drain where the figure had disappeared.

I need to know what's down there, he thought. His heart raced at the thought, but his curiosity was stronger. He checked around to make sure no one was watching, then carefully lifted the drain cover. The smell of damp earth and stale air rose from the dark tunnel below. *Here goes nothing*, he muttered under his breath.

Kane clutched a metal bat in his hand, just in case. He didn't know what he might find, but he felt better being prepared. The ladder creaked under his weight as he descended into the darkness. The deeper he went, the colder it became. He could hear the distant sound of water dripping, echoing off the stone walls.

Halfway down, he paused to catch his breath. That's when he heard it—a faint sniffing sound, followed by a low growl. Kane's heart skipped a beat. *What was that?* he thought. His grip tightened on the bat as he scanned the darkness around him. The air felt thicker here, like something was watching him.

The growl came again, louder this time, closer. Kane's muscles tensed. He knew he wasn't alone.

And then he saw them—two glowing red eyes staring at him from the darkness. He froze, his breath caught in his throat. A massive creature emerged from the shadows, its fur bristling, its mouth open in a snarl. Kane's heart pounded in his chest. *A werewolf*, he thought, unable to believe what he was seeing.

Without thinking, Kane swung the bat with all his strength. The blow landed with a sickening crack, knocking the creature back. But it didn't retreat. Instead, it lunged forward, its claws swiping at Kane's legs. Kane scrambled to get away, his foot slipping on the ladder rungs. The werewolf came at him again, faster than he could react. He climbed as quickly as he could, feeling the sharp claws just inches from his heels.

At the top of the ladder, Kane made a desperate leap, pulling himself up just in time. He swung the bat again, hitting the werewolf square between the eyes. The creature stumbled backward, then tumbled into a stream nearby, unconscious.

Kane slammed the drain cover back into place, his breath ragged and his hands shaking. He glanced around the market. The vendors were all asleep, oblivious to the danger beneath their feet. The night was still, the only sound the soft snoring of the traders.

What the hell was that thing? Kane thought. *What else is down there?*

The next morning, Kane couldn't stop thinking about the creature he had seen. When he told the other vendors about the werewolf, they laughed it off, dismissing it as a dream or some kind of wild story. But Kane knew what he'd seen. He needed proof.

"I'll go back," he said to a few of the more skeptical traders. "I'll bring back something—hair, claws—anything to show you that I'm not crazy."

Reluctantly, they agreed to join him. The group made their way to the drain, climbing down the ladder into the cold, dark tunnel. The air felt heavy, the silence almost oppressive. Kane led the way, his mind racing. The others stayed close, looking around nervously.

Soon, they came across a trail of blood—dark and thick against the stone. Kane motioned for them to follow, and they cautiously advanced. The blood led them to a cave at the end of the tunnel. Before anyone could stop him, one of the men stepped forward into the cave.

"Wait!" Kane shouted, but it was too late. The man had already disappeared into the shadows. Seconds later, a terrifying growl echoed through the cave. Then the sound of gnashing teeth.

The wolves were everywhere, emerging from the dark, their eyes glowing like embers. The group scattered, grabbing whatever they could—sticks, rocks, and metal pipes. Kane swung his bat, knocking out one of the wolves, but there were too many.

The battle was fierce, but eventually, one by one, the wolves fell. It was over. The last of them lay unconscious on the ground.

Panting, bloodied, and exhausted, the group climbed back to the surface, emerging into the cold night air. They were alive. The wolves were gone. For now, at least.

Kane said his goodbyes, heading back to the van. As he settled into his seat and closed his eyes, he couldn't shake the feeling that this was just the beginning.

What if there are more? he wondered, the image of the werewolf's glowing eyes haunting him. But for now, it was over.

The end.

The Forgotten Desert

Wellington College International School Shanghai, Wang, Jasmine – 12

Layla Chen, the wild dreamer, was ready to make a difference. She admired new discoveries and fascinating objects, praise from people, and approval from her family. It was the day of a new start—the trip where she could finally take an independent step in her journey, her chance at fame and an impact on the world. She finally arrived in Turpan. It was her first time here, and she couldn't be more excited. She could smell the aroma of grilled skewers and traditional noodles; she could feel the cold wind blowing onto her face, and she could see the golden sand dunes that looked smooth as silk. She waved her hand in the air as thousands of taxis drove by, bustling through the rush hour. Finally, she caught a car, opened the door, and jumped in, optimistic for the day ahead. The Silk Road, the world-known trading route, was going to be another stop in her adventure.

When she finally arrived at the dusty motel, it had been three whole hours on the road, and she longed to jump into a soft, cozy bed to get some good sleep. Until she showed up at her accommodation and saw a room that looked like a pigsty—it wasn't anything like her imagination: the cozy clean room with fresh sheets and a comfy mattress. It was too late though. She brushed her teeth and made her way to bed. Staring at the ceiling, she slowly fell asleep...

It was dawn. The sun came up as light seeped through the ragged curtains. Her eyes lit up like a little kid and she jumped out of bed. She checked the time and realized she was late—really late. She raced across the room packing everything she needed, every little thing that made its way past her eyesight. She threw on her shoes and dashed out. She still had five minutes. She started sprinting, her feet thumping on the rough ground while her throat dried up, gasping for fresh air. She wanted to stop and pause for a second, but she couldn't, not on her biggest trip ever. She kept speeding, flying past everything in her way. Until she saw the bus. It was about ten blocks away, ready to close its doors any second. Her heart was beating as fast as a leopard, she zipped through thousands of people. She leaped toward the closing doors shouting, "Stop!" Her hand reached out to the handle, grabbing on tight. She made it. The doors closed and off she went.

The trip was long and hard to endure, but that was over, and the excursion finally arrived. She set foot on the scorching hot sand that was finer than powdered sugar. She was there at last. This place was not visited, not a common destination. There was not a single chatter or whisper. This place was a stop on her bus ride to the famous tourist destination, the Ancient City of Jiahe. Somehow, in the end, she decided to inspect here. She wondered why and how a place so beautiful could be unknown. How it could be untouched, not a single print on the natural sand. The bus left promptly after, leaving a gust of wind blowing through her long brown hair. She looked up at the abstract rocks and caves just waiting to be explored. It was fascinating, just a wonder. She turned around, feeling shivers up her spine. The more she walked in, the more watched she felt. It was like an ocean of eyes staring through her. Goosebumps crawled up as she shivered in despair. She spotted a tall, dark shadow standing in the far corner.

Slowly she walked up. Her feet pounded onto the burning sand, her throat turned dry, and tears were sneaking into her eyes. Her posture bent as she got closer and closer to the uncanny man. Oh, who could he be? Why was he here, not moving at all? She attempted to tap his shoulder, but her hand swerved back. She held out her arm slowly and carefully patted the man's shoulder. He turned around. Her heart raced. He was normal. He had brown, fluffy hair, blue eyes that could go on forever, and a strong build.

"Hello—excuse me. Do you need anything?" the man asked.

"Oh! Hi... my name is Layla," she stuttered.

"Hello. I'm Hardin," he replied.

"Sorry about that," she said, clearing her throat. "What are you doing out here? This place is practically unknown."

"I'm here to explore, see what I can find. You?" Hardin asked.

“Same, actually.” She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. “Well... I’ll see you later, I guess.” Before he could answer, she hurried off, cheeks burning.

“Bye,” he called after her, still wondering what on earth had just happened.

Layla ran faster and faster until Hardin couldn’t see her anymore. She slowed down, holding her hand on her pounding chest. Why did she run away? Hardin. That name echoed behind her like a whisper carried on the desert wind. Wind howled past as the ancient ruins flickered in the distance. It was a reminder: discoveries and treasure, that’s her goal. She scolded herself, trying to forget what had happened. It was just one encounter. You got this! she thought.

As she was walking by the golden dunes she felt a shiver. The wind was getting stronger. She glanced behind her, seeing the once sunny sky turning dark. Colours faded as clouds grew and sand started to build up together. She ran as fast as she could, every breath making a sharp sting in the back of her throat. Her hair whipped behind her. The sand flew at her like an army of ants; she could feel the sting but she was determined to survive. She had to.

As she searched for shelter, she couldn’t help thinking about Hardin. Was he okay? Would he be okay? Barely able to see through the crumbling stones, she found a rusty cave camouflaged beneath the ruins. She bent down, crawling further as the stone wall scraped across her fragile skin. The more she squirmed, the more the cave revealed its true beauty. The air grew colder, but the place had a strange sense of safety. Inside, it was big and had an earthy smell. The place was perfect, it was like the desert had forgotten it existed. She thought of her plan; her curiosity grew larger as the wall carvings pieced together into a drawing. There were carvings of a family. Was this an unfound city? she wondered. Who lived here before?

Thump.

The sound broke through her thoughts like a sudden jolt. Her heart skipped a beat as she shrank back to the wall. Who was it? The footsteps were approaching her by the second.

“Layla?” The voice called out—familiar but uncertain.

“Was it him?” she thought to herself “Yes... is that you, Hardin?”

He emerged from the tunnel, his face tense with relief. “I thought I’d lost you in the storm,” he said, his voice trembling slightly. “I was terrified.”

She jumped up, hugging him with joy. “I can’t believe it’s you!”

Just like that, they spent the night together, hiding from the sandstorm.

The wind stopped howling. The sand stopped flying around. It was morning. Layla woke up to the sunrays. She got up, stretching and yawning. Just beside her was Hardin, sleeping like a baby. She carefully got out of the cave and started searching for clues. Her boots sank into the sand as she scanned for displaced treasure and forgotten paths. The air was cool as wind blew past and the temperature was just right. Moving farther and farther away from the cave, she uncovered pieces of rock scattered across the desert. Maybe the desert didn’t trap them... maybe it brought them exactly where the adventure starts. Hope rose as she joyfully wandered around the desert collecting the fragments of an “abstract art piece.”

Just then she realized the carvings looked fresh, likely new. Was there another being living here? The ruins pieced together part by part, forming a family tree? Was there a whole family out there?

At that second, a sudden gust of wind blew past, sending the pieces flying.

“No!” she shouted.

She ran after them, realizing the sandstorm had started again ‘even bigger’ this time. She ran as fast as she could back to the base. But through the dusty wind she saw a gang of men running after her. She couldn’t think. What’s happening? What did I do? She ran back and saw Hardin.

“We’ve got to go, there is a sandstorm coming!” she shouted with fear.

“No... these men are after my father,” he said, trembling. “I’ve been avoiding this, but I have to face them.”

“What do you mean?” she asked, panting.

A sandstorm was swirling up, bandits were following them, and they were trapped.

The Buried Tomb

Wellington College International School Shanghai, Xiong, Yinzuo – 12

The air in the penthouse was cold and still. Agent Gao looked down at the body of Dr. Wei. People call him the ‘Silk Road King’, but now he’s just a dead man laying on a very expensive carpet.

He had been killed with a dagger, it’s handle was made with porcelain and decorated with green stones, but it was the cloth that caught Agent Gao’s attention. Someone had covered the body with beautiful blue silk. It had a complex pattern and weird signs woven on it. It looked ancient, but also strangely new.

“The dagger is old, very old,” a technician said. “It is from an era around two thousand years ago according to my investigation. Oh, and the cloth, we think it is a copy.”

Suddenly, Agent Gao’s phone buzzed. It was her boss, informing her that the big international trade summit was in two days. The death of its main character was a huge problem. She needed an expert urgently, someone who could reveal the hidden message that the murderer gave from the unusual cloth. A quick research on her phone gave her a name: Dr. Lin.

Agent Gao stood outside a small apartment on a dark alley in Xi’an. She knocked. The door was opened by a woman with tired eyes and messy hair.

“Dr. Lin? I’m Agent Gao, nice to meet you. We spoke on the phone earlier if you remember.” Dr. Lin said nothing, she stepped aside and let Agent Gao come in.

“I need your help with a case.” Agent Gao got straight to the point and explained everything that happened. She showed a clean shot of the silk covering Dr. Wei’s body. Dr. Lin glanced at it carefully. The tiredness suddenly vanished, replaced by a sharp focus. She snatched the photo from Agent Gao’s hands.

“Where was this taken,” Dr. Lin asked.

“A crime scene, the victim is Dr. Wei,” Agent Gao replied.

“Oh, the Silk Road King?” Dr. Lin asked.

Agent Gao nodded and said “The silk is copy. We need to know what this pattern means and why would the murderer use this?”

Dr. Lin smiled. “Because it’s a language no one else speaks, a language that people say that I invented it.” She traced the patterns with her finger. “This is a fragment, it’s incomplete! See here?” She points to an edge in the pattern. “This isn’t the end, it’s been cut, it says a sentence that is missing its nouns!”

“Wait so what does the fragment say?” Agent Gao asked.

“It is a map,” Dr. Lin replied, still staring at the photo. She pointed at a tangled part of the design. “See these curly lines? They’re not just vines, they represent the Mogao Caves in Dunhuang, and these lines here, they point to a part of one cave. It seems like the murderer didn’t leave the full picture, he left the starting point of the route, he wants us to follow the trail.”

Agent Gao looked at Dr. Lin determined face, realizing this was the only person in the world who can understand what was needed to be solved, as she gained more confidence.

“Pick up your coat Dr. Lin, we’re going to Dunhuang!” Agent Gao said with excitement, making the decision.

The flight to Dunhuang was immediate. Agent Gao made calls to her team, telling them to get ready. When they landed, a local police car took them straight to the Mogao Caves, as there was no time to waste. The giant cliffs were full of ancient caves, it was a place full of history.

Dr. Lin led the way, looking at the photo every few seconds. She stopped in front of a small, unnoticeable cave entrance.

“Here it is,” she said. “The pattern points to here. Inside, the cave was dark and humid. They used flashlights. The walls were covered with faded paintings of Buddhas and ancient stories. Dr. Lin’s flashlight pointed to a spot on the wall.

“There,” she whispered. The painting there was the only one that looked new, it was clear and not faded.

“It’s another message, another piece of the map.” Dr. Lin said. “It’s showing the ‘Camel Mountain’, it’s near the city of Kashgar.

Suddenly, Agent Gao’s phone rang, it was her team back in Xi’an. Their voice was urgent.

“Agent Gao, we have another problem. A German art trader was found dead in her hotel. She was murdered the same way as Dr. Wei, and she has this covered on her body.”

A photo popped up on Agent Gao’s phone. It was a picture of a small piece of blue silk on the victim’s body, she immediately showed Dr. Lin.

“This is the exact same piece missing from the cloth on Dr. Wei’s body!” Dr. Lin yelled in the hollow cave.

The murderer was still one step ahead, leaving a trail of murder cases full for clues for them to follow. Agent Gao looked at Dr. Lin again, her face was serious.

“We need to get to Kashgar, now!”

In Kashgar, the air was different. It smelled of spices and smoke. Who they needed now was someone who knew the local history and patterns better than anyone. By communicating with the locals, Dr. Lin and Agent Gao were led to an elderly woman that owns a small weaving shop in Kashgar. Her name is Abreza. Dr. Lin showed her the photos of the two silk patterns. Abreza stared at them for a long time.

She pointed her bony finger at the new picture of the mountain, the ‘Camel Mountain’.

“You guys have to know that y’all are not looking for treasure,’ Abreza said with a casual voice.

“Then what are we looking for?” Agent Gao asked.

“A tomb, a tomb of a great queen, a forgotten queen. The pattern is a map to her.” She began to weave again. “But the mountain isn’t here now, it is replaced by a building site, for the new trade road.”

They rushed straight to the construction site, it was a huge area of concrete and steel, lit up by bright lights, it was empty at night.

They saw a figure in the shadows. It was Professor Tanaka, a Japanese historian. He saw them and froze. In his hand was an ancient dagger, just like the one that killed Dr. Wei.

“I had to!” Tanaka shouted, the echo followed. “Dr. Wei was going to dig up the tomb, he wanted to use it for his own glory, to make himself more famous, he didn’t care about the queen.”

He had killed Dr. Wei to protect the truth of the queen’s tomb, he had killed the German art trader because he had the missing piece of silk and was going to sell it.

As he talked, Dr. Lin noticed something. The way he held that dagger was strange, it was in a very specific way, but she had seen that grip before. Only one person held tools that way, Ableza, the weaver.

Dr. Lin had realized that Professor Tanaka was not the main cause, he was just a helper that was hired by Ableza.

At that moment, Ableza stepped out of the shadows.

“You are a fool Tanaka, why did you say that,” she shouted with anger.

She then looked at Dr. Lin and Agent Gao and decided to reveal her mind “Dr. Wei was a greedy man, he was going to change the history, that’s why I needed to have him dead. But I did not want to hide the tomb, I wanted the world to know the queen’s story, my ancestor’s story, that’s why I had to do this!”

Agent Gao called for backup, and had Professor Tanaka and Abreza taken away. The truth was finally out.

Ableza had started a murder investigation to make the truth of her ancestor’s tomb a world-famous story that no one could hide and forget. She used a modern crime to tell an ancient truth.

As Dr. Lin stood with Agent Gao, looking at the sun rise over the mountains, they felt peace. The secrets that had been hidden for thousands of years were finally revealed, but their new partnership was just beginning.

The Box

Wellington College International School Shanghai, Zhu, Clare – 13

In the bustling market of Xi An, the air is filled with the scent of hot, juicy buns, the sound of sizzling oil, chattering of tourists and calls from the shopkeepers.

Desperately, Wang Hua pushes and squeezes through the crowds of tourists with sweat on his entire blushed face and a frown. He holds sheets of information and a single contract, kept nicely in an opaque folder. Then, Wang Hua sighs and starts to kick the broken pieces of rock which are scrambled on the floor. "How am I supposed to figure out all of this in 2 days? Is it not my fault with how the previous assistants left?"

In the crowd of people, a young woman peered secretively at Wang Hua. She starts to walk, slowly, towards him. "Hi!" The woman cheered. She had a huge smile, a smile so big that Wang Hua thought her face would break if she did that for too long. "I'm Anna.....Anna Jade! How about you?" She asked as she smiled a big smile again. Wang Hua looked at the sky, then opened his mouth, and croaked, "Wang Hua."

"I have a father just like you! He does not like to talk and likes to gaze at the sky. He says it relaxes his nerves."

Wang Hua's eyes opened big and scratches his head, and a question mark appeared on top of him."

It was almost 4pm, so Anna then suggests going to the Café and get some snacks together.

"Two chocolate cookies. Thank you." Anna introduced to Wang Hua how this was her and her father's memory. They used to go to the Cafe every Saturday afternoon.

After the chat they had, Wang Hua found out that Anna had several ship driving experiences and is good at map reading. Therefore, Wang Hua went through the company procedures and successfully made Anna the temporary assistant.

A day later, they set to the seaside and catch the boat going to Xinjiang. Wang Hua had a small duffle bag, and wore a simple T-shirt, holding a massive black box with roles of tape stuck around it.

"So, this is the box full of precious little jade?" Anna asked, casually.

Wang Hua nodded and made a "keep this a secret" gesture.

For the next two hours, Anna kept a sullen face and stared blankly at the sea, which was churning with waves. But Wang Hua did not care, and believed that Anna was just tired, and was storing energy for the major event later.

They finally arrived and pushed themselves out of the boat, feeling sleepy.

The desert's sand was soft, smooth and thin. Even if you fell into it, nothing would happen. It was like a golden sea, and a sea that would only be seen in Xinjiang.

Unexpectedly, a huge sandstorm came. Whoosh! Anna shrieked while she jumped and snatched the black box from Wang Hua.

"Come here, quickly! Hide and protect the box!" Wang Hua exclaimed.

A few minutes later, the sandstorm was over.

"Let's go, I guess." Anna spoke, plainly.

On the taxi, Wang Hua noticed Anna was constantly playing her mobile phone. Perhaps she is texting with her friends? Wang Hua assumed as he reassured himself.

Ka-ching! They scanned the taxi fee to the driver and got off. There is just about 10 minutes of walk route to get there.

Just as they almost arrived, something that changed all their plans happened. Arrows shot out from towers, ninjas leaped from trees, swords bounced into Wang Hua's view.....

“Anna!” he cried. This was the first time Wang Hua has ever felt so scared and feeling like he has done everything wrong or will ruin this opportunity.

He could feel his blood run cold, and his face slowly turned purple in colour. The man grasped and clutched tight onto a pillar comforting himself.

This is not the worse part.

Anna Jade, his assistant, took off her jacket, revealing the logo on her tight clothing. Anna’s clothes looked the same as the one on the ninjas, but Anna had a crown symbol on the left side of her chest instead.

This repeated slow motion in Wang Hua’s mind, feeling shocked. He wished that this was a dream and would wake up as soon as possible. But it was not.

The only thing he could do now was to clutch tight to the box, and run away to another place, change the location of the trade.

Who could expect a normal trade to develop into such a rare situation like this? Wang Hua had great mindset, so he decided to go with the plan.

His pupils fixed on the narrow bridge ahead, Wang Hua immediately set off, zigzagging to make the ninja’s harder to shoot him.

He passed the flying arrows, swinging knives and boxing ninjas, accepting the challenge. Good thing he has took karate lessons about a few years ago.

There was almost a pinch of land till he arrives to safety, but he trips and lands on his nose, controlling the urge of pain that is making him want to cry. He crawls and reaches while saying “I am not regretful.”

Anna thought of the happy days with Wang Hua and stops the ninjas. Instead, she holds Wang Hua’s hands and says with sorrow.” I’m sorry. I did all of this and planned it myself. It is not your luck about finding an assistant so fast, but my cruelty of gaining all treasures. When I was small, my parents abandoned me and dumped me into the rubbish bin. Then I turned into a head ninja. This was all for survival...Maybe revenge. It is ok that you do not forgive me, and I totally understand. Just leave me and my crew alone. I guess.”

“Sorry, but I cannot forgive you. Happy to meet you. Bless you good luck and a stable job.”

Wang Hua turned and walked away with a bleeding nose, sore feet and a broken heart. There is no time. Last chance to succeed.

Anna Jade silently watched everything, hoping the best for him. In her heart, she will never forget Wang Hua and how gentle he treated her. It is a pity. Regret came too late and never realized his fire melted her ice—cold body. His kindness, courage, strength... We shall meet again. She thought.

Wang Hua found their client behind a tree and explained the situation. The client was very pleased with how Wang Hua handled it. After quickly exchanging the items and ensuring their quality, they all took the boat back to Xi An.

“Captain, the situation is getting worse! We are sinking!”

Everyone put on life jackets and glanced nervously at the huge hole that made them sink down. Deep down into the depths of the ocean.

Just as they were about to lose all hope and start writing last wishes to send to their families, a bunch of mysterious people appeared and threw a ladder at them. It was Anna!

The truth was, Anna had been following Wang Hua and protecting him secretly, all the way.

Wang Hua felt a huge warm, invisible hug as his heart raced of excitement. Home!

Back in his company, everyone cheered and Wang Hua led a shy girl—Anna Jade, back and introduced her to them.

“Start with the easiest job. Eventually, you can handle more things, like me right now!”

After this event, Wang Hua turned into an executive. He also acknowledged a fact, locked in the treasure chest in his body.

If you trust yourself, you can do it. In life, there are different things you may experience. They may be good; they may be bad. But it is all worth living. Why not try?

The Lost Jade

Wellington College International Shanghai, Braido, Evelyn – 13

It was another ordinary afternoon in Xi An, the traders from the silk road had flooded into the main streets and Emily was swarming through the bustling crowd after yet another long day of school. Emily kicked off her tattered shoes before she entered her small cottage, the grandfather clock slowly swung as Emily collapsed to the ground. Emily's eyes slowly flickered; her kneecap was forming a dark bruise. Emily had tripped on a wooden tile. The pain in her chest spread through her body which made it hard to breathe as she sat up. A few minutes had passed by Emily slowly looked around locating where the missing floor tile had gone. As she picked it up from under her feet and went to go place it back, she noticed something under where the tile had been. The crumpled map made all doors unlocked to Emily's mind, her pupils shrunk, leaving her speechless. She had no time to waste.

Emily grabbed her bag and leapt out of the door. Shuttling through the streets, Emily's steps bloomed from a lazy saunter into a sprint, her feet became two fluttering sparrows that outstripped her own awareness—until at last, she could no longer feel them. It was pitch black when Emily finally stopped at a bus stop. She was starving but she quickly sat down and started to read the map. With only a few yuan in her pocket she bought a ticket to Ho tan. Emily didn't sleep, tightly gripping the ticket in her hand and rethinking everything. Soon, the bus had arrived, and Emily got on. A tall muscular man sat next to Emily.

"Hello, I'm Akeculi" said the man in a booming voice.

"Hi, I'm Emily."

The next few hours Emily stayed quiet. Suddenly a shivering sound broke the peace. It was Emily's stomach.

"Want to try some of the best food ever." Said Akeculi.

Emily wanted to be nice and say no but she was too hungry to reject the offer.

"Yes!" Emily said cheerfully.

Akeculi took out a small container filled with curry. The smell of curry filled the bus, Akeculi handed it to Emily. Emily slowly took a bite. Her taste buds tinkled, and the scrumptious curry made a smile quickly spread across her face. Emily quickly finished the rest and said thank you.

"Why are you going to Ho tan?" Emily asks.

"I'm going there to trade for Jade. Ho tan has the best jade!"

Emily had vaguely remembered something, but the thought quickly faded away and the bus came to a stop.

The vibrant city of Ho tan looked like an art piece from the intricate designs on the buildings to the neatly cut bushes. Emily took out the map and started following the directions. She passed small markets and food stands. She looked through her bag to see if there were any valuables or money, she could use it to buy some food but there was no luck. She kept on walking. Emily's legs began to tremble with exhaustion until, finally, she froze. Looking up at the small store with a bold sign saying 'Lian's jade'. As Emily walked in a pretty girl with long silky black braids greeted her.

"Hello, are you here to look at some jade? It is a must buy when you come to Ho tan," said the lady.

Emily didn't speak as her head spun and twirled like a ballerina.

"Oh, I'm just having a look." Emily said, tucking her map away.

As Emily examined the store a whisper came from behind her back. Emily swiftly turned around to see an old lady with a wrinkled face gesturing for her to come over. Emily made sure she wasn't talking to someone else, then slowly walked over to the back of the store.

"You look just like Judy when she was younger" whispered the old lady.

Judy was Emily's grandma's name.

“Wait here” said the old lady slowly getting up and walking towards the backroom.

A few minutes passed by, and the old lady walked back out and handed Emily a piece of paper. Emily was just about to start talking but the old lady stopped her before she could and gently said “save the questions for later, now hurry up and go.”

Emily nodded and quickly left the store. The piece of paper was another map.

The sun was starting to set, Emily fastened her footsteps till she started to jog. Soon she stopped, this time in front of a small cave. Suddenly, a deepening sense of anxiety filled Emily’s body. Emily hesitated; the awful flashbacks covered Emily’s mind. ‘No, I don’t want to leave!’ Her soft baby hand rubbing against the sharp gravel walls, an old lady crying on the floor. It was the flash backs of her leaving her grandma. She couldn’t muster enough courage to walk in, it was impossible, but now she had nothing left so she had to be brave. Slowly stepping her foot in and the rest of her body she made it inside. The cave yawned before her, its darkness swallowing the dim light like a hungry beast. Emily gently rested on the moldy mattress and her eyes slammed shut.

To the sound of small chirping noises Emily leisurely woke up. She felt miserable. Running out without telling anyone, only to have made it to some small little cave and now she had nothing and no way back home. Her mind was a mess. A tear dripped down her cheek followed by a few more till she eventually broke down in tears.

“I thought I could do it, finally find what grandma had left me.” Said Emily.

“Her last words I heard were find the map and we shall meet again but now nothing.”

Emily’s voice slowly faded, and she stood up to go get her bag. As she scrummaged through her bag, she noticed a small box that she never had seen before. It was small with a red velvet outside and dark red accents. She gently opened it making sure she didn’t break whatever was inside. A shiny emerald green jade necklace. Emily softly pressed her finger against it. It was cold to the touch and as soft as silk. Emily then pulled out the jade that had been tucked under her shirt. She looked at the two pieces. She lay them flat on both palms and collided them together forming a distorted key. Emily felt hope, quickly standing up she looked around the cave. “Aha found it!” it was a small hole in the cave. As she placed it in, she heard a click then gently turned it. The wall glided to the side that revealed a fancy mansion.

Emily stepped in, looking around, the white marble floor rubbing against her feet and the tall, bifurcated staircase. Emily spotted a figure at the top of the staircase. The person had grey hair with a nice floral dress. Not the kind Emily would wear though. Emily took a deep breath then called out

“Grandma is that you?”

the figure quickly turned their head then briskly ran off.

“Hey, come back here!” shouted Emily running off.....

Whispers of the Silk Road – The Siblings' Quest

Wellington College International Shanghai, Chen, Jade – 11

Yumen Pass was once a bustling frontier post, with caravans and soldiers coming and going, but today this city is awfully quiet, only the sound of sobbing echoing around the city. The Hun has come. The only difference is that this time they didn't just steal foods and goods, they took away teenagers, who were the heart of the whole family. Parents were devastated, younger children were crying, and the elders could do nothing but stare out of the windows, hoping for their grandchildren to return safely.

Inside a small brick house stood a boy. He was the one whom the Huns have missed in their search; there was no sign of relief on his face. He successfully hid from the Hun, but his sister didn't. He finally went to a conclusion after a whole night of tossing and turning—the only way to find his sister is sneaking out. He thought that he needed to do this alone, but it turns out that he might be wrong.....

Carefully, he opened the door. Looking at the home he lived in for 15 years, he had never left Yumen Pass before, and there is a good chance that he might never come back again. For one second, he was thinking about turning back; to make a better plan before going to find his sister, but every second he delays, his sister might be in deeper danger.

Suddenly a black figure flashes across his sight. He froze, hands tightening on the stick at his waist. He doesn't want to catch anyone's attention, though he is ready to yell if necessary. But before any sound can build in his throat, a cold hand clamps over his mouth. "Zip it. Don't let anyone know. I'm not supposed to be out here now, and you shouldn't too, should you?" She says as her gaze quickly sweeps over him.

"Do I know you?" The boy asks, ignoring her question.

"No, I'm Meiling."

"Well, it seems like it's time for you to tell me your name. You don't need to be all mysterious." Meiling stares at him. After a few awkward seconds.

"Umm, just to be clear, you are the mysterious one." He said with a roll of his eyes. "But anyways, my name is Liran. And, uh, any reason why you are still here?"

"Duh, I'm going to find my brother captured by the Huns." Meiling said, as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. "And you are going to go and find your sibling too, right? Is it your sister?" She asked but didn't bother to wait for the answer. "We should get going then." Meiling rasps. Her tone turned serious. "Wait here."

About one minute later, Meiling's back — riding a beautiful, amber-colored horse. Seeing his shocked expression, a small smug smile tug at her lips. "Coming?" She asked, offering a hand when Liran nodded.....

Miles away in the lurid Huns camp, Xiaoyu — Liran's sister and Yunan — Meiling's brother, huddled on the tent's floor, shoulders pressing together, trying to keep the only warmth from escaping. They met the day they were captured, developing a deep bond with each other as they share stories about both themselves and their siblings, who had escaped from the Hun's search. Now the two of them are fast friends.

Accidentally, Xiaoyu's elbow knocked onto a piece of loose floorboard. She yelped as Yunan covered her mouth to shush her. Slowly she flipped the floorboard over.

Underneath is a piece of scrambled parchment. Yunan leaned closer, squinting at the smudged writing. "Oak bends low, path unfold." Xiaoyu whispered. They didn't have a clue of what that might mean when they heard a guard's gruff voice. "Lights out. Anymore noises then you will have to answer to the Khan." Xiaoyu quickly stuffed the piece of parchment into her pocket. Not long after she did the whole encampment fell silent, only the soft echoes of snoring lingered. Yunan turned to look over at Xiaoyu, finding her already fast asleep. The crease between her eyebrows from all the worrying about their capture was gone. He softly traced his finger over where the crease had been; then suddenly conscious of what he was doing, he pulled his hand back quickly. Just as his eyelids started to feel heavy, he heard two distant voices. He listened carefully, straining to hear each word.

"I'm heading to the Khan's tent to report," one of the guards muttered.

"I'd be careful if I were you – he's not in a good mood these days. Whatever thing he is working on is not going well." The other replied. Yunan frowned, trying to hear more, but the voices faded.

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As Yunan and Xiaoyu were having their breakfast the next morning, Meiling and Liran are trying hard to find water. "Meiling!" Liran yelled. "There seems to be a mark here." Meiling rushed over. On the ground there is a mark of a camel hoof. She dropped to her knees and started to dig. There wasn't water or even any supplies, instead there were just a piece of fabric. Meiling's face dropped as she hold up the piece of cloth for Liran to see, but instead of feeling the same disappointment Meiling has felt, he froze, a breath caught up in his throat. "This is Xiaoyu's," he said, voice cracking. "She wore this dress the day she was captured."

"There must be something important about this then, I bet she wouldn't risk it if it is meaningless."

Suddenly an old memory crossed Liran's mind. "I know!" He gasped. "My mom said this dress is made of special fabric—words can only show under sunlight." Before he even finished, Meiling held the parchment to the sun. "Memory can never be forgotten." She whispered. "Since Xiaoyu wrote this, do you have any idea what this means?"

"Well, I think 'where memory is never forgotten' points to the camp—Xiaoyu must be guiding us." He paused, then went on. "The place she means must be the empty field by the lake and the cave. This place was once a venerable Silk Road post station. It's special to us; we promised each other that anything said upon that land will be remembered by heart forever." Liran's eyes turned misty, recalling the peaceful days. Meiling coughed to get his attention. "Okay, umm... I'm not saying this clue is not important, but we still don't have any water supplies so I think we should continue the journey and find some water."

Liran bit his lips and nodded. He knew better to argue; they wouldn't last long without water.

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After a whole day of working for the Huns, both Yunan and Xiaoyu were tired. So they fall asleep as soon as their heads touched the floor.

In the middle of the night, Xiaoyu suddenly woke up when she heard whispers outside the tent's door. She slipped out, surprised to see two figures backing the wall. When one turned his head, she saw a face she'd longed to see for weeks. 'Liran!' she whispered, tears sliding down her cheeks with excitement. The tent flipped quietly, pulled back as Yunan slipped out. He rubs his sleepy eyes, then freezes—there's Meiling, right in front of him. 'Meiling?' he whispers. Before he can say more, Meiling throws her arms around his neck and buries her face in his shoulder. All the courage she had earlier—when she snuck past the guards, when she searched for him in the dark—disappears. Now she's just a little sister, glad to be with her brother again.

But this warm moment didn't last long. Shouts from the guards cut through the night. They grabbed each others' hands and ran. The sounds of the Huns quietened as they ran and ran—their feet throbbed, yet panic pushed them forward. They didn't stop until the Hun's camp had completely disappeared from their sight. Ahead, they saw the walls of Yumen Pass; their familiar home. They fell to the ground with exhaustion. Seeing their home, their eyes got a little teary—they were finally back where they belonged. Yet they knew everything wasn't over. They didn't realize the clues weren't just linked to the Silk Road—they also tied to their family history. The Hun's secret project remained a mystery. Back at Yumen Pass, they finally had a chance to breathe, aware that more adventures lay ahead—but not how quickly they'd arrive. General Ban Chao was racing toward them; the wall they'd built as captives would soon alter Yumen Pass's fate. No one could tell if the Silk Road's glory would rise again or fade away. Then, on the horizon, dust swirled. Their fate was about to shift, and they were going to face it together

The Silk of Fortune

Wellington College International Shanghai, Cheung, Jasper – 11

The evening was becoming dim, and Shi Ya was sitting on the wooden stool, in the booth where were congregated its throng of traders and travellers, and where all were drawn by the magic sparkle of her silks. They were lustrous, and as was the moonlight on a still lake, their lines were floating in the air like the voices of the ancient city.

The cloth seemed living that absorbed the dying light of the suns and stored it up in every crevice. Her silk was not a piece of cloth, it was a strand of legends, a thread of tales in the far-flung parts of the world. The colour of red akin to sunsets was amazing to the Persian merchants. The blue which was touched by Qinghai traders was a calm colour, such as the lake stretching under a clear sky.

Nobody could know what magic it was. Shi Ya was aware of it and hid it in her heart with a lock. It was initiated 3 years ago when she was still a greenhorn dyer learning the art of silk craftsmanship.

One afternoon in a dry season a stranger came into her shop with his face covered by a broad hat. His eyes were like desert sands varying in colour between brown and gold and amber as the light fell upon them. He didn't resemble a trader. He appeared to be, like a person, such as she had never met. I have a present to you, he said, and presented me with a little pouch. It was finely powdered, glittery, and bordered along the brightness of the dim shop-lights.

"This will make your silk, this will," he said to her in a creepy way.

He brought her one of the rolls of her best white silk—a blank canvas, and waiting a masterpiece. He had a dark look in his eyes that had known the secrets of the world and was overloaded. The recipe he had provided her was in a language with which she was not familiar, in a language which curled round her head like vines. But she had in her the magic of his words, even when even the letters were lost to her.

That night she mixed the powder with water which dipped the silk into the mixture. It sparkled. It was not the fabric she was using before. This was a substance. A foreign artifact. Little by little Shi Ya got recognition. Traders came round and round bearing gold and gems at the price of her silk. Nevertheless, though she had been famous, there was one question that was fluttering about her like a shadow before the sunset. One day how much would it cost her to receive the gift of the stranger? The years were extended, the material has become even more brilliant and the colours of the material got brighter. But in her bosom Shi Ya felt a pondering in the fibre of her thread, as though the fibres were pulling her away somewhere she could in no way tell where.

The visage of the stranger was always at the back of her head and his eyes turned as quickly as the sand moves at the desert. She now loved the cloth she had made, and yet she had a fear of it. The silks were so pretty that they might rather look unnatural. Just like they were too good to be here in this world. Whenever she was in possession of something, she always wondered herself whether it was more expensive than a pouch of dye powder.

One night, when the rays of sunshine are sweeping its golden rays over the city, the stranger has suddenly appeared. He was not holding this time a pouch of powder. Rather he carried a black box. His eyes were glittering with an expression and his voice less loud than before. You have brought me something " he said, words like a sweet wind, through the leaves. "Yet there is always a cost." Shi Ya's heart raced. She had known that it was going to occur but not ready. The question that she had been asking herself over the years is what the price of the gift would be. Was it her soul? Was it her peace? Or was it yet deeper than that?

The box was stretched out by the stranger. She was indecisive that she felt that the burden of the world was in the little box. Choose you must decide, he said, and his voice was scarcely audible. It was as though he were talking to her soul. Shi Ya accepted the box with shaking fingers. She unscrewed it very cautiously and found a shining stone within it. It was no diamond or ruby, but some old thing. In the twilight its surface glowed with colours giving an effect of fireflies. The stranger provided her with a scroll of papyrus. As she studied the stone she looked at it closely.

"This will be the stone,"

Which will not merely make you more powerful. It has the power to make silk comparable, than any other in the world. Realize this, once you get it is not burnt down.

She looked at the stone. Felt drawn to it. It was murmuring to her beckoning her to off place she did not know, with. The city, the traders, the notoriety,—all that was in the past. It was the rock and the price that it would bring. Why me she whispered softly. I know you are a down artist, down you be, they said.

“Thou perceiving beauty doth the world possess, And cross the thread With thy thread dost thou weave. But beauty always has a price.”

The thought of Shi Ya was flying about, her mind like the swirling of a storm, before the storm. What should she lose in doing so; in taking the stone? What would she gain? Was it worth the risk? The silks were perfect already but the stone held more. With a great sigh she made her decision. Making her eyes closed and caressing the stone in her cheek and touching it with her flesh she felt it is warm.

With a smile the stranger said:“Then you are ready.”

Thenceforth the silks of Shi Ya became even greater—so at least it can be conceived. Their colours became darker and gloomier and appeared to radiate their light. But on the nights when the store was dark and the metropolis remained Shi Ya would only sit there by himself and wonder how much that would cost him. Was it her heart she paid?. Was it the cost of making something too beautiful to the world?

Time had passed, and she never dared herself again to put the question: What would it cost to take the gift? So what would it be costing to accept the gift? And yet this secret, wrapped up in the fibre of every one of the silks which she shot, was a secret which she could never truly understand.

Secrets to behold on the Silk Road

Wellington College International Shanghai, Gulshan, Meher – 12

It was a customary Monday in Washington D.C. At least for Tony Roberts it was. Our story begins in the land of the free. In D.C the streets are bustling whilst bystanders enlivened the area. As dawn approached, the luminescent sun touched the Washington monument and all around. As Tony woke up in his commodious bed in his even more commodious room, he devoured his sandwich, then left his apartment, got into his supercar and zoomed down the streets of D.C. A new day had begun.

“Hey Tony!”

“How’re you doing Roberts?”

“Got your double shot latte right here, sir!”

Tony Roberts’ life must be full of surprises, right? “What?!” Tony exclaimed, just being notified of an unsettling truth. “That’s right bud. This is the pinnacle of your career!” Tony’s colleague just divulged him of his upcoming trip to Dunhuang, China to lead a trade operation. “Why would I go to China for some excursion?”

“If I’m not wrong, your paygrade will double in size!” He exclaimed. “This is what you’ve been waiting for!”

“Huh, I guess he’s right,” Tony pondered. “Maybe this trip won’t be so bad after all.” “Alright, I’ll do it!” Tony finally spoke. “I’ll go consult my subordinate in ten.” Tony muttered, gazing at his Rolex watch before sauntering out the room with his coffee.

The door opened. “John, been waiting for you.” Tony stated, halfway down another cup of coffee.

“Afternoon, sir. You mentioned your request for your trip.” John stated

“That’s right. Now, what can you get me?”

“I’ll arrange your flight based on the dates you provided and I’ll have our trade division in China set up the rest.”

“Great.” Tony closed his eyes and suddenly, he stood before Dunhuang airport, in his mind he thought “Alright, this is it, everything comes down to this.” Suddenly, a jet-black Mercedes van zoomed out of the midst and two tall slender men in suits stepped out, pulling out an ID. “Tony Roberts?” One spoke

“Yeah?” Tony mumbled, a hint of suspicion in his voice. “Who’s asking?”

“We’re with the trade ministry. We need you to come with us. Get in.” Another stated, gesturing towards the van. He found his journey culminated, not at a placid oasis, but at a sun-bleached emptiness, when he got out of the van, the view before Tony was a sight to behold; the bright sun mixed with the golden sand dunes and amid it, a small building with luscious trees against the blue water surrounding the building. “Welcome to Dunhuang, Mr. Roberts.” An unknown voice rose from the midst. “My name is James W—”

“Look, I get your name is interesting and all, but I’d like to speak with, y’know, the big guy.” Tony “replied” cutting off James.

“I am that *big guy*” James corrected, hinting a tone of disgust in his voice.

“Sure, whatever.” Tony haughtily replied. “This guy!? No way he’s the top guy in this operation!” Tony complained to himself “The management here surely could use someone like me!”

“We’ll have someone pick you up tomorrow and drive you to the site.”

The next morning, Tony heard a knock on his door as he was getting dressed. He donned a polo shirt and white shorts. Through the peephole was a lady, her face barely visible and shoulders touching the “Do not disturb” label. Tony squinted through the peephole in disbelief. “Wow, really? The only thing she looks like she can do is make a sandwich. What’s with the management here?”

“Hello, Mr. Roberts, my name is Jane. I’ll be taking you to the sight today. Best, we be on our way. Our trade operations aren’t doing the best. That’s why we called you in from Washington.” Jane informed Tony, walking briskly in front of him.

"Hm? Okay, sure." Tony replied, his mind somewhere else. Jane took him into a car, and they revved through the glittery sand dunes. When they arrived at the sight, they sight of people, drained, famished as if they were to faint at any given moment. Just then, someone came running with a tablet. It was Tony's boss. "Hey Tony, how're you doing?" The boss replied. "Hey boss, I've got here, now what?" Tony replied

"I'm glad you asked that! This place needs you to help them with trading. You tell the instructors where to ship the goods, and they'll inform you if they are successful. If the trades were successful, promotion! If not, you can kiss your job goodbye!"

"Okay... g-got it" Tony muttered. He never felt this anxious before, in fact he had never felt this anxious about anything. And so, he got to work. As the bright sun focused on the resplendent sand dunes, so did Tony. "Send that there." It'll be autumn there so they gotta stay warm. It's supply and demand!" Hey! Don't ship that without clearance!" Tony could see the job was no easy task, but he couldn't let the others know that. Completely fatigued, he turned his gaze to the sky. The beige birds danced and soared through the boundless, blue sky as the scintillating sun dazzled through them. "Job's not as easy as it looks, huh?" Jane smiled.

"Says who?! I can handle it!" The job wasn't as easy as it looked.

"The morning trade failed." Jane sighed. "1% of it sold. More of those and you're getting booted."

"I expected that! The spices weren't even that good!"

"Well, we're importing some silk in thirty, so get ready."

"Whatever." Tony grumbled "Ugh, how did it do *that* bad?"

"Sir, our shipment is on standby, we need your authorization." A young man came with a pen and clipboard.

"Huh, sure, this better sell," It didn't. What was going wrong? He traded repeatedly, each time thinking it would be different; it didn't. "Sir, we have the notifications from the silk trade and, it failed; only a handful of people bought it." Jane stated when someone came running up with Tony's boss in a screen. "Hey, Tony." Tony's boss greeted with an undertone of hesitance. The stiffness in the great sand dunes replicated that of the intense sun shining down on them. The message was clear. "Oh, I understand." His voice brimming with dismay. "So, since we can't send you home, you'll be working with the dockers." What now? Everything had gone crashing down before him, everything; all of it. As Tony dragged himself towards the docks, he realized he couldn't treat them like the worthless pieces of trash they were, he was in no position to. The least he could do was shoot prejudiced expressions at them, which they didn't care for. The atmosphere was hard, tense. After a while, they started to loosen up, entertaining each other with stories of their family. "Got any kids?" One person asked

"Yeah, I got a girl." Another replied

"A girl's nice." One other added.

The smiles, laughs everything was authentic, each one filled with life, each one lacking a Mercedes Benz and a Rolex, and each one deemed it enough. How could they?

It came to Tony, that in his zeal to prove himself, he lost everything, even the last bit of dignity he had. He had enough, he had to prove that he wasn't just a spoiled, arrogant man. He was a real person, with real feelings.

"Sir," Tony hesitantly muttered.

"If I recall, you've been fired." James replied firmly.

"Just give me another chance."

"Apologies, but what's final is final, sorry." James sighed. Tony could see Jane in the distance, her face marked with pity.

"Look, I know what the problem is, and I can fix it. Trust me." He knew it.

"Fine, one last chance but no do-overs." James gave in. "We've got our next shipment in fifteen minutes so, there's your chance."

"You can count on me!" Tony assured him, seething with determination, an authentic determination. And he made it count.

The Crimson Shadow, Bound to an Unfinished Blade

Wellington College International Shanghai, Li, Jacqueline – 11

During the Zheng Guan period of the Tang Dynasty, the Silk Road was a crucial path for both commerce and influence, leading westward from Chang'an. The sounds of camel bells filled the desert air... steady, distant, unending, blending with the sight of colorful silk under the sun. Caravans transported prized items like Xingyao porcelain and Hetian jade. Still, danger was always present; the desert held more bones than treasures. Sandstorms raged, bandits lay in ambush, and the Great Tang's riches always came at a price.

Emperor Li Shimin stood in Taiji Palace, his golden dragon-patterned robe touching the red sandalwood steps, the gold threads glinting coldly in the lamplight. As he reviewed reports from the western border, he focused on the planned uprising by Wei Chengye. Wei Chengye, a former general, was plotting to seize a tribute shipment. The emperor traced the words "Rebel general plotting to seize tribute" with his finger, his eyes narrowing. "Summon Lin Hongxiao, the Crimson Shadow, now!" he said, turning to a eunuch.

Lin Hongxiao arrived moments later. Her sharp features were framed by raven-black hair pinned back with a red-and-gold hairpin, unmoving even as she crossed the hall. Her crimson robe stirred with each step, a controlled ripple rather than a flourish. She knelt before the emperor, spine straight, head lowered, her strength contained but unmistakable—a **warrior shaped by battle, not ceremony**. The name Crimson Shadow did not only refer to the robe she wore, but from the fleeting blood-red arc her blade carved through the air, a streak so swift it vanished almost as soon as it appeared, faster than the wind itself.

"The rebel general Wei Chengye is controlling the Wei River Bridge," Li Shimin stated. "He plans to hijack the tribute, which symbolizes the western regions' submission to the Tang. We cannot afford to lose it."

The emperor handed her a suit of scale armor, gilded at the edges. "Protect Tang," he said. "Guard this road, and you guard the gates of the Great Tang."

Lin Hongxiao accepted the armor with a steely resolve. "Wealth can be replaced, but dignity cannot," Li Shimin warned. "The fate of our empire rests in your hands."

Weeks passed as Lin Hongxiao led the tribute convoy toward Luoyang. The caravan, laden with treasures from distant lands, trekked through endless deserts where the sun blazed by day and the winds howled by night. The journey was grueling; each day there was a struggle against the unforgiving environment. They faced scorching heat, biting cold, and constant fear of ambush, yet Lin Hongxiao's presence steadied the hearts of her men. She was a warrior of legend, and her leadership gave them the strength to press on.

Her reputation spread through the ranks, and even the fiercest warriors began to speak in awe of the Crimson Shadow. She was a figure of myth and might, as deadly as she was resolute. Her fierce determination was evident in every action, every glance, every command. Even in moments of rest, when her men whispered of danger, she stood vigilant, circumspect in every movement, her eyes scanning the horizon for threats. At the Wei River Bridge, a tense silence enveloped the convoy, broken only by the distant gurgle of the river. But that quiet was shattered by the tolling of the third watch bell, marking the arrival of danger.

Suddenly, fire erupted from the darkness. Torches cut through the air like serpents as masked riders appeared on both sides. Their leader, Wei Chengye, rode at the front, his voice booming: "Seize the tribute! Leave no survivors!"

The convoy was thrown into chaos. Horses panicked, and carters fled, but Lin Hongxiao's voice rang out, commanding calm: "Hold the line! Protect the carts with your lives!"

Her sword flashed like a streak of lightning as she charged into the fray. The first rider was down before he could react, his blood staining the planks beneath him. The battle exploded into violence, with arrows raining down and swords clashing in a thunderous symphony. Lin Hongxiao fought like a force of nature—swift,

powerful, and precise. Each strike was a masterful blend of technique and instinct, and with every step, she pushed the enemy back. Her movements were a blur, and the few who dared to face her were swiftly cut down.

Seeing the tribute chest containing the imperial seal, Wei Chengye lunged forward. Lin Hongxiao met him mid-leap, their swords clashing with a deafening roar. Sparks flew, and for a moment, the world seemed to hold its breath. Her blade shattered, but she fought with the broken hilt, driving it into his chest. Wei Chengye fell, his body tumbling into the river below.

When dawn broke, the Wei River was staining crimson with the blood of the fallen, but the tribute remained untouched. Lin Hongxiao, bloodied and battered, stood resolute at the bridge's edge; her broken sword still gripped tightly in her hand. The victory was bittersweet, for though the tribute had been saved, the cost had been high.

After three more days of travel, Lin Hongxiao and the convoy entered Luoyang, the bustling capital of the Silk Road. The city was alive with the sound of merchants hawking their wares, children playing in the streets, and the endless bustle of commerce. The air was thick with the scent of spices and the shimmer of precious goods. She passed the noisy markets and alleys until she reached the quiet "Shutong Workshop," renowned for its sword-making. Inside, she found a young man, Song Shutong, forging blades at the anvil. His movements were fluid, his strikes steady and precise.

Lin Hongxiao placed her broken sword on his workbench. "Can it be mended?" she asked.

Song Shutong examined the sword and promised, "I will fix it." Over the next few days, their quiet conversations grew into a bond. She shared tales of the Silk Road, the deserts, the dangers, and the beauty. He spoke about the art of sword-forging, of how each blade held a piece of the smith's soul. Despite the difference in their worlds, their connection deepened, and they found solace in each other's presence.

Seven days later, Lin Hongxiao returned to the workshop, finding a new sword waiting for her. It gleamed like a molten crimson, its hilt inlaid with coiled dragons. "This is not my old sword," she said.

"No," he replied. "It is the sword you deserve." He named it Hong Shang, symbolizing the bittersweet truth of life. He also gave her a sword of his own, Qingshang, a pale blue blade that symbolized his vow to wait for her return.

On the seventh night, Lin Hongxiao whispered her farewell: "Wait for me..."

Six months later, Lin Hongxiao returned to Chang'an victorious, having defeated countless bandits and forged alliances with the western tribes. She brought back not just wealth but respect for the far-flung regions. The capital erupted in celebration, but as the revelry faded, the court grew tight with murmurs—ministers conferring in hushed voices, careful not to be overheard—while Lin Hongxiao remained demure, her gaze lowered. Emperor Taizong approached her and asked, "Lin Hong Xiao, will you be my empress?"

Lin Hongxiao stood straight, spine firm as steel, refusing to lower her head. Her gaze remained steady as she said, "My hands are made for holding a sword, not a scepter. I only wish to roam the rivers and mountains, not live within palace walls." The emperor's smile vanished, his eyes cold as ice.

"If you are of no use to me as an empress..."

"You have no right to live."

Three days later, she was branded as a traitor, accused of colluding with rebels. The people of Chang'an wept in secret, mourning the loss of their greatest protector, but none dared speak out against the emperor's wrath.

That night, Lin Hongxiao stood on the Fall Wind Terrace, her hair flowing in the wind, her face serene. The moonlight turned into a deep crimson as the executioner's blade fell. She died quietly; her spirit forever entwined with the empire she had fought to protect.

Word of her death reached Luoyang by dawn. Song Shutong, devastated, mounted his fastest horse and raced toward Chang'an. He cut through ten city gates and finally arrived at the Autumn Wind Terrace, but he was too late. There, he found only the blood-stained stone. Grieving, he pulled Hongshang from his saddle, its warmth still comforting. "We will meet again," he whispered.

With Qingshang at his side, he journeyed back to the Wei River Bridge, where their paths had first crossed. He drove Hong Shang into the stone pillar, carving some words. Then he leaped into the river below, joining her in the afterlife.

Centuries passed, and the story of the Crimson Shadow and the swordsmith faded into myth. One spring, a fisherman found two swords in his net—Hongshang and Qingshuang, still gleaming as though forged yesterday. They whispered of a love that defied time, and on the stone pillar by the river, the words remained etched, speaking of a love unbroken by death, waiting to be rekindled in another life.

"The crimson shadow never fades; the tung trees bloom again each spring, their petals touched by the winds of time. If there is an afterlife, let us walk the same path once more."

The Shattered Dream

Wellington College International Shanghai, Li, Livia – 12

Lee Ying was awoken by the clatter of pans falling outside on the street. Rubbing his eyes, he scrambled out of bed and went outside onto the cracked and uneven street. Squinting his eyes, he looked up at the sun. It was already dangling from the highest point in the sky. Soon, it would be time to open his stall. Handmade bits and bobs — toys made from twisted wire, slightly wonky pottery and delicate clay people upon request — was what shaped Lee Ying's stall. His nimble fingers earned just enough each day to keep him, his sister, and his mother alive. He was only 13, but he already knew how to run a shop successfully, and was as independent as an adult. He was a trusty and diligent child, so was called on to run errands for a few coins, which he always did eagerly, smiling to himself at the thought of his dear little sister dancing with joy before the piece of chocolate he would present her later that evening.

He had just finished setting up his stall when a crowd of hysterical, laughing children around his age ran past him. Had he ever been as carefree as them? None of them bothered to glance at Lee Ying, nor his stall. He gritted his teeth. Sometimes when he was alone, he would play a game of "Imagine If." *Imagine if my father never left me. Imagine if I didn't have to work every day. Imagine if...* He would run those thoughts through his head, those frays of unspoken fantasy he had woven for himself, then teared apart. *Would—in another world—my life be different, perfect even?* Then, he would push those thoughts away and bury his head deep in his work, revealing not a glimpse of this strange, shameful hope he clung on. A dream that he couldn't let go of no matter how hard he tried.

The day was going quite successfully. Even more successful than he had thought it would be. An old man had come and bought five clay cups, then a wealthy looking family stopped and bought three wire toys, a clay teapot and requested five miniature clay people to be done by the end of the day. He had just passed the clay figures to them when a man walked to front of his stall. Instead of browsing through the bits and bobs in front of him, the man's piercing black eyes locked on Lee Ying. Then, he spoke in a voice Lee Ying would never forget. It was a desiccated sound, as if the words were crumbling to dust the moment they left his lips. "Have I seen you before, my boy?" Breaking eye contact, Lee Ying ducked his head down and answered, "no sir, I think you mistaken." "I have never been mistaken in my whole life," the gravelly voice murmured. Panicked, Lee Ying told the man in the calmest voice he could manage, "Sorry sir, but if I had seen you before, I would know it. I am sure you are thinking of someone else. It is time for me to close my stall so..." His voice fell away as he noticed the expression the man was wearing. His hazy, unblinking eyes seemed to be watching an invisible screen, not seeing him, not hearing him, drifting away from the conversation like a balloon with its string cut. Packing away his things, Lee Ying slowly backed away and left the man standing there, with a faraway expression in his eyes.

The next day, Lee Ying tentatively set up his stall, for the man to not appear. As luck could have it... he was there. "You were right. I did recognise the wrong person," the man apologised. Lee Ying smiled an "I thought so" smile. "What if I told you though," the man's voice had turned ominous now, "that the person I mistook you for... was your father. And I am your father's friend." WHAT?! Lee Ying felt that the words had struck him in the chest, taking his breath away. His mind flashed back to the time he had last seen his father. His younger self, waving with all his might at his father's back, as his father left to accompany a few traders to other countries. "*Travel safely father! Come home soon!*" He stumbled, suddenly unable to breathe. As if the news was still not enough, the man added, "he is still alive, but you will have to go save him, as quickly as possible. He might not have much time left. I would go if I could, but..." Before he could finish his sentence, Lee Ying had already sprinted away.

"Sorry mother, sorry little sister. I wish I could tell you, but you would just try to stop me." Lee Ying shivered and tentatively stepped inside the temple. The silence was deafening. Foreboding shadows loomed inside the abandoned temple and crumbled statues of long forgotten gods lay toppled on the floor. Their eyes seemed to follow him at every step, and his neck prickled with fear. Something was off. Poles painted with faded colours stuck out in odd angles, threatening to collapse any moment. His sixth sense told him to turn back, but what choice did he have? The fate of his father depended on him.

Rummaging through the pieces of rubble, Lee Ying felt increasingly frustrated. The man had told him that his father had recently been into this temple. The temple had also collapsed recently, and there had been no record

of his father making his way out of the temple, so the most likely explanation was that he was buried under the debris. The most likely reason for the temple's fall was an earthquake.

Focus! "Father?" He tried calling out. Silence answered him. Desperation grew. His father had to be there. He had to be alive. He just had to. Tap—tap—tap. Lee Ying whirled around. Somewhere—in the pile of wood, stone and dust—there came a faint tapping sound. Then came a cough. He held his breath, hoping that his own heartbeat wouldn't drown out the sound, and began to dig. Frantically and carefully, he pushed away pieces of debris with his hands, the skin of his fingertips tearing against the rough materials. The pile finally gave way, and through the spaces between rocks, Lee Ying could see dusty, grey skin and twitching. He reached his hands out and grabbed his father's arm. "Father!" shouted Lee Ying, elated. He scraped the rest of the rubble away and saw his father conscious but pale, struggling for breath.

After cajoling his father to sit up, Lee Ying wrapped his arms around his father. The entire world melted away and left just father and son in a safe warm bubble, held in tight embrace. Then Lee Ying was snapped out of his daze when his father opened his mouth and croaked, "Who...who are you...and who am I?" The thin, bright, frozen surface of a dream he has been skating on splintered, causing him to plunge into the river of despair beneath.

The Swallow's Path

Wellington College International Shanghai, Li, Rachel – 11

The last rays of sunlight disappeared from the horizon of Qing Village in Chang'an; lanterns flickered like dancers in the night breeze as smoke rose from the chimneys with the scent of spices. Gan Wei and her siblings leaned their ears close to a peek hole in her room and listened for the bell that rang at six o'clock sharp every day; it was the special signal that meant Father was back. She dashed past her two younger brothers and flung open the door to see him holding three baked sweet potatoes as always, but his iconic gleaming eyes were dimmer than usual. Father rarely sat in silence, but he did so today.

"No more philosophical reasoning?" Gan Wei asked, while munching on her sweet potato, noticing her father's oddness.

"I'm afraid it isn't the day; I have more...problems to deal with." He replied, slouching in his chair.

"Well, if you're worrying about Mother's health, then don't—she has been taking her pills on time and she's finally eating today."

Father managed to squeeze a smile, gazing at his ill wife, then went back to staring at space. Gan Wei stopped. She knew Father was a serious man—he was the guide for Zhang Qian, Emperor Wu's most trusted military officer. But something wasn't right, and she was sure of it.

The night continued as usual; Mother started coughing after dinner and the twins begged for another round of Chinese chess while Father left them to fetch water for the next day. Before long, the village fell asleep as the soft buzzing of the cicadas faded into silence. But Gan Wei couldn't sleep. She tossed and turned under the covers until her back hurt, mind racing with anxiety about the secret she sensed her father was keeping. Finally, exhaustion took over her worries, and she drifted into a shallow sleep.

Just before dawn, Gan Wei woke to the faint rumble of hurried footsteps outside. At first, she thought she was dreaming. But then came the low murmur of men speaking. She slipped out of bed, careful not to wake the sleeping twins, and crept to the door. Through the crack, she saw her father standing with two soldiers dressed in the emperor's colors. One carried a scroll sealed with red wax; the other held a lantern that flickered across their stern faces.

Gan Wei's heart thudded.

"General Zhang Qian departs at sunrise," one soldier whispered. "The emperor commands your guidance on the journey west. Be ready when the first rays of sunlight shine through."

Her father bowed deeply, but Gan Wei noticed his hands tremble. After the soldiers left, Father remained still for a long moment, as if the calm air had suddenly become heavy. When he finally turned, he found Gan Wei standing behind him, eyes filled with tears.

"Baba... you're leaving?" She asked, voice barely hearable above the rustle of the cold breeze.

His eyes softened with the weight of the truth.

"Yes. A new mission. One more dangerous than any before." He knelt to meet her gaze. "The emperor seeks new trade routes beyond these mountains. Zhang Qian cannot fail. And neither can I."

Gan Wei swallowed hard.

"But the Silk Road... people say the deserts are filled with unexpected storms. And mother—mother needs you."

Her father placed a warm hand on her shoulder.

"That is why I have kept this a secret, to not let you worry. But I suppose this is the best way of saying goodbye, for now."

Father closed his eyes, then reached into the inner pocket of his robe and pulled out a small wooden charm shaped like a swallow.

"This bird always finds its way home," he said, placing it gently in her palms. "As will I."

But even with his reassuring words, Gan Wei sensed the tremor in his voice—the fear he tried so hard to hide.

By sunrise, the village gathered to watch them depart. The horses bit into carrots the soldiers were holding as Zhang Qian climbed into his saddle. Father joined him, clutching onto a bag of maps and burnt letters from kingdoms far away.

As they journeyed westward, she watched dust swirl through the air, glimmering with a golden glow from the sun's rays. Gan Wei made a silent promise to herself:

Someday I will travel your path on the Silk Road, Father. Across deserts, mountains, and many secrets...I will return you to your home.

Weeks passed, and the village slowly settled back into its rhythms, but for Gan Wei, nothing felt the same. Every morning, she traced the swallow charm with her thumb, imagining the dangers Father might be facing. Every night, she lay awake, hoping for the faint sound of hoofbeats, pretending he might return sooner than expected.

But instead of the sounds of horses, something else arrived.

One evening, as lanterns lit up the narrow alleys of Chang'an, a trading cart entered the village—tall camels with bells tied to their necks, wagons loaded with silk scarves and jars of spices. The villagers gathered in awe, whispering about the traders' long beards, their strange accents, and the shimmering gemstones they wore.

Gan Wei only noticed one thing.

A torn scrap of parchment fell from the side of a merchant's saddle. It fluttered toward her like a wounded bird. She picked it up and froze. The parchment held a symbol—a swallow carved beside a burnt seal of the imperial court.

Her breath caught. This wasn't just a scrap of paper, it was a cry of help that she might never hear again if she ignored it.

"Where did you get this?" She demanded, running to catch up with the merchant.

He blinked, confused, then shrugged. "Found it in the desert. Buried halfway in the sand. We thought it was just trash."

Gan Wei's pulse quickened. Father carried maps and letters. Could this have been his?
Or worse—*had something happened?*

That night she spoke to her mother, who sat by the hearth boiling herbs for her cough.
"Mother, that parchment... it belonged to Father. I know it. Something is wrong. We can't just wait."

Mother's weary eyes watched the fire flicker.
"Wei'er... the Silk Road is not a place for children. It is filled with storms, bandits, kingdoms at war, and feral beasts that hurt anything they see. Our village is small and insular—we are safe here, but out there...."
She coughed, clutching her shawl tighter.
"Your father and Zhang Qian are strong men. They will return."

Gan Wei looked at the charm in her hand.
"So will I," she whispered.
Waiting only felt like letting Father vanish into the desert forever.

That night, she made her decision.

Before dawn, she slipped outside, making sure her steps were furtive, as she wanted to avoid the village's early risers. Gan Wei only carried a small cloth bundle: steamed buns, a water flask, and Father's old compass. The cicadas buzzed in the thick summer air as she walked toward the road that led west—the same path that swallowed her father into its endless horizon.

But just as she took her first step onto the dusty trail, someone grabbed her wrist.

It was her younger brother, Gan Ping—silent and stern.

"You think I'd let you leave alone?" He murmured, tightening his grip. "If Father is in danger, then we go together."

Gan Wei blinked. "But the journey—"

“Is exactly why we can’t delay.”

He pointed ahead. The Silk Road stretched endlessly before them, winding like a dragon’s spine through mountains and distant fields.

Gan Ping adjusted the strap of his pack.

“He followed Zhang Qian. Now we follow him.”

Gan Wei felt something spark in her chest—fear, yes, but also determination.

Side by side, they stepped onto the ancient road. The world ahead was vast and unknown, filled with strangers, secrets, and storms.

But she held the swallow charm tightly.

A bird always finds its way home.

And so would they.

The Porcelain Dolls

Wellington College International Shanghai, Turdeich, Rhiannon – 13

In a village deep along the Silk Road stood a small cottage beside a quiet lake. Sunlight danced across the water, and birdsong echoed through the trees. If you knocked on the cottage door, you would be greeted by a kind old woman named Agnes.

Agnes loved children. Parents told their sons and daughters, *“If you ever need help and I’m not there, go to Grandmother Agnes. She will look after you.”*

Inside her home were shelves of carefully kept toys and jars of sweets. Most shelves were well loved, but one was rarely touched. Upon it sat three porcelain dolls—each with the same delicate face, yet each somehow different.

One had ginger hair cascading over her shoulders and bright green eyes that gleamed in the sunlight. Another wore a chestnut-brown braid and had eyes as blue as the sea. The third had golden-blond hair that shone like summer and warm brown eyes, soft as melted chocolate.

“There was a time before this one,” Grandmother Agnes often said when children asked about the dolls.

No matter how many questions followed, her answer never changed.

“You’ll hear the story one day.”

All except Lily, the youngest child—often overlooked and always quiet. She had never stopped wondering what Agnes meant.

One calm, rainy evening, Lily gathered the dolls in her arms and approached Agnes, who rocked gently in her chair, working on an intricate stitch.

“Good evening, Grandmother,” Lily said softly. “May I ask you something?”

Agnes looked up, adjusting her glasses.

“Ah, little Miss Lily. What can I do for you?”

Lily hesitated. “You said the dolls have a story. I wanted to know what it is.”

Agnes smiled, pride shining in her eyes.

“Of course, my dear. Bring me the book on the shelf titled *A Tale of the Silk Road*.”

Lily placed the dolls beside Agnes and skipped to the bookshelf, returning with the largest volume. Agnes brushed dust from the cover. On it were three girls who looked exactly like the dolls.

“Ready?” Agnes asked.

Lily nodded eagerly.

Many Years Ago...

On the eve of the Silk Road Festival, the village buzzed with excitement. Families prepared gifts from their heritage—blankets, clothing, food, and treasured heirlooms.

The most admired items came from the Hawthorne family, who lived by the lake. Charles and Eleanor Hawthorne had three daughters and were known for their beautifully crafted homemade porcelain dolls.

The eldest was Dahlia, with long ginger hair and bright green eyes. Who always dreamed of becoming a fashion designer and often sketched dresses in her sketchbook which always sat on her bedside table.

Next was Arabella, a quiet and thoughtful young girl; her brown hair always braided neatly. She preferred the forest to the village and cared deeply for animals. She always likes to collect tiny creatures and look after them.

The youngest was Celia, whose golden hair was often in a half-up half-down hair style. She had the wildest imagination and told stories of impossible things as if they were real.

That night, the girls played together and talked about designs for porcelain dolls for the upcoming silk road trade, before their mother called upstairs.

“Girls, bedtime.”

“Coming!” They called back together in unison.

They changed into their nightgowns—green for Dahlia, dusty rose for Arabella, and lilac with pink butterflies for Celia—then Dahlia carefully climbed into bed, while Arabella and Celia jumped onto their bunkbed.

“Would you like a story?” Eleanor asked.

“Yes!” Celia laughed. Dahlia and Arabella looked at each other and giggled.

Eleanor read *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*. Before she turned to the final page and noticed all three girls had fallen asleep. She tucked them in gently, kissed them on the head and said goodnight.

Later That Night

BANG. BANG. BANG!

Dahlia jolted awake. Arabella and Celia shot up after her. They all looked at each other's fear shown across their faces.

“What was that?” Arabella whispered.

“It came from outside,” Dahlia said, getting out of bed, grabbing her coat and jumping into her slippers.

“We’re coming too,” Arabella insisted, Celia just nodded.

“Uh fine but be quiet” Dahlia said annoyed.

Lantern in Dahlia’s hand, Ceila holding onto Dahlia and Arabella's hands. The sisters stepped into the night; The air was damp; the ground soft beneath their feet. As they followed a narrow trail, they passed an old sign half-covered in vines.

“The Silk Road,” Dahlia read aloud.

They walked past it, not thinking anything of it, but Celia shivered with fear. The mud thickened as they walked.

“You know when there’s mud, there’s usually—” Arabella began.

“Water,” Celia finished shaking.

They walked over to a lake they had never seen before. Another sign stood nearby.

THE SILK ROAD WISHING LAKE

The sisters exchanged glances. There was only one wish that all the girls wanted. But none of them wanted to say it first, until...

“I know what to wish for,” Celia began “To stay together forever.”

They all nodded in agreement. They took each other's hands and knelt by the water's edge, fingers brushing the surface.

“We wish to stay together forever,” they said in unison.

Nothing happened.

Dahlia sighed. “Maybe it didn't work.”

Then Arabella screamed, followed by screams coming from Dahlia and Celia.

Pain shot through their bodies. Bones cracked and twisted. Their screams echoed across the lake as porcelain replaced the flesh. Through the pain, they locked eyes—full of love, hope and fear for each other.

And then... silence.

Where the three girls had stood, three porcelain dolls now rested by the lake.

Agnes closed the book and looked down at Lily.

“So... that's the story?” Lily whispered.

Agnes nodded.

“What happened to their parents?”

“They searched for years,” Agnes said sadly. “Eventually, they learned the truth.”

Lily frowned. “How do *you* know all of this?”

Agnes smiled gently.

“Because after they disappeared, the parents had another daughter.”

It took a moment for Lily to realize but when she did her eyes widen with surprise.

“S—so... you're their daughter?!”

Agnes laughed softly and nodded.

THE END

Threads of the Past, Wings of the Present

Wellington College International Shanghai, Wang, Sofia – 11

“Hello everyone, and welcome aboard! During this flight to Cairo, Egypt, we will be journeying along the legendary Silk Road — a path that once connected the East and West. For centuries, merchants and travelers crossed these lands, carrying silk, spices, and countless stories. The Silk Road was more than a trade route; it was a bridge between cultures and a symbol of human curiosity and courage.

Please fasten your seatbelts and prepare for takeoff. As we rise above the clouds, take a moment to enjoy the view — mountains, deserts and distant horizons. Let this journey remind us that travel is not only about reaching new places, but also about rediscovering the past that brought us here. Wish you a pleasant journey!”

As the soft hum of the engines filled the cabin, a sense of calm washed over me. My thoughts grew lighter, my breathing slowed, and before long, I felt myself drifting into a peaceful sleep.

I woke up to a warm breeze brushing my cheeks gently, carrying a faint smell of cinnamon and sandalwood. The plane’s engine noise was gone. Instead, I heard the jingle of camel bells and people talking in languages that I didn’t understand. I blinked to clear the last bits of sleep and found myself lying on a woven woolen mat under a twisted old poplar tree. Its branches cast spotty shadows on the sun-warmed ground.

This wasn’t the plane cabin. In front of me was a busy oasis town. The houses were made of mud bricks, with flat roofs and wooden balconies. They lined winding alleyways that led to a central market. Merchants wore bright robes — some in Chinese silk tops, others in Central Asian felt hats and narrow-sleeved jackets. They bargained over piles of goods: rolls of shiny silk in bright blue and red, sacks of fragrant spices, and stacks of glazed ceramic bowls. A group of men led a caravan of two-humped camels past. The camels’ humps were loaded with folded fabrics and wooden chests. Their hooves kicked up little clouds of golden dust as their bells rang in a steady rhythm.

As I sat up, a voice next to me laughed. “You slept really well for someone traveling from the East.” I turned and saw an old man with a long white beard. He wore a linen robe and a headscarf tied loosely around his forehead. He held a clay cup of hot tea, and its smell mixed with the scent of roasted mutton from a nearby stall. “Did the journey tire you out that much?”

I stared at him, unable to speak. His face had both Eastern and Western features, and his accent sounded like someone who spoke many languages. Behind him, I noticed a small group of travelers — merchants in silk, a Buddhist monk in an orange robe, and a young boy leading a donkey loaded with medicinal herbs. They were gathering their things, just like in the old Dunhuang paintings. The monk smiled and nodded, pressing his hands together in a greeting. It reminded me how faith and trade walked side by side along this route.

“Where am I?” I finally managed to ask, my voice rough.

“The crossroads of the world,” the old man replied, handing me the tea. “We’re in Dunhuang, a treasure of the Silk Road. Look — there are traders from all around the world. Look,” he nodded towards a group of tents, “are Persians with carpets.”

As I sipped the warm, spiced tea, I watched the market spread like a living tapestry. Goldsmiths hit metal to make detailed jewelry, their tools ringing against anvils. Women looked at rolls of cotton and silk, chatting in voices that went up and down like music. A storyteller sat on a stone platform, surrounded by children. He told tales of faraway lands — Chinese emperors, Roman soldiers, and desert spirits that guarded the trade routes. Everywhere I looked, different cultures met and mixed: a Chinese merchant swapped silk for Persian spices, a Central Asian nomad traded furs for Indian cloth, and a Greek traveler shared bread with a Tibetan monk. There was a plethora of colors, sounds, and scents that made the whole town feel alive with energy.

The old man followed my gaze, his eyes twinkling. “This road isn’t just stones and sand,” he said softly. “It’s a river of stories, flowing from east to west and back again. We carry silk and spices, yes — but we also share ideas, faith and friendship.” He pointed to the caravan, getting ready to leave. A young woman was tying a bundle of silk behind her camel. “That’s Fatima, a merchant from Bukhara. She’s traveling to many other places to sell her goods and will come back to Changan with tea and porcelain. Her mother did the same, and her grandmother before her.”

Just then, a trumpet sounded, and the caravan started to move. The camel bells got louder, mixing with people's goodbyes and the rustle of silk. The warm breeze picked up again, carrying the smell of jasmine from a nearby garden and the distant sound of a river — maybe the Amu Darya, which has given water to travelers for hundreds of years. I watched as Fatima climb onto her camel and waved to the crowd. Suddenly, I wanted to join them — to walk the path that has connected civilizations for thousands of years.

The old man patted me on the shoulder. "Are you coming? The desert is waiting, and the next oasis is a two-day journey away. But don't worry — we have wells along the way, and stories to keep us company." He nodded towards a pile of supplies: water skin, a loaf of flatbread, and a blanket with patterns that seemed to dance in the sunlight. "For travelers like us, the road is home."

I stood up, brushing sand off my clothes, and felt a lightness I hadn't known since getting on the plane.

Then, the sound of the passenger attendant was back, "Ladies and gentlemen, we are now in a turbulent phase, please stay where you are and fasten your seatbelts. Thank you for your cooperation." The jolt of the plane sent a sharp tingle through my armrest, and I knew I was awake on the flight, but the warmth of that spiced tea and the echo of camel bells still lingered in my bones.

The past and present seemed to blend, like the breeze that woke me had carried me through hundreds of years. As I joined the caravan in my mind, walking next to Fatima and the monk, with camel bells ringing in my ears, I realized the flight attendant was right. Travel isn't just about getting to a place. It's about finding the things that connect us all — the threads woven along the Silk Road, in the stories of merchants and monks, and in the warm breeze that still carries their echoes today.

From that moment on, I no longer saw travel as just checking destinations off a list, but as stepping into a living story where every path is a bridge to the past and to each other. It was a moment of pure serendipity that turned a simple flight into a lesson about how history is never truly gone, and how even the most quaint and forgotten corners of the world hold stories that bind us all together.

A Trade Of Kindness

Wellington College International Shanghai, Wang, Vera – 12

“Ming, can you pass me that sack?” I groaned inwardly, Ma was going on yet another trade to the North, leaving me to stay in the palace alone again. I leaned down, fingering the textures of the straw sack, flinging it at Ma with annoyed force. “Ming, come on, you’re a 16 year old girl now, don’t you want to give trading a try?” Ma requested with a persuasive tone. I groaned once again, Channeling my strength to lift up an empty apple crate. “Ma, no, I told you that I have to go to the palace festival and any ways, trading is your thing I wouldn’t be good at it.” I mumbled. Ma smiled awkwardly as I bent down to drop the crate, my skirt scratching my knees from all my ‘fancy’ embroidery.

I was tired.

Dear Ma,

Its hard without you. The pain of every lonely day, the distress of all those sullen seconds. I know that you went through all that agony and torment. I’m sorry. It’s all my fault.

Love, your son. Ming

As I led my Ma through all those gates to the hillsides, I finally let her go. I sighed and we waved our final goodbyes. She turned, shouting “Young lady you better take care of yourself!” She grinned and left. I stared until she disappeared through the hazy horizon, finally heading back to the palace.

I ran through all the bustling streets of the village, my shaggy pants almost tripping me over as I dodged a nearby market stall. As I reached the gates of royal grounds, I slowed to a steady pace and hid from all the soldiers positioned by the door. That’s when I saw her. The girl in shining robes, she was led through the gates with her Ma, all packed up with fine carpets and silks ready to travel through to the north. Her name was known through all the villages aligning the elite trading system. From Chang An, to Northern Mongolia everybody knew Lu Rui Ming and her Ma, the royal trader of the emperor.

I slowed to a stop as the young maiden escorted me through the gardens. This was my favorite place in the whole of Chang An, where I could sing as free as a sparrow and dance amidst the vivid shrubs and bushes. Just being lost. For a second. Sometimes I imagined myself soaring through the skies. Traveling around the globe, singing in London, dancing in Paris. But it was all impossible. Here I was, stuck within the city walls. I snapped out of my trance, stumbling slowly to my room. The walls were covered in ancient murals studded with jade ornaments, the wooden floorboards were covered in carpets of the finest fabric. I arrived at a wooden door, sliding it open, my room, my cosy cosy room.

As I continued dodging the passing carts, I thought about her, she was beautiful, like of a chrysanthemum, her silky braided hair was spotless... how could I ever match her. I ran across the muddy road, staining my worn shoes. I scaled an abandoned house that could have once housed a happy family. Yes! I found it, my secret passage. I crawled through the cracked hole, The dirt was even and sturdy beneath my hands as I slipped through the cracks, bursting into the open.

Jumping on my mattress, I finally took off my uncomfortable dress to reveal, soft robes beneath. I snuggled into the silky blankets and turned. The ceiling was ornate, covered in Chinese textiles. The sunlight warmed my face and the whistles of birds filled my room. I peered out the window frame, spotting a boy standing in the palace garden. He was wearing torn clothes, his shoes were black from mud and he was surely very skinny. Out of place?

I stumbled into the sunshine, into the palace gardens. My favorite place in the whole of this country, a place where I could daydream under the willow trees, or read under the blossoms, most of all, I could see her. She would sing and dance like a sparrow, often making me fall into a trance, we would talk for hours straight without noticing, she was very pretty...

I walked out covering my robes with a scarf and headed out greeting the boy. He often visited when I was bored, we would talk and dance and think and sing. We could go on forever. As I opened the door I let my hair loose, and he smiled greeting me.

She was peering out the window, looking stunning like a powerful symbol of peace. I stared into her beautiful brown eyes which seemed to symbolize the oak. She saw me and smiled, heading out of her room, her hair flowing in the wind. I smiled back stupidly and waved.

We started to do the usual, talk, dance, sing, draw... it was the happiest part of the day. We were mid conversation about our family when "I have no mother," he explained, "I grew up alone with my sister." I pitied him. I was rich, popular and loved, yet I still didn't appreciate it. His hazelnut eyes met mine, glowing, he leaned in, with a predilection for the moment that seemed to draw them closer... suddenly the garden gates burst open. my uncle stood there, his face a mixture of anger and fury.

Almost. We almost did it. Guards ran up to me bounding me in rope. Rui Ming look terrified. I was terrified, she begged her uncle to stop, to let me go with droplets of salty tears rolling down her pink cheeks. Her uncle shook her hand off and declared "this boy is kidnapping you, he is dirty and poor, he is sentenced to prison." I shouted at her with fear and distress, "don't worry, we'll meet again, I'm going to be okay!" She answered through tears "take care..."

I was escorted by my uncle back to my room. I didn't feel anything, no anger, no fear, no nothing. I was lonely in this cold place, he was the only thing that entertained me in those dull days. I collapsed on my bed. Outside my door stood two guards, keeping me from the city. My eyes no longer shined like they used to. I just lay there, sleepless, soundless...

The guards dragged me down a flight of hidden stairs, we went down the gray corridor, to the final cell, empty except for a mat on the ground. They threw me in, tying my legs on the wall. The room was dank and smelled like swamp water. The chains felt like ice on my skin, and I laid on the scratchy mattress just waiting. For nothing.

The first ray of moonlight woke me up from my 'sleep'. I decided to search for him. I didn't care if I got in trouble. The emperor was having his 'beauty sleep', I was already in trouble anyways, it wouldn't hurt if it was worse. I wrapped my head in a scarf and climbed out the window, landing in the silent palace hallways. I knew where he was, in the royal prison headquarters. I scaled the walls, jumping at the slightest of sounds. Finally a painting of the palace gardens caught my eye. It was painted carefully with neat brushstrokes. In it was a picture of a boy and girl walking through the bright flowers. My heart ached, reminding me of something, or someone. I flipped the painting and slipped through the dusty cracks, finally arriving in the grey prison hallway. I tiptoed down, searching each lifeless cell. CLATTER. The sound of chains led me the end of the corridor. It was desolate, until someone emerged from the shadows.

She came. She came to save me? I stood up, running to the bars. She looked at me once and smiled, her eyes red from crying. "I'm so sorry, it was all my fault." I wiped her tears and stared into her deep brown eyes. She stepped back, handing me a small knife, picking the lock with her hair clip with frustration and I started carving through the rope on my legs. A sound of keys scared me, she burst into my cell and we lay there in sullen silence. As the sound of footsteps grew fainter, we let out a breath and we ran up and into the unknown.

We did it. I took his hand and we ran like the wind, through the crowded city, until we arrived on the borders of Chang An. I looked up, nestled in the hillsides sat a small cottage. It was made of oak, vines curling around the columns of wood. It was my aunts former house, and now, this nice house would be ours. We collapsed with final relaxation on the field, the hugest grin pasted on our faces, we leaned in and kissed under the ethereal and resplendent sun.

The Girl I Left Behind

Wellington College International Shanghai, Yu, Audrey – 11

I tore open the wrappings before anyone could see, and there it was, another letter, unsigned, just for me. It was unnerving. Every line on the page described something that hadn't happened yet—things that would. It didn't just feel strange; it felt like the letter was a glimpse into the future, unknown. I stepped forward, and the air seemed heavier, stickier. Every time a letter came, it predicted something, and every time, it was true. A shiver rolled down my spine as I ripped apart the new letter. Each letter brought something horrid, someone's death, a robbery, a murder on the Silk Road. Sometimes it predicted something normal, such as rainfall or thunder. I couldn't shake off the feeling that my mind was unravelling, like the world around me was bending in ways it shouldn't be, and I was the only one who could see it.

I'm Seren, named after a star my parents said, but the weird thing is, I don't feel like a star most of the time, I feel like the tiniest celestial object in the galaxy. Almost as if I'm invisible. People talked of luck, of receiving good fortune, and making more money. But me? I wish I had someone guiding me, instead of fumbling around in the darkness with a broken map.

My master's voice broke the spell – sharp and impatient, calling me to the storeroom before the merchants arrived. The merchants came from all over, travelling the Silk Road in many caravans. Sometimes, I would peek out of the window, watching the caravans' inched along the rumbling, dusty road. I imagined that they could only cover no more than 30 kilometers in a day, because of the stinging desert winds, and the freezing mountain tops that petrified the travelers. My master's voice rang out again, I obeyed quickly, cleaning down the shelves and windows that surrounded the storeroom. The sky was clear and blue outside, my thoughts drifted as I wondered where the letters came from. Was it a childish prank from an unsuspecting stranger, or was it just mailed to the wrong person? I frowned, feeling like a small, useless pawn trapped in the middle of a never-ending chess game.

"Seren! What in the world do you think you're doing, staring out of the window with your mouth open? You are a servant working for me, cleaning the windows, not some kind of goldfish auditioning for the opera."

His voice jolted through the messy yet thoughtful daydream I created, and I bowed my head, sheepishly.

I was dismissed, and I ran through the busy, bustling courtyards and came to a halt by the post office. There was another letter with my name written boldly on the front, folded neatly in the corner. I opened it carefully, feeling the rough edges slip through my fingers. I read it, and my heart trembled.

"Do not clean the windows tomorrow, no matter who asks. When the glass breaks, let it fall."

I blinked in confusion, not knowing why someone would warn me about something as ordinary as cleaning a window. I shrugged it off, assuming they didn't quite trust me with a mop and bucket.

By the time the sun's rays vanished, evening had draped the streets into stillness. I made my way back towards the voices, the ones sharing stories and tales of distant Gods. I paused inside the shadows, knowing that nobody would look for me as I merged into the darkness. In front of me, the laughing merchants traded glassware, spices, jewels and medicines telling tales of unfamiliar cities, and sharing memories of strange customs under the warm sky. But I knew what I saw, the joy, the laughter, wasn't always that way. I recalled tales of times when it wasn't so cozy, when the encounters were tense and unwelcoming, with bandits lurking beneath the night sky, around corners, waiting to strike.

I blinked awake, the first sunrays brushing across my eyelids, and I wondered how the night had passed so quickly. I opened my curtains and admired the view as the sun stretched and yawned. I breathed, every breath tasted of rain-washed earth, and the promise of another day.

The second I stepped out of my tiny room, a mop and bucket were shoved into my hand, indicating my job to wash the windows. I sighed, and the peace that washed over me this morning was seemingly gone. The windows needed cleaning, yet the letter had advised me not to. I stumbled into the shops and dredged my mop into the bucket, feeling more miserable by the second. People talked of luck, of receiving good fortune, and making more

money. But me? I wish I had someone guiding me instead of feeling like I was fumbling around in the darkness with a broken map.

The windows screeched as I drowned them with icy water, as though mocking me. I climbed into the waist ropes and hoisted myself onto the higher windows. I knew there was no safety net if I fell, and I had to rely on my strength, balance, and a prayer to finish the job. I closed my eyes, imagining freedom as sunlight beating through closed shutters. Tears filled my eyes; it was as though I was trapped in a bubble, dark storm clouds surrounding it, locked and no key. I would never find my way out, and no one will ever find their way in.

BANG! A chorus of shattered glass gave way under the force, and, before I could blink, it fell onto the jewelry and exotic spices we were preparing to trade. Voices echoed in the hall, and footsteps rushed upstairs. I was frozen in space, as if time slowed down, as if Earth stopped spinning, as if I was unable to move or speak. It was torturous.

I lowered myself down and sprinted, feeling like a robber caught in the act of stealing the crown jewels. I slammed the door of the house shut, as another letter was delivered to me. Panting, I ripped it open and stared at it disbelievingly.

“Do not delay, one wrong move could cost them their lives.”

Smoke coiled ominously in the corner, and a shriek tore from my lips. I glanced at the flaming stairs as my heart pounded. The master’s son was still up there. The distant sound of floorboards creaked, and I peeked up, shielding my eyes. Was it him up there, or was I being delusional? My mind mangled into half— realistic visions. Yells for a healer could be heard, and men were starting to storm up.

The smoke stung my legs; my heart beat a faint drumming in my chest as every instinct screamed for survival. I clawed at the window, successfully breaking it.

“Mommy?”

Just one word. One innocent word from a toddler. A faint tugging in my chest grew. I whipped around. Robert, just turning 3, was sitting on the top of the stairs. A bewildered expression sat on his face as he faced the flames. It wasn’t my duty, professionals were heading here, but something in me still felt wrong. In the chaos of the fires, something in me shifted. Maybe it was the sudden fear of losing someone I had seen every day, or perhaps an unspoken need to prove that I was capable of surviving and more. I couldn’t let him stay; this was the only thing that could allow me to steer my life now. In the second, I dove into the fire and ran up the stairs, fire creeping up my legs. It burnt like hell. I closed my eyes, struggling to gather my tears as I picked up Robert. The smoke was doubling, and I was choking. For a terrifying moment, I thought that the flames would claim us, and this would be the end. I glanced at Robert, and he took my hand. I tugged out the very littlest amount of energy I had left and sprinted. With the flames closing in behind us, I ran, not just from the fire, but from the girl I was. I knocked down the door and rolled into the grass. I didn’t look behind me again. Robert was unharmed. Me, however, the way his mother cradled Robert, the way his father kissed him on the forehead. I knew that I did the right thing.

When the fire died down, I knew something else had burned away with it: the belief that I was powerless. The air smelled cleaner, fresher and I’d been granted my freedom. What was left was a wish: a desire to build my own future. using the glittering map of stars as a guide, I travelled long and far, using the desert’s silence for company along my journey towards my new life.

In the end, I realized about that it wasn’t about how others made you feel, but searching and finding your own path and power within.

Two Names Beneath One Desert Sky

Wellington College International Shanghai, Yu, Lily –

Sand softened her fall, then it shifted. A girl, barefoot, landed hard on the dune, dust exploding around her like confetti. Wind licked her cheeks and sand slithered into her shoes; she blinked against the twilight. Below the ridge, an ancient Silk Road glimmered—a moonlit merchant motorway. While a boy lay beside her, jerking in his unconsciousness. She had no identification, no travelling companions, no clue how either of them had arrived. Just the desert's silence and the same question hanging in the air: who were they, where did they come from, and what could they possibly do next?

Twilight spread across the endless dunes, violet and gold.

The boy awakened, the sand mixed with his eye-lashes, his head pounding, and his throat dry. Beside him, a stranger—girl hugged her knees, her troubled eyes reflecting the stars. Only the dune's endless silence kept watch.

The girl's eyes tracked the horizon, then turned to him. "Drink," she coughed, offering a dented bottle into his hand. Water slid down his throat; when he passed it back, their fingers brushed, just a single, steady nod from the boy. Shoulders almost touching, they turned into the twilight—two silhouettes, strangers to impeccable friends beneath the wide sky.

A golden sunset, a slide of sand, and there they were: Lila and Max, alone on the sand.

Below, the city gates of Dun Huang clanged shut for the night. A line of traders hurried the last camels inside. One guard spotted the children.

"Hey! You with the grass?" he shouted.

Max's T-shirt was covered in grass from the fall. Lila's hands were covered too. The guard waved them through.

Inside the walls, a stall-holder threw two sticks at them. Confused they saw the stall holder put the sticks with the grass, twirl the grass into grass men, and sold three sets. They copied, and sold two sets.

By sun-rise they had four copper coins and a new job title: "The Grass Twins."

They still had no memories, but at least they had a stall to sleep behind.

By the time the sun was up, Max and Lila were both up twirling grass men. They spent the whole morning working in silence stopping only briefly to give each other an encouraging look. Working from the break of dawn to the moonlit sunset they fell asleep content with their work. There it was: two new merchants. One day of twirling and one stall day.

Day after day they worked, no break to drink or eat, only one meal a day but still they were happy.

A few weeks later, Lila felt her heart lurch. She remembered. She said to Max at dinner, "I miss my old home, I'm happy here but I keep worrying about my brother, he is independent now but as the older sister I'm still thinking every day about him."

Max replied, "Me too, I have my grandmother back at home and she is old now, her old bones can't move around, I have an aching for her right now in my heart."

They woke the next day right before the break of dawn, they then sat together on the hill, watching the sun rise on the edge of the horizon. Then as soon as the sun went up they were back twirling the men. They started creating animals and plants, hoping to make enough money to get a carriage ride home.

On that cold day, they both worked double speed, as they each had a goal.

As the sun rose the next day shining on their faces gently nudging them awake, they grabbed their things, then hurried to the market to catch the morning rush of buyers. It was a sweltering hot day and there was a change in the atmosphere. They asked around the buyers, no one answered but as the place heated up with people a whisper could be heard all around the clearing, "Inspector Bing Bu Lang Zhong is coming!"

"What is he doing here?"

"Did anybody do anything wrong?"

"Hope he's just here to look around!"

"He buys a lot of things, who do you think he will buy from?"

"Whoever he buys from will definitely get treated a lot better in the future!"

"I hope it's me!"

Suddenly, a loud drumming filled their ears, and all eyes turned to the direction of the sound.

"He's here!" A shout filled the air. Then the whole market fell silent. A tall man in a long silk coat turned the corner. The crowd gasped in unison. Even the pair fell silent. Many stall holders dropped what they were holding to look at the majestic sight. Inspector Bing Bu Lang Zhong was flanked by two Shepherd dogs and 20 men surrounded him from all directions. Deferential bows went all around the clearing. Many thought him callous. No one muttered a word as the great man stepped onto a tall rock and started speaking. No one dared to even breathe. No one even dared to flinch. He spoke brusquely. He was the emperor's personal advisor. He had even more power than the emperor.

Then finally at the end of his speech he said, "Carry on."

Immediately the market turned back into the bustling village it was before. Max and Lila sold a few of their grass animals like normal, just as if nothing had happened. Out of nowhere came the sound of screaming. Everything stopped as if someone had pressed pause. Lila and Max pushed their way to the crowd that was forming rapidly.

There on the ground lay the mighty inspector Bing Bu Lang Zhong, and stretched out on his leg was the callous death-eater scorpion. The scorpion slowly stretched its sting towards the shin of the inspector. The most powerful man in the country, fallen under the tail of a small animal. As the scorpion crawled over to the shin, baring its stinger at the guards, the crowd stepped backward. Leaving the two friends standing there awkwardly. Max froze on the spot, scared and fingers numb. This was his nightmare. He abhorred scorpions. On the other hand, Lila made a brazen move and pushed forward past the many guards who were doing nothing to help, grabbed a stick and hit the scorpion on the head, the guards stepped back.

Max forced himself out of his daze and ran forward to assist Lila. He grabbed some nearby grass, and at 100 miles per hour wove the grass into a cage. Together he and Lila drove the scorpion into it and twirled close the seal.

Safe.

They realised with a jerk that they had been holding their breath, breathing out, Lila and Max exchanged a look. They did it!

The inspector sat up, dazed but fine. He asked the crowd,

"Who was the brave warrior who saved me today, the one who saved me when I was on the brink of death, the one who had to overcome their fears to save another person?"

"It was us." Max and Lila said together.

"You?" The inspector looked at them with questioning eyes. An awkward silence began the eye staring contest. Then a chant filled the silence, ending it.

"Max and Lila!"

"Lila and Max!"

"Max and Lila!"

"Lila and Max!"

The inspector bent down and shook Lila's hand warmly, then Max's.

"Thank you so much for saving my life."

"It was our honour." They replied without any doubt in their voices.

“What do you want, I have everything you could imagine, what is it you need? I will fulfil your dreams.” The inspector said. The whole crowd looked towards the two young heroes. Max and Lila shared a look, then Lila with a shaky but definite voice spoke:

“We would like to go home.”

Were We Ever Free?

Wellington College International Shanghai, Chen, Zhu Zhu – 13

1. The Plague

It was raining in the desert. I hadn't seen rain in a long time. Was it always this color? – such an unsettling red? No. Something was wrong.

I'd expected to feel shock at the sight of my friend, bleeding onto the floor at the hands of his own father. I want to scream, but my voice has abandoned me. All I can do is stand there, mouth agape. Scarlet rain stains the carpet. I try to run. I falter. I kick as a hand latches onto my leg. Curl into a ball as nothing else prevails, shielding my head from the battering blows raining down on my limbs, torso, hands, leaving red-hot bruises in their wake. Then I am flung out of the caravan, landing on the ground with a sickening crunch.

“Get out, you good-for-nothing! It's you who disrupted the fengshui of my son's recovery! If it wasn't for you, he wouldn't have had to suffer from the Black Death. He wouldn't have...”

He breaks off with a heart-wrenching sob, slamming the door wretchedly. A moment later there is the crack of a whip – the caravan drives off, weighed by the driver's remorse, and I am left alone, in the most godforsaken place on the Silk Road.

I am sick. That much is obvious. The buboes that'd plagued my friend have relocated themselves on me – swollen, aching, egg-shaped things that hurt to touch. It hurts to move, as if poison-tipped needles are piercing my body. I hurt with them. Detached from physical pain but left to the mercy of my own shallow emotions. Retreating into the world of my dreams, I find myself falling.

Falling.

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My vision goes dark.

And I wake up, drenched in cold sweat.

2. Tears

The Gobi Desert was as cold as a thief – stealing into my bones.

I pushed myself up, my ribs screaming in protest, buboes throbbing agonizingly. I hugged my knees to my chest, trying to calm the frantic beating of my heart. *Was I going to die here?* My nose prickled as tears collecting at the corner of my eyes, into one pearly bead of emotion. *Let it fall*, I thought. Maybe then, I could finally find peace.

But it didn't. In the half-light of the fading sun, I rubbed my eyes. The tear was gone, leaving a phantom warmth on my shoulder. It was him, willing me on. Permission. A command. *Go*.

To stay was to die as a feast for vultures.

I crawled. Fell after twenty paces. Then thirty. *Progress*. It was nothing, but not nothing. I pushed again.

I picked up the pace. I had put off the aching pain in my limbs for so long, blinded myself in the hopes of saving my friend – blanketing myself in the momentary calm induced by just... him. And when I thought of him, I just couldn't seem to let go. It was the strength that allowed me to put one foot in front of the other. If I moved, I wouldn't need to think. And if I burned from exertion, well – maybe it could numb the deeper cold.

3. The Snake

The second day, I was using a gnarled branch to pull myself up a rocky incline when I saw it – a diamond-scaled viper, coiled on a flat stone in my path, basking in a silver of sun. My heart stuttered. To go around would risk a sheer drop – but neither could I go back. We stared at each other – two dying creatures in a wasteland. Slowly, trembling, I sank to my knees, no more strength left to fight. If this was how I'd go, it would beat dying on the side of the road. At least it would be an *imaginative* death.

A stone hissed through the air, striking a rock a hand's breadth away from the viper's head. It flinched, and in a lightning-fast twitch, slithered back into a crevice.

I turned, vision swimming. Standing a few paces from me, hand still poised to strike, was a girl. Gaunt, clothes hanging raggedly off her frame, and even from here, I could see the swollen shadow at her neck. The plague.

I struggled to my feet, opening my mouth to express gratitude, but –

"Don't thank me." rasped the girl. "Just come with me."

And so I did. Not out of respect, but of curiosity. She did save my life, after all.

4. War

Our journey soon became a three-front war.

Thirst stalked us. Hunger was a constant companion. We ate beetles, a luckless lizard, and once, a handful of grubs that she had dug beneath a rotten log.

And through it all – the dry hunger-induced retching, the moments where we were so tired that we could do was lie on the burning desert floor, the Plague was always there. Our fevers would rise in turns. She held me when the buboes swelled – staying there, comforting me, and I her. I told her about the slave trader's son, his untimely death. In speaking, the memories lost their hold – weakening the strength of the past as we struggled to make it to the future.

And then, they became stories. Of how my parents had left me with the slave trader. Of how his son had comforted me when it became the hardest to hold on.

It made the days just a little more bearable.

5. The Shepherd

It was just on one of those days – jogging through acres of sand, sharing stories with no thought of destination – when we stumbled across the oasis town. The air carried the scent of the Silk Road – animal musk, frying dough, dung, and the faint, precious perfume of apricots from a rooftop drying-rack.

We made our way through the streets. People drew their robes aside as they passed – not out of caution, but of habit. Until we found him. At a stone trough, drawing water for a line of weary, patient sheep as the sun bled into the dimming sky.

The slave trader.

His hands, once quick and sharp with a whip, trembled when lugging the wooden bucket. And when he turned and saw us, his entire frame seemed to fold.

“I built a cairn,” he said. “Over the hill. The wind... sounds like his voice. Before...” He broke off, staring at the floor.

The path wound up a stark, rocky hill west of the town and there, at the summit, the world opened. The Silk Road was a faint, tawny ribbon far below, threads of caravans moving like slow ants in both directions. And there, facing the endless comings—and goings, was the cairn. A pyramid of smooth, river-washed stones – green jasper, white quartz, black basalt. They were stones from a hundred different places; a miniature Silk Road of grief assembled on one lonely hill.

The slave trader crumpled, his sobs the only raw sound in the clean wind.

I sat down, feeling the last knot within me loosen. The weight I had borne since the long, aching fall did not vanish. It dulled, fading into one single desire – to see him again. A profound exhaustion, deeper than sleep, saturated my bones. Her hand found my shoulder, and I knew that she would be able to forge her way forward without me.

With that, I closed my eyes. Not to die. To listen. And in the whispering of the stones, I heard his voice, comforting me in the caravan. I felt his presence beside me in the caravan, as if he had walked every step of the long way here, too. And now, we were both, finally, free.

Epilogue

My eyes flicker open in a haze of gold. There is a sea of grass, its surface moving in a slow, languid tide under a porcelain sky. The wind carries only the clean, sweet smell of earth after rain.

And he is there, waiting where the grasses are tall enough to brush his hand.

Him. Not as he was in sickness, but as he was in the caravan on a good day, leaning out of the window to watch the horizon.

I walk to him. There is no more pain in my limbs, no weight on my shoulders. Only the soft rustling of the grass against my legs. I take his hand. It is warm, soft – real. I am pulled into an embrace, and I feel the strong, sure grip of his arms around my back, the beat of his heart against mine. And when we finally step apart, he is smiling – the old, easy smile that crinkled the corners of his eyes. He turns and begins to walk into the golden light, the tall grasses parting for him. He fades – not out of existence, but into the landscape. Back into where he belongs. His home.

And mine too.

For after so long, I am finally home.

The Sand Robbers

Wellington College International Shanghai, Gao, George – 12

Father shot up rigidly, gripping the hilt of his saber tightly in his clammy hand. The pounding of hooves on the winding path of the silk road, tore across the desert's stillness. A cavalry spear penetrated the sides of the carriage, drawing blood from a deep wound as it skimmed across the side of his face. His father rammed his shoe into the side of the carriage and the wall tore free. Brandishing his saber, he leaped into the chaos. Casper ran, pulling his mother after him. Blood soaked the ground, flooding the silk white road a river of red. Suddenly, a rock caught Caspers foot, the world fell over, a crunch. The last thing he saw was the blood red sun, speared by Chim Targa Peak. "Casper"

"Casper!" His mothers voice jolted him awake.

"Coming!" Casper dragged himself out of his rough leather blankets and sauntered drowsily out of his room. His mother was hunched over the single wooden table, her features illuminated by a guttering oil lamp, casting jagged shadows that sharpened the hollows of her cheeks. His eyes and voice still thick with grief

"Go run your errands, we're nearly out of coin." His mother said gravely

Money had become a big problem since his father died. Casper sighed and strolled onto the streets. Something glinted blood red in the corner of his eye. The ruby necklace of a man, steadily approaching him. Casper turned around as the man's shadow fell upon him. The man only had one eye, in the other socket was only eternal darkness.

"Your father is alive." He muttered, his lone eyeball raking over his face.

Casper froze. For a second he forgot how to breathe "No, you're lying, I saw, I..."

"The great peak of blood, he's there." The man jerked his head towards the mountains, "Injured. Broken. But alive."

"Chim Targa?" Casper asked, but the man had already vanished, "I'm coming dad."

A single pale, unblinking eye stalked him in the shadows.

The desert wind picked up as he rode over the threshold, carrying the sharp tang of sand. He pulled his father's threadbare cloak tighter around his shoulders. It was the only thing he'd kept of his father, besides the nightmare that replayed each night.

Chim Targa loomed on the horizon, jagged peaks stained red by the blood-red sun impaled on its summit. The horse's hooves crunched over loose stone. What if the stranger was wrong?

When Casper arrived, the sun dipped lower, timidly hiding its face behind the peaks Casper spotted a flicker of movement, something small and quick, darting behind a boulder. He stopped his horse, hand drifting to the dagger at his hip.

"Who's there?" he called.

A figure stepped into view, slender and wearing a sage green leather tunic. Her hair was loose, strands of ink black flowing in the dying light. She held a bow loosely in one hand.

"What are you doing here?" she said, her voice clear and steady. "Strangers don't last long on Chim Targa."

Casper relaxed slightly, "I'm looking for my father, a soldier, a stranger told me he was on this mountain. We were ambushed on the Silk Road by bandits..." Casper paused. He shouldn't say too much to someone he didn't know.

The girl sensed he was a bit edgy. She laughed and slung the bow onto her back. "I'm Lira. I live in the valleys below the peak. I know these trails better than anyone. The bandits on this mountain took an injured man into their cave a week ago, refused to let anyone near him."

Hope flared in Casper's chest. "That's him, my father."

"The cavern is guarded day and night, but after dark, the west side is unpatrolled, too many cliffs. If we leave at dusk, we'll reach the cave by midnight."

They rode in silence, as the clock's hands turned steady towards the last hours. The only sounds were the crunch of hooves on stone and the wind's chilling wail. The shade of red slowly faded from the peaks and was replaced by the gentle, misty sheen of the moon and stars.

"Have you lived here all your life?" Casper asked, breaking the silence.

Lira nodded, solemnly stroking her pony. "My mother was a healer, she taught me the trails, which plants to eat, which to avoid. She died last year, so I tend to the valleys alone." Her voice softened. "It's quiet. Too quiet, sometimes."

Casper thought of his mother's hollow cheeks, the silence of their cottage after his father was gone. "I know the feeling," he murmured.

"You loved him, didn't you?" Lira glanced up at him.

Casper nodded silently, "He was brave, *courageous, always fighting for good. I can only hope to be half the man he is.*"

"You already are," she whispered looking into Casper's eyes. "Most men wouldn't ride into Chim Targa alone, chasing a stranger's rumor. That's courage."

Warmth trickled Casper's chest, even in the freezing desert. They talked more as they rode, about her mother's herbs, his childhood on the Silk Road, the way the stars looked brighter here, unobscured by the smoke of caravans.

"There's the cave" Lira gestured ahead.

The mouth of the cavern yawned into the night, masked by tangles of dead vines and the reek of wood smoke. Torchlight flickered deep inside, casting wavering shadows on the stone walls. Casper could hear gruff voices echoing, laughter, a curse, the clink of metal mugs. He could almost see his father, somewhere in there.

Lira's lips came to his ear and whispered, "I'll distract the bandits, and you sneak in through that tunnel."

Lira strode up to the tunnel and started talking to the guards. Casper swiftly slipped past the guards and ducked into the tunnel. The air grew cooler here, the walls damp with moisture, and the voices faded to a murmur. At the end, he found a crude wooden door, its hinges rusted, an iron lock hanging from the latch. And there, behind the door, was his father.

"Casper?" he rasped. "How...how did you find me?"

Casper rushed forward, unlocking the door with a small key on the ground "A girl named Lira, she led me here."

Kael's face darkened. "You fool! She's one of them. This is a trap."

Suddenly a horrific clang echoed through the chamber as the cell door swung shut. He spun around to see Lira standing with her bow raised. An arrow nocked and aimed straight at his chest. Her cold gaze cut his heart, from which the warmth leaked out of him.

Casper breathed, his chest aching. "Why? I thought...I thought you cared."

"Caring is a weakness." She said coolly.

A red pedant glinted in the darkness. A man appeared behind Lira, a grin splitting his face, followed by two more bandits.

"You lied to me," Casper said to Lira, his voice breaking. "Everything. Your mother, the valleys, the kindness... it was all a lie?"

Her eyes glistened, but she didn't lower the arrow. "The boss he took me in when my mother died. I owed him. This is how I pay it back."

The one-eyed man chuckled. "Smart girl. Bring the old man, we're going have some fun with the one that killed our fellow bandits."

Casper glared at Lira, making her wince as if a dagger had stabbed her heart.

The man raised his sword. Casper closed his eyes. Whoosh. A thump. But the pain never came. His scream replaced by that of another. The blood dripped down his cheek. He opened his eyes, only to see Lira in front of him, a cold blade stuck through her chest.

"No!" Casper screamed.

Fury burned through him, his vision blurring with tears and rage. He snatched up a dagger, driving it into the man's torso with every ounce of his grief. The bandit's scream gurgled into silence as the dagger sank deeper, warm blood soaking Casper's hands.

He fell to his knees next to Lira.

"I'm sorry" she whispered.

"Why did you save me?" Casper wailed, holding back tears.

"You reminded me...what love feels like, what it felt like...when my mother died. I...don't want you and your father...to suffer the same." Lira smiled and squeezed his hand, tears trickling down her face, "I...love you Casper."

"I love you too." His tears dripped onto Lira's limp torso.

Slowly, a golden film of tears appeared over Lira's wound. Warmth started flooding through her body. The gash healed quickly. She her eyelids fluttered and opened. Casper let out a cry. They embraced tightly, happy tears slipping through their beaming eyelids. Vowing silently to never betray each other again.

Bound

Wellington College International Shanghai, Jian, Amy – 12

Liu Silian (刘思怜) lost counts of the days she had been abandoned for. Her previously glamorous robes were sold, leaving her with nothing but the robes she mended herself. Each step carried the weight and memory of her youth. Her tightly bound feet were no longer a symbol of wealth and nobility. Instead, they carried shame and guilt. Meimei had fallen asleep in her mother's arms, curled up. Silian cradled her daughter, her lips gently pressed on her head.

The hours of walking brought her to the marketplace, allowing her to finally set down Meimei and take out her needles, threads, and scraps of silk saved from the remnants of her old clothes. From the years of training, she had developed a graceful posture and precise stitching techniques. But as helpful as this skill is, it brought a sense of dread. She remembered the day she turned five, when her mother brought her to a small room and filled a bucket with warm water, herbs, and animals blood. Her mother trimmed her nails and washed her feet, instructing her to soak them in the mixture. After a few minutes, her mother bent her arch inward, and wrapped her feet so tightly, her toes folded inward. After that day, the process began. Every few days, the bandages would be removed, her arch would be crushed, and her feet would be folded. Then, the bandages would be wrapped tighter. After those sessions, she wasn't allowed to scream or cry. "Never interrupt a man. Never raise your voice," her mother instructed sternly, raising her hand and bringing it down harshly on her daughter's wrist. By the end of the day, she was sobbing quietly, and the last thing she saw before falling asleep was the coldness in her mother's eyes.

Only when she finally set down the needle and threads did she notice the crowd of onlookers staring at her – specifically, her gold lotus feet.

"Oh my. How beautiful those feet are? She's a noble – a fallen one," one said before turning away.

"The posture – oh the gracefulness! Indeed, but why is she here?" another one gossiped, "it's the Silk Road! Why is a woman even here?"

Finally, one well-dressed man came up to her, "I'd like to buy your fan. It's beautifully made. How much?"

She stood up, "it's double-sided, and made of silk. Around 1 吊 or 1,000 文 would be enough."

"Well embroidered. I'd go for 1 吊 and 200 文 for this."

"Thank you, sir," and it was sold.

Silian sighed quietly, still maintaining her graceful posture and the noble air that surrounded her. It has been a long day. A sudden separation of the crowd caught her attention. A man with long, thick hair, dressed in silk and fine cotton walked in a presentable manner towards her. His servants held an umbrella for him--- blocking out the sun, and others held his long robes, "Your name?" he asked in a controlled tone,

"刘思怜," she slightly bowed her head.

"Your embroidery skills are exquisite. Your needlework is of finest quality, and your grace is truly of nobility. If there is no object, I would be honored to offer you a place in my household. You'll be rewarded generously for your efforts and talents."

She looked down at Meimei's sleeping silhouette. This was her chance to give her daughter a better life, "I am grateful that my skills have your notice. I accept, and shall remain under your humble service," a pause. It was seen a blessing from heaven if a noble offers you a place to stay. Most people would be on their knees by this

point, but she still had a request, “If I may, please allow me to have one condition. I have a child, and if you permit, may I take her into your household?” She bowed her head.

Please

The noble paused and peered to the baby in the crib, “You are a brave soul to be asking that,” Meimei stirred, “I permit.”

“You have my greatest thanks,”

On the way, she thought about the events which led her to this place. She was thirteen when she wed a twenty-five year old noble. This increased her status (and her family’s), or so she was told. She remembered her pregnancies. First at fourteen, but a miscarriage took place after three months. Only two months later, she was pregnant once again, and gave birth prematurely. A vivid memory: She was on a bed, her vision blurred from the pain. The last thing she heard was her mother’s voice, “it’s a girl.”. And before the realization hit her, she fell unconscious. When she woke up, she got the news that her father drowned the baby. It was unladylike to question the actions of her father, and the years of harsh training had successfully suppressed her emotions just enough so she wouldn’t lash out. She look vacantly at the floor – then, at her own crippled body. It wasn’t unusual, but she knew that they had enough riches to raise another daughter, so why? Why did they drown her?

After three more pregnancies (two miscarriages and one which was another girl), her body deteriorated, and her youth was irreversibly taken. Her lower body was covered with scars, and the trauma left her with insomnia.

When she turned nineteen, she walked for the first time in a year, and her husband immediately planned to ‘try again’, so they did. After all, she was nothing but a tool to make children and strengthen the family. She waited a full nine months—almost ten. Her parents say this will be a healthy child. They made her pray to the gods, pray that her child is a boy. Then, the day came.

She forced herself to stay conscious during childbirth. Once her child came out, the first thing she did was cradle it, praying, but once she opened her eyes, reality hit her. It was a girl.

“Shameful,” her husband said as he reached for the healthy baby in her arms as she slowly lost consciousness, “Let’s try again.”.

In that moment, she forced herself awake and immediately retracted the baby from her husband’s reach.

Her family froze.

“What do you think you’re doing?” her husband’s eyes turned sharp.

“I’m not letting you kill her.”

It has been a month since she moved into the noble’s household. Meimei had good food to eat, and a proper crib to sleep in. She always finished her tasks and found herself in a wonderful position where she had both the time and the resources to raise Meimei.

Someone knocked on her door. She sat up and opened the door, revealing a guard. It was quite late, though, but she didn’t think much of it. Of course she wouldn’t. She’s safe. Safer than she’s ever been here. But before she could speak, he immediately covered her mouth with his hand, his nails digging into her skin before she felt a hard blow on the back of her neck and passed out.

She woke up in a basement, accompanied with the heavy smell of blood in the room and the cries of her daughter. The guard was drunk with his friends, laughing,

“Finally. Sir had a favorite, and we have her. Right now.”

“Wanna stab her or poison her?”

“What about her daughter?”

As her senses came back, she tried to stand up, only to be pulled harshly back down by the ropes tied around her wrists. As she lifted her head, a sharp pain jolted her awake, and she realized it came from a knife that imbedded itself into her stomach. The wielder was no other than the person who kidnapped her,

“You win. It’s stabbing,” he said, twisting the knife painfully.

“What a shame. She’s really pretty. She would make gorgeous babies,” another guard snickered.

Their faces blurred as she lost her consciousness, but Meimei’s cries remained resonant. The distinct calls for her mother ringed in Silian’s ears. *My daughter... I’m sorry. Mama is sorry.*

And as she departed, the only thoughts were of her daughter. Dear lord, why would she die this way? Her daughter, her beautiful, *innocent* daughter will be left alone in this world. She’ll never feel the warm embrace of her mother. She won’t watch her child grow – she won’t even know if her child will live. What has she done? What has she...

The End

The Last of the Starkweathers

Wellington College International Shanghai, Kothapalli, Shanvi – 12

Hi, my name is Reshmi, but you can call me Resh. This is my version of what happened during the Shadow attacks on the Silk Road of 1350.

15th of October, 1350

I sucked in a deep breath as I lay in bed, thinking about the day's struggles. Earning 80 gold coins in a day was good, but not good enough. I had so many things to pay off – the rent for next year, the loan I took to repair the shop window of the caravan, and, most importantly, food. I silently did the maths in my head: 200 gold coins from the past week, another 80 from today, made 280 gold coins. But I needed 450 coins to pay for it all. I grumbled again, this time too loudly, because Mayur, my younger brother, stirred from his sleep and whispered, "Don't worry, Resh, it will all be fine. Mom and Dad will come back to us, soon." I forced a smile onto my face and told him that I was alright, and I was sure that one day, our parents would return. Mayur returned to bed, already yawning.

But I could not fall asleep, carrying the truth alone. Our parents could never return. Because you can not return from the land of the dead once you go there.

16th of October, 1350

I woke up early today, at the first crow of the rooster down the lane. As my eyes slowly adjusted to the dimness, I trundled out of bed, got ready, ate some breakfast, fed our horses, called Hwin and Bree some carrots, and entered the Caravan, which also acted as our shop. Yes, I am a trader, probably one of the youngest you will ever see on the Silk Road. Every day, as our caravan travelled on the road, we sold spices like Cardamom, Asafoetida, Bay leaves, Carom seeds, Turmeric, Chili powder, Salt, Jakhiya, and a lot more. I felt relieved looking at my supplies – I still had 500 large bags of spices left. Smiling, I started setting up my counter – putting up the till and arranging pouches. A few minutes later, Mayur emerged from our trailer, looking fresh and dishevelled at the same time. He ran towards me, sobbing, and pointed behind us. I looked, and my face paled.

The caravan behind ours was gone. Instead, in its place lay a corpse, its hair matted with blood, eyes staring at nothing. I let a scream, and quickly muffled it. I slowly inched forward, my hand clasped around Mayur's as I looked at it. It was Mr. Smith, the man in the caravan behind us, who sold nice clothes from Turkey. He was so nice to us, and always helped us, whether it was with haggling a price while selling or just babysitting Mayur for a few hours. And a poster was pinned to his bloody chest. It said, "Hi Reshmi! I'll be there soon... to kill you and reign supreme. Enjoy the last of your days if you can. You are the last ones of the Starkweather Dynasty. I'll see you soon, Reshmi. Signed, Gisela." I trembled slightly when I finished reading it. I looked at Mayur and saw him frowning at the parchment. A wave of relief slammed through me. Mayur didn't know how to read – he was only 7 years old. Some random Psychopath was out there trying to hurt me, and I had no idea why or how. But I knew one thing – that I wouldn't go down without a fight.

I covered Mr. Smith with a rug and sent Mayur inside. Starkweather. That forbidden name was a death sentence. The debt of 450 coins was now meaningless. Survival was the only currency. I traded in a haze, every customer a potential threat, every shadow Gisela's agent. That night, I sat in the dark, listening. My parents' final whisper echoed: "Just live." I saw my spices as weapons. Chili to blind. Jakhiya to choke. My hand gripped tightly around my dagger as I thought about what I had read about her in a borrowed grimoire earlier that day. She was a sorceress fuelled by malice. On that note, I fell asleep, back against the sacks.

17th of October, 1350

Suddenly, a flash of violet light ripped forth from the air in front of me. It straightened, becoming a gaunt woman with a cruel smile. Gisela.

“Last of the Starkweather’s,” she said, her voice like grinding stones. “This’ll be your last day.”

I had no sword, only my spice pouches and my wits. As she lunged, I sidestepped, throwing a handful of fine jakhiya seeds into her face. She choked, momentarily blinded, and I swung my heavy book at her temple. It connected with a sickening thud. She staggered, but didn’t fall. Her knife flashed in the dawn light.

She said, “ Foolish girl, do you think your petty knife tricks can defeat a sorceress like me?”

Gisela’s smile widened as she gestured, “Your parents had a flair for dramatics too, so I made sure they died laughing!” she taunted.

My fear sharpened into focus. I wasn’t just a trader; I was a Starkweather. My hands moved on instinct, not toward a weapon, but toward the air itself, tracing a symbol I’d seen my mother etch in the dust years ago while she told me it would keep us safe. I had thought it to be a silly superstition, but now that I knew more about the Starkweather legacy, it didn’t seem as such.

A shimmering shield of golden light—the colour of turmeric—flared between us just as a whip of pure darkness cracked from her fingertips. The shield held, but agonizing pain shot up my arm. The magic had drawn blood, a thin cut across my forearm, glowing with an eerie light. My eyes widened. Not only had the spell worked, but it had even stopped some of her attack!

Gisela’s eyes gleamed. “Oh, you do remember magic. This will be more fun than I thought.”

The glowing cut was a beacon. I could feel it pulling at her power, trying to siphon my own. Panic threatened to choke me, but then I smelled it—the sharp scent of Asafoetida from my open pockets. My mother had called it a purifier. Alas, my hesitation and distraction were all Gisela needed to attack me again; this time, her whip lashing through my shield like it was a piece of parchment and cutting a wide line across my torso, a few centimetres thick. I keeled over for a second, my stomach cramping with pain. I reached for the Asafoetida and smeared it on my tongue. Instantly, the pain started to subside.

I dropped my shield and grabbed a handful of the pungent gum, smearing it over the bleeding cut. The eerie light sizzled and died with a foul smoke. Gisela recoiled, the shadow-whip faltering.

“You fight with spices?” she spat, but her voice trembled slightly.

“I fight with what I know,” I replied, “and it seems to be working.”

I reached for the chili powder, its softness deceptive in my palm. This wasn’t for blindness, but for fire. I cast the red dust into the air, focusing my will into a single, heated word. "Ignite!"

And it did. A roaring plume of scarlet flame erupted between us, not toward her, but upward in a wall of searing heat and light. The Silk Road itself seemed to gasp. My caravan, my spices, were my arsenal. And I wasn’t going to let her win.

And it went on for a week. She cut me with her sword, and I retaliated with my spices. Sometimes she got wounded; most other times, I did. My consciousness was fading, and my movements were not as energetic as before. Two figures hovering in the air, one ragged, wounds spilling so much blood on the ground, another tall and resplendent, looking tired with a few scratches, but fine.

Shadows gathered around Gisela, smothering the flames like a cloak. She was through in an instant, her knife—a shard of polished obsidian—already plunging toward my heart.

I had no shield. No time for another spell. Only the raw instinct to turn.

The blade bit deep, not into my chest, but into my side. White-hot agony blazed, worse than any flame. Then was when I realized that I would most certainly wouldn’t survive.

Gisela loomed over me, her knife held right above my throat. "A trader to the last," she mocked, watching the life she thought was mine seep away. And I truly did think I would die.

Suddenly, a blade skittered across the sands, landing near my hands. Gisela didn't notice it. But I did. I inched my hand towards it, grasped it in my hand, and twisted the blade in a way that felt purely instinctive and jabbed it right into her heart from behind. Her eyes widened, and then she slumped over. Dead.

My Sweet Child

Wellington College International Shanghai, Loh, Sonia – 12

Estelle laid out her tattered mat on the sand. Yet another day of selling heirlooms on the silk road to random strangers. Estelle looked up at the sky – it was sunny, with no clouds in sight – and she prayed, she prayed for her mother’s illness to get better, she prayed for more sales today, and she prayed for food on the table. Estelle laid out the heirlooms her late father gave her – A statue of a Buddhist monk, A brooch with an amethyst heart, a few rings, and a pocket watch. She watched as the minute hand made a revolution, no, she couldn’t possibly sell this, to a stranger who didn’t know its value—it’s worth. She hugged it to her chest, cradling it. No, she would never sell this. Estelle put the watch in her pocket and continued with her sales, more anxious with every minute that passed by.....

The icy wind whipped Estelle’s already battered face, like a thousand ruthless ropes. Estelle took out the pocket watch and watched as time trickled away like water. Her stomach grumbled, the mixed aroma of spices, food and herbs hit her like a freight train, awakening the hunger that she had been resisting for days on end. She mustered up her strength and held up her handmade sign that read: affordable high-quality jewellery. Estelle called out into the abyss of a never-ending void of hunger, inferiority, and unworthiness “Get your jewellery here! Cheap jewellery here!” But that was all she could say. After what felt like an eternity, a plump, well-fed man approached her stall, he said “Why, my dear, what a fine pocket watch you have.”

“Would you like to discuss prices with me?” A greedy smile spread across the man’s face “My child, this exchange could change your life!” Estelle hesitated..... fully pulling the pocket watch out of her ragged clothing pocket, she considered—If this man was true to his word, she wouldn’t have to worry about the debt of her mother’s medical bills eating her alive, she would never have to worry about the next time that she could eat, and she would never----- “This pocket watch is special, I have entrusted it to you Estelle. Protect my memory, my sweet daughter, and never cry tears of sorrow.” Estelle’s mind cleared out of the haze it had been in. Why did her father’s last words just reappear in her mind?

The words repeated themselves again, but this time something overlapped them, an angry voice, full of desperation. It was the voice of Estelle’s customer, trying to persuade Estelle to sell the pocket watch. But try as he might, Estelle’s mind was made. “No,” Estelle proclaimed “No, I shall not allow my father’s memory to fade away from earth. I shall not give up his pocket watch, and shall never, even in death, be parted from him.” The man sighed, clearly annoyed. “Then, you must face the consequences of not giving me what I want!”

The man’s face contorted into one of fury as he smashed Estelle’s array of heirlooms. She shrieked in horror while she watched the bits and pieces connecting her father’s memory crumble. “No! Please, sir, please stop!” Estelle begged, her face now wet with salty tears.

Estelle wept, not tears of sorrow, but tears of fury that set her heart ablaze. “Curse that man,” She thought, as she kicked the ground in frustration “May he never find happiness again!”

Happiness, My Child

(Part 2)

Crushed, and with nothing left to sell, Estelle slowly made her way to the graveyard where her father was buried. She set the pocket watch on the ground. The sky was now a hue of purple and blue, colors of serenity and peace. And there was a lark soaring toward the East overhead. Estelle let a sigh escape from her mouth and set her hands on her father’s gravestone. “Father, forgive me, I have failed you. Mother isn’t getting any better, and I do not know what more to do. Father, I have lost the heirlooms you gave me. A stranger took them and smashed them. Father, please, lend me your strength!” Tears were now cascading down her face, like a never-ending waterfall, a

reservoir full of self-doubt and burden. "My sweet Estelle, you will always make me proud. Happiness, my child, is what you deserve." The words her father once spoke replayed in her head. Calming and soothing.....

Estelle dried her tears. She had a plan.....

Estelle's plan was a simple one: she would enlist in the army and earn money after she fought. Her mother was in the hospital, so she wouldn't notice that Estelle was gone.

Estelle walked up to the enlisting office; her knees were shaking badly. "Excuse me, I would like to enlist in the army....."

Her voice trailed off into the cold night air...

I can change your life

(part 3)

Three weeks after she had enlisted, Estelle found herself in a meeting with her commanding officer. It was said that the enemy army would send their troops to the western region of the silk road at dawn, and that was when Estelle and her comrades would strike. Estelle spent the night in her trench restless – something was nagging at her not to fight. Then a voice played in her head "My dear, you have merely been surviving off your father's luck, but this time, luck will not change your situation. I could change your life for you; you just have to be brave enough to take this leap!" This voice sent shivers down Estelle's spine-----this wasn't her father's voice, this voice was oily, as if it was filled with malice, and just plain wrong...

Recognition flashed across Estelle's face, was this voice HIS VOICE?

Estelle remembered that day at the market, where the plump man had offered her an opportunity in exchange for her father's pocket watch, Estelle then recalled with more detail: The man's smile too wide, his eyes gleaming too much, what did the man mean? What was the meaning of his words?

Estelle let out a warped cry...

Estelle subconsciously held the watch tighter until her knuckles turned white, her fear now turned to determination. If the voice really was the plump man's voice, then Estelle had to fight, she wouldn't let herself be a puppet hooked up to a string, with that man controlling her. Her father's pocket watch was not just an extremely sentimental heirloom, it was also a promise between her and her father, a promise to never lose her sense of self, a promise to stay human, in whatever ways that were.

The sun rose as the tower bell struck six times...

As Estelle put on her gear, she put the pocket watch in front of her heart, pressing it between her armor and her body. This would keep her safe. Estelle was sure of it. As Estelle stepped out of the trenches, she recalled what her father had once told her: "Out of a hundred men on a battlefield, ninety are merely targets, another nine are good fighters – we are lucky to have them, and one, one is a real warrior, and it is he who shall bring the others home."

Estelle made up her mind. She would be that one warrior.

Estelle lifted head to the sky, it was clear, tinted purple and blue, "father, may your spirit find peace" she said, as a lark circled the rising sun.

Estelle stepped out, head high. She was going to carry her father's legacy head high, no matter what the circumstances – She knew she could. Because weeks of training in the army had strengthened her physical strength to that of a real warrior.

She was ready.

Just then, the battle horn sounded. Estelle immediately ran with comrades from her legion into the winding woods. Just then, the enemy army ambushed Estelle and her comrades. BOOM! Gunshots were fired to—and—fro, Estelle squeezed off a shot, killing an enemy instantly. Then, there was the sound of a gunshot, followed by a crisp cracking sound. Estelle gasped in pain, then her eyes fluttered once, twice, and the world went pitch black.

Estelle woke up in a medical tent, her chest heaving as pain engulfed her in flames. “You were lucky,” The medic explained calmly as she took Estelle’s pulse, “That pocket watch of yours saved you. Without it, the bullet would have killed you... But you survived with a punctured lung, you lucky girl.”

Estelle took this information in as she looked up to the sky. A lark soared above head, as if it were watching over her...

“Father,” Estelle mumbled “your pocket watch protected me. Thank you.”

Over Estelle’s head, the lark gently sang a tune, as if replying to her thanks...

Fang and the Silk Road

Wellington College International Shanghai, Ong, Chun Pin – 12

That silk shouldn't have remained in such good shape, not after so many years of getting tormented by the harsh weather of the Gobi Desert. Fang stared at the scanner as the thread of ancient silk pulsed warmly under the white lamp light. As the letters appeared on the screen, Fang's eyes turned wide, and the beating in his chest raced at the thought of a new discovery. —silk, copper pigment, and a metal the computer couldn't name... He could almost hear his late mother whispering in his ear. "The silk contains the wisdom of our ancestors and is built to withstand rain, sun, and wind. One day, you will find it, and I hope you know that some things are never meant to be used for personal gain." Fang sat back in his chair, contemplating the lone piece of silk on the lab table.

"I am Fang Wang, a consultant scientist specializing in the artifacts of the Silk Road." Fang took a deep breath. Remembering to look at the board of senior scientists. This is his biggest shot at making the expedition. "Last night," he began with the tone of an excited child, "I worked late to inspect this piece of silk found in the Gobi Desert." Fang showed the piece of cloudy white and gold silk. "The material scan showed that there was silk, copper pigment, and another metal the computer couldn't name. Looking through the records, I found that the last time this metal was seen was in an excavation site based in the Gobi Desert, so I am pitching for funding for the expedition there." A wave of murmurs spread through the room; some scientists' eyes gleamed at the opportunity to witness a potential discovery, while others knit their eyebrows in quiet unease, questioning whether to entrust Fang with a potentially dangerous discovery, afraid that he would be manipulated into giving up the material to underground businesses. Despite that, after persistent pleading, the final decision was made, and Fang almost yelped out in delight. A fiery warmth spread in his chest; this was his moment.

Fang stuffed his belongings into a bag and rushed to the plane. The journey felt like an eternity, passing his time watching movies and slowly drifting into sleep. In his dream, silhouettes of ancient Mongolian soldiers were advancing from the horizon, and a piece of fabric was glowing at his foot. "Can we trust you to know what to do with the silk?" an administrative voice boomed from all directions. Fang knew what he was implying: collect the silk and file a patent immediately if anything is found, keeping the profits for the private company. But lingering in the back of his mind, there was a voice that told him, "Some things are never meant to be used for personal gain."

After several hours of travel, Fang arrived at the Gobi Desert with his expedition notes in his hand. He stood there blinking under the brilliant sun that set the rocky desert ablaze in an orange light. Looking at the caravanserai, it was just like his mother had described: the sky was polished with a pastel blue, and dried-out plants were scattered across the parchment-colored sand. That evening, a student in a sandy scarf approached him. "Dr. Fang from San Francisco, is that you?" The student introduced himself as Naran, an archaeology student from Ulaanbatar. Naran had a rough, reddish texture to his skin; traces of sunburnt skin hinted that he had been staying here for a while now. "I heard you found indestructible silk," he said. Fang laughed. "It's not indestructible; my guess is that it's made to keep 'messages' from the Mongolians safe."

Naran's eyes glinted in a cryptic way at the mention of messages.

Fang and Naran worked side by side for three days straight, running tests in the suffocating tent. When Fang asked yet again about what Naran knew about the messages, he answered, "My great-grandmother's town had traded information to Mongolians—some were revolutionary, like the art of making paper. Others... well, it had some terrifying information: the giant Crossbar, the making of gunpowder. It was this information that led to the power of Genghis Khan, but it was also this information that made the silk so valuable. And when this type of silk stopped production, so did the Silk Road..." Fang listened with intent till the very last word. Then there was silence, nothing but the heavy breathing of Fang. It felt like his destiny was calling, just out of reach, but closer now. Just as he was about to return to his hometown in Beijing, Naran handed Fang a palm-sized tapestry from a local shop. It pulsed faintly when sunset struck it, then it hummed...

Back in Beijing, Fang tested the new samples. The metallic content was almost identical to the original fragment. It was the ancestor of a modern hyper-conductive alloy, just a thousand years early. There was a big difference,

though, in the way it hummed. The new silk hummed constantly, while the old silk vibrated in a pattern like a cipher. With a moment of realization, everything started to make sense, like puzzle pieces clicking together—the messages woven by his great-grandmother, the way his mom talked about the silk— He gave the piece of silk to the deciphering branch of their lab. The three days he waited for the cipher experts to decode felt like an eternity, immersing himself in everything related to the Mongolian messengers of the Silk Road. Days later, when the cipher was decoded, the expression on his face turned fearful. On it, I wrote about a weapon of so much power that it could destroy a small town without costing the wasteful energy needed for a modern nuclear bomb. Such an immense amount of power would be detrimental to world peace, but the profit would be immeasurable—everybody would want it.

Fang sent his discoveries to his supervisors, leaving out how big the impact would be.

The reply returned to him: Excellent discovery. Begin patent documentation.

Fang sat back in his seat, the hum of the silk lingering in his ear like a deep-rooted memory, and his own mother's deep, natured voice returned, soft and gentle: "Some treasures are not meant to be owned."

Fang flew back to the Gobi Desert on his own budget.

Naran's family kiln stood at the edge of a dry riverbed, made from mud and iron scrap. His grandfather looked up from the stoking coals, rubbing a bead of sweat off his forehead with the back of his wrist, and called for Naran, who rushed to his side. "So, you have decided to patent the discovery?" asked Naran. Fang shook his head. "No, to return it."

Fang thought about his supervisor's email sitting unanswered in his inbox.

Instead of filing a patent, Fang published an open paper describing the silk's components. The museum, though clearly annoyed, said nothing. It was already public. And the silk? It had fallen back into the hands of someone trustworthy, a family that had been in this business for a long, long time.

Fang poured himself tea and whispered, "You were right, Mum." The steam rose, dancing in his sky.

The Journey to Redemption

Wellington College International Shanghai, Tan, Kayla – 13

Merchants and tourists overflowed the lively streets of Kashgar, and the overwhelming scent of exotic spices permeated the air. Despite all the prosperity surrounding her— Xuehua, a struggling silk merchant, only felt misery.

“Silk! Come here to buy silk!” Proclaimed Xuehua. Exhausted but desperate, she hopelessly advertised her commodity—Chinese silk— which garnered no attention. After a long day, Xuehua made it a habit to vent to Auntie Wang.

“Auntie, how have you survived four decades of merchant life without going bankrupt, or insane?!” Whined Xuehua.

Sighing, Auntie Wang reassured: “Young girl... I’m afraid your troubles are inevitable for a merchant! Maybe go to Baghdad if you’re so desperate. For new ones like you, I’m sure you’ll make a fortune.”

Baghdad? Ah, the renowned trading center in Arabia!

“T—thank you for your insight auntie! I’ll leave now...” she murmured as she rushed off.

Xuehua walked down the cramped alleyway. In contrast to the polished market streets, most Kashgar locals lived in filth. Xuehua was one of them, living under a shabby mud hut. Upon returning, she collapsed onto her straw mattress. Turning to face the grimy ceiling, she replayed auntie’s suggestion in her mind. *Baghdad... doesn’t sound too bad—*

Suddenly, a memory emerged in her mind: an unpleasant one— her parents.

With them intially leaving for an ‘evening walk’, 11—years—old Xuehua thought nothing of it; but it had only been a whole week before she found a crumpled note on the wooden table, which wrote: *“Do not look for us, for me and baba will leave you. Money is tight, and we can’t afford to waste any more. — mama.”* Yes. They abandoned her.

Even after six years, the memory was still etched into her mind like a scar. With anger overpowering her rationality, her brain only told her one thing: leave. If her parents failed to have an ounce of responsibility, it was only up to her to save herself, wasn’t it?

The following sunrise, she pulled her belongings from a makeshift caravan into the direction of the rising sun: along the Silk Road— her only chance to redemption.

...

The journey across the mountain was treacherous; and with a frail body, that was bad news. Luckily, just as Xuehua was about to give up, a large group of merchants were approaching in the distance. Instantaneously, an idea popped into her mind— a risky one. Being petite, she could simply sneak into their caravan and hide inside! This seemed like a promising idea, but how was she going to distract them?

There she saw a pile of cobbles, coming to her rescue.

Ready, fire!

Upon hearing the consecutive thuds, a few merchants went to investigate the strange noises. Back at the caravan, lazier merchants dozed off, making the infiltration much easier. Without a struggle, Xuehua stealthily snuck into the back of the caravan, and held her breath.

After descending the mountain, while the merchants stopped to rest at the entrance of the desert, she retreated to a safe distance. Though she had completed one step of her journey, the desert would only be more perilous.

...

Xuehwa slumped onto the grainy sand. Even an hour of walking was too strenuous! She tried to lift her sore legs, but with the scorching sun and her excruciating fatigue, her body wouldn't obey. Under all her weariness, she collapsed; completely knocked out.

...

The aroma of charred lamb filled the air, and the comfort of the cool breeze put Xuehwa at ease.

Wait. This isn't right.

Resisting the urge to keep idling around, she sat up and observed her surroundings. The crimson sky gradually engulfed the sun, with Xuehwa watching from under the tent. Across the campfire, she saw an unknown figure in the distance.

His vibrant chapan coat sheltered his muscular body, and his dark hair was kept in a doppa hat. He stared back, stood up, and slowly approached her; like a predator targeting its prey.

Now everything made sense: she was being held hostage! Upon realisation, she tried to shuffle away, but again, her body was failing her. Helpless, she accepted her fate. Death.

She flinched as he knelt before her. "Don't scream, I won't hurt you." He reassured as he put both hands up in the air. Xuehwa sighed of relief, wiping the sweat off her face.

"If so..., why did you take me here?"

"Because I found you knocked out on the desert floor," he bluntly answered. "If you can move, go outside to eat."

After five minutes of attempting to stand, Xuehwa impatiently limped towards the fire, awkwardly landing on a scruffy mat.

"...Is this where you live?" She asked shyly, her words barely above a whisper.

"No, I just freelance around. If I come across travellers, I help them get to their destinations... like you, for example."

Xuehwa's eyes lit up with hope. It was as if fate had given her another chance! She could ask him to guide her to Baghdad, and everything would work out—

"It looks like you want me to help you!" He teased. "I can help, but I'll charge you a protection fee of two gold."

Two gold?!

"Is there another way I could pay? I... don't have much to spare." She embarrassingly admitted.

She could trade her silk, but then what would she sell in Baghdad? On the other hand, if she didn't give anything at all... who knows what would happen!

"I have three pieces of silk, if that's okay..." she muttered.

He paused for a moment, processing her offer.

"Fine, we have a deal. Tell me your intended destination, and once we arrive you give me all three pieces. Deal?" He proposed.

She hesitated before confidently responding: “deal.”

For the rest of the night, they exchanged stories while eating the lamb skewers. She learned that the tribesman’s name was Hassan, and that his own parents had also abandoned him. Compelled by his tragic story, she gave in and sympathised with him— sharing her own sob-story of a background.

For the next few months, Xuehwa and Hassan ventured through the Taklamakan desert, stopping by Bukhara and Merv city on the way. The journey was tiring and tedious, but with Hassan as her guide and companion, it felt more exciting than exhausting, with all the stress taken off her.

Each stop showcased new unique sights, filling Xuehwa’s mind with colour and curiosity; something she never felt back at home. *Is this how merchants felt about Kashgar too?*

...

At last, after six months of expedition, Xuehwa finally made it.

The city gates loomed over her. Baghdad was beyond breathtaking, and no words could describe how impressive the city looked. Surrounded her were luscious courtyards and fountains, behind them spectacular domes and grand mosques. After making her way through the huge crowd and commotion, there she finally saw it— the market.

The market of Baghdad was quite literally definition of prosperity, and the sounds of merchants raising their voices over one another gave Xuehwa a strange sense of comfort. *Homesick, I suppose.*

Amid taking all the sights in, she sensed a weird feeling in her stomach. The one where you felt something was definitely wrong. There she remembered it: Hassan’s payment. She instantly swung around, but alas, Hassan was already gone.

She foraged every corner of the city, but he was still nowhere to be seen. *I’m so stupid! How could I forget something so important?! I knew it, I should’ve never gotten involved with a tribesman! If I don’t pay him, who knows what will happen to me! ...*

“Xuehwa... you stupid, stupid girl!” She lashed out—loud, holding back her tears of frustration.

The next day, before leaving her rented inn, she found a crumpled note sitting on her wooden side-table. Still vexed at herself from yesterday, she reluctantly un-crumpled the note, dreading what it would say. She didn’t need another problem thrown onto her shoulders. On the paper, it wrote:

“Xuehwa, I apologise for leaving so abruptly. It must have caused you much distress. About the payment, forget about it. Don’t worry about being in debt; I’ll turn a blind eye. Although I’m a tribesman, I’m still human. I sympathise with your experience and feel this is the least help I could offer you. I wish you the best of luck, and much success. — Hassan.”

Folding the note gently, Xuehwa gave a bittersweet smile.

On her first day of selling in Baghdad, she made almost equivalent to one gold. For once, she felt like she belonged somewhere. Auntie Wang was right after all! She continued selling there for a week, then a month, then surprisingly a year. She even learned Arabic to communicate better with local customers.

...

One day, a familiar face appeared at her stall. He took a piece of intricately embroidered silk, smiled at Xuehwa and asked: “how much would this piece of silk cost?”

Barely containing her joy and deep-rooted longing to see him, Xuehwa smiled back and replied:

“For you Hassan, it’ll be free.”

In the Knots of Silk Strings

Wellington College International Shanghai, Teng, Mia – 13

Fingers of light reached through the curtains, and shadows danced around the hardwood floor as Evander pushed himself upright on the double bed. In the pallid light, he could make out his mother's face, etched with wrinkles, the result of her long working hours as a seller of knitted socks in the bazaar. She managed to bring home enough to buy food, but not a penny more to save for winter's icy breath. Evander slipped into his father's boots and stepped outside.

As he walked through the village, the mist curled over the hills, and the fresh scent of pine and earth drifted through the air. When his feet hit the Silk Road, he saw a shiny, black object. Evander slowly approached it; the word "Steinway" gleamed in huge golden letters. A Steinway piano! The lid was open, revealing the silver strings lying on an iron frame. He removed his shoes, then his socks. Evander's right-foot thumb pressed the first white key. The sound swayed, shaking like the uncertainty of a bird learning to fly. People in carriages, on horses, and on camels had halted, all of them staring in awe at Evander. Then he began his left-foot notes, his feet dancing in perfect harmony, his notes playing a delicate melody.

As the final notes resonated through the air, the crowd was completely immersed in the music. Evander had unleashed a wave of applause that surged at him like a tsunami. An elderly man in the front row, propped on his cane, was grinning from ear to ear. When the crowd had dispersed, the man shuffled to him, clutching a plastic bag. Evander peered into it: freshly cut bread, a pineapple, and grapes. He nodded in gratitude, and the man slung the bag over Evander's shoulder. As he turned, Evander couldn't help but notice the words 'Cresst twine' tattooed on the back of his neck.

Just then, a girl, whom he had noticed merely as a face in the crowd, rushed towards him. Her hair was chestnut brown and tied back in a ponytail. She smiled. He smiled. Silence hung between them until the melodic sound of her crisp voice shattered it.

"Hi! I heard you play. The composition was gorgeous!" she remarked.

"Th-thank you," he stuttered.

The girl's head twisted from side to side, eyebrows knitted.

"I think I know you..." she said tentatively.

His chest jolted with every heartbeat; words lodged in his throat like stones.

"I think I know you too..." he breathed.

"Lyra!" barked the man who had given him food. "Time to go packing. NOW!"

Her rosy lips formed a groan. She mouthed a brief 'bye' and left, chasing after the man. The silence she left behind was as ominous as the darkening thunderclouds in the sky. He decided to go home.

As he swung open the door to the cottage, the smell of roasted potatoes enveloped him. His mother was frantically peeling potatoes with her back to him. Pots and pans were flying everywhere, and potato skins covered the floorboards like confetti.

"Honey!" His mother cried, dropping a potato. She hobbled towards him and seized the plastic bag from his shoulder. Looking into it, her mouth opened into the shape of an 'O'.

"Holy moly...where'd you find these?" she gasped.

"Off a stranger with a weird tattoo on the back of his neck," Evander explained calmly.

Her expression faltered, then softened as she looked at him.

“Tonight, we are going to have a feast!”

In their bedroom, the blanket had been turned over, a pillow was on the floor, and their family photo was lying on their bed. He launched himself onto the mattress; his eyes were locked on the picture. There he was, smiling serenely. His mother, lovely in a long white wedding dress, had one hand on his shoulder, the other reaching towards the left side of the picture. But the photo ended there, edges torn as if ripped by time. At the bottom, letters were scribbled in small writing. He squinted; it said ‘twine’.

Over dinner, fragments of truth pierced his mind like shards of glass. He knew what he had to do.

“Mum, I’ve heard there is a lottery to win money at the bazaar,” he lied. Her eyebrows were raised, but she nodded hesitantly.

He ran to the bedroom and reached for his bag with his feet, putting in the torn photo, a notepad, and a pen. His mother quickly followed and put bread and the pineapple into his bag.

Even though it was autumn, the biting night breeze gnawed at his flesh, trying to freeze him to the bone. He pushed his way through the hills, the moonlight spilling over the slopes. At the Silk Road, his feet stopped again. A faint figure appeared in the distance, looming and shifting closer. When they were a few meters apart, Evander summoned the courage to speak.

“Who’s there?”

“Lyra!” screeched a shrill voice.

Evander’s face relaxed. “It’s me, Evander.”

They sat together on the cobbled road.

“When’s your birthday?” Lyra questioned. “Mine’s April 17th.”

“April 17th...mine too.” He said, shocked.

They pulled half a ripped piece of paper from their bags and joined them. ‘Cresst twine’—the letters whispered dark secrets. Evander wrote ‘Cresst twine’ with his feet; Lyra traced the letters with her quivering finger. The phrase revealed itself: secret twins.

Evander’s vision blurred. His sister’s tears streamed in fountains. They held onto each other.

“My brother,” she breathed.

“We can’t live a lie,” Evander said in a low yet firm voice. “We *have* to know the reason.”

She nodded gravely.

The twins bounded towards his cottage, concrete crunching under scuffed shoes. They burst in. His mother froze mid-stir of potato stew, the spoon clattering.

“Mum—Lyra is my sister.”

The stew boiled over. His mother’s face drained of colour, and she sank into a wooden chair.

She whispered, “I knew this day would come. The tattooed man. He is your father.”

Evander waited for the message to sink in.

“You said he died.”

“That was to keep you safe. Your father is a merchant. We fell in love, but his family hated that I was a village weaver. When we had twins, they threatened him. So, we split. He took Lyra, I took you.”

Lyra’s knees buckled. “Why didn’t you *tell* us?”

“Fear,” his mother said, tears carving rivers down her cheeks. “Fear they’d take you both. Fear we’d never be whole again.”

As the clock struck midnight, they were packed. Evander put his tattered blanket in his bag, and Lyra found an extra loaf of bread.

They slipped out, steps light as moth wings. The dragon caravan waited at the village’s edge, its scales gleaming like polished silver. The driver, a dragon-scarred woman, took Lyra’s coins and gestured to seats between the dragon’s spines.

They rode for three days, listening to the wings’ low, thrumming hum. Wind carried the scent of jasmine and distant seas. They landed in a city of curved roofs and lantern-lit alleys. Dawn broke over the cobblestone square, and vendors were selling steamed buns. As they walked, black-haired people passed, speaking in a language as alien as the music that filled the streets. Lutes, zithers, and bamboo flutes sang in the air.

“A violin and a piano!” Lyra cried.

A man with a gentle accent let them play.

“Beautiful siblings,” he said, his words rising and falling with the music around them.

Lyra tuned her violin; the crowd murmured in anticipation. Evander removed his boots and socks; the crowd held its breath. She gave him a timing cue. A melody unfurled, heavy with the ache of years lost and never spoken. The crowd roared.

A man in a silk robe, leaning on a cane, pushed his way through. His hair, streaked grey, caught the light. His eyes—those eyes—burned with a familiar spark.

“That music,” he said, voice trembling. “It’s the lullaby I hummed to you both... the night we parted.”

It was him—their father.

He led them to the Hall of Azure Bells, a palace constructed from carved stones and painted walls. This was where the musicians had played for the emperors so many years ago. That night, with lanterns shining like captured stars, Evander sat at the piano, his hands moving as if through magic. Lyra held her borrowed violin ready. And they played. Her violin wept. His fingers wove tales on the piano. Every note was the echo of the past they both knew. Posters soon read: *The Crested Musicians – A Melody Reunited*.

On the seventh night, Evander spotted them. In the back, their mother stood, hand clasped in their father’s.

Their eyes met. In a tranquil courtyard with falling plum blossoms, their father spoke, voice hoarse.

“I’m sorry. I should never have let fear win.”

Their mother smiled, wiping a tear.

Once torn apart, they now clung together like silk spun tight, every fiber binding them into a single, unbreakable thread.

The Sand Trader

Wellington College International Shanghai, Waldron, Anthony – 13

The sun was melting into the horizon when the caravan rolled through the Arabian desert. The sand glowed deep orange, and two white horses dragged the front wagon, their flanks shining with sweat. Simon sat inside, doing his best not to roll his eyes at the endless dunes.

“How long is this trip supposed to be? And why do I even have to come?” he asked, half under his breath.

His father looked out the other side of the wagon. “Your mother wanted it this way. It was her wish, and I intend to keep it.”

Simon’s stomach clenched. That line, *your mother’s wish*, came up every time his father didn’t have an answer. Simon barely remembered her dying words, but he remembered her warmth, her laugh, and how she always told him to do what made him happy. She wouldn’t have forced him into this life of bows, sand, and sunburn.

The soldiers riding alongside them murmured in low voices. The air smelled of dust and leather. Simon leaned his head against the window frame and tried to imagine he was anywhere else. Someday, he told himself, he’d leave all this behind and become a trader, someone who dealt in silks and spices, not blood and honor.

He almost drifted to sleep before the world blew apart.

An explosion ripped through the front of the caravan, throwing him against the wooden wall. The wagon spun and tilted. Horses screamed. Someone was shouting outside, but all Simon could hear was ringing in his ears. The flicker of orange light returned, not from the sun this time, but from the flames spreading through the camp.

“Stay here!” his father yelled before jumping out.

Simon stumbled after him and froze at what he saw. The desert was chaos. Arrows cut through the smoke, soldiers ran for cover, and the air carried the dry, metallic smell of burning oil. Through the haze, dark shapes appeared on the dunes, the sand killers, the scourge of the Silk Road. They didn’t just rob caravans; they erased them.

Simon tried to run toward his father, but the heat and fear made his legs weak. Alaric stood tall, bow in hand, releasing arrows as fast as he breathed. Every shot hit. Every movement was precise. He looked unstoppable, until he wasn’t.

Simon saw the blade slide across his father’s chest before he could even cry out. The archer who had never missed a target fell, and everything stopped.

Something inside Simon snapped. The fires around him roared louder, men screamed, and he felt small, useless, terrified. He wanted to help, but he couldn’t even breathe. Then, a sharp, shameful thought hit him: *If I lie still, they might think I’m dead.*

He grabbed a dead soldier’s cloak, smeared it with dirt and blood, and threw it over himself. Then he dropped into the sand and shut his eyes tight. Feet thudded past him. A blade scraped nearby. A voice laughed. Then silence.

When he opened his eyes again, the stars were out, and everything was gone.

The wagons were burned to ash. The soldiers were still. His father’s body lay near the broken bowstrings. Simon’s knees gave way. He crawled to Alaric’s side, pulled the bow from his hand, and whispered, “I’m sorry, Father.”

Then he started walking.

The desert stretched forever. Simon didn't know which way he was going, east, west, it all looked the same. He tried following the wind. That failed. He tried following the stars. They blurred. By the third day, his mouth was too dry to curse his luck. By the fourth, his thoughts blurred with the heat.

He collapsed on the fifth.

When he woke, he wasn't dead. A shadow hovered above him, a woman wearing a sapphire-blue veil. "Don't move," she said. "You'll waste what little strength you have left." She pressed a cup to his lips. The water burned going down, but it was the best pain he'd ever felt.

Her name was Zara. She led a merchant caravan bound for Merv, full of traders hauling fabrics, spices, and salt. Her people had found Simon barely alive among the dunes.

"You're lucky," she said later, when he was strong enough to sit. "In another hour, the sun would've finished you."

"I don't feel lucky," he murmured.

"Then call it fate," she said, half-smiling. "Fate and water."

He stayed with them as they moved along the road. The days melted together in dust and heat, but slowly, Simon began to learn the traders' rhythm, the bartering, the laughter, the quiet danger. Zara taught him how to judge character like weighing gold. "People," she said, "are just transactions of trust. Some are worth investing in. Some aren't."

At night, they'd sit by the fire, and sometimes Simon would think about his father — the man who saw emotion as weakness and reputation as everything. He couldn't decide whether he hated him or missed him. Maybe both.

One evening, Zara caught sight of the bow he kept wrapped in cloth. "You're trained to use it," she said.

"Was trained," Simon replied. "My father taught me."

"He must've been good."

"The best," Simon said quietly. "And that's why I'm not."

Zara didn't press. She just nodded, poking at the fire. "Sometimes," she said, "we inherit more than skill. We inherit their ghosts."

Simon didn't respond, but her words stayed with him.

Months passed. He grew stronger, wiser. He negotiated small trades, a bag of cinnamon for a strip of dyed cloth, salt for tea leaves, and found he had a talent for it. He liked watching people's faces, measuring truth against smiles. He liked building something that didn't end in blood.

Then, one night, bandits hit the camp again.

They came fast, maybe a dozen of them, hoping for easy prey. Zara's guards shouted and scrambled to defend the wagons. Simon woke to the sound of steel and fire. He reached for the bow before he could think.

The first draw burned his shoulders. The string hummed. He let the arrow fly. It whistled through the dark and struck the nearest horseman clean off his saddle. Then another. And another.

By the time the bandits turned and fled, the caravan was safe, and Simon's hands were steady. He'd fought not out of anger, but out of instinct, not for pride, but for protection.

When the camp quieted, Zara approached him, still holding her curved blade. “I didn’t take you for the fighting kind,” she said.

Simon shrugged. “I didn’t either.”

“You’re full of contradictions,” she said, smiling faintly. “That’s what makes you survive.”

Over the next few years, Simon’s name traveled along the Silk Road. Traders began calling him *the Red Archer*, though he never introduced himself that way. He guided caravans safely through dangerous routes. He made fair deals, built alliances, and turned profit where others saw only peril.

He never forgot the night of the fire, but he stopped letting it define him. The bow became part of him, not as his father’s weapon, but as something new, something his.

One night, standing alone atop a dune, Simon strung the bow and loosed a single arrow into the desert sky. It vanished into the starlight.

“Father,” he said quietly, “you taught me how to aim. But I found my own target.”

The wind caught his words and carried them into the dark.

Back at the camp, Zara called for him, her laughter carrying over the dunes. The fires were glowing, the camels settling, merchants trading one last story before sleep. Simon looked back at them, at his life, his road, and smiled.

For the first time, he wasn’t running from his father’s legacy or his mother’s memory. He was just himself, a traveler with a story, a trader with a bow, walking his own path through the endless desert.

And as the dawn touched the horizon, turning the sand gold again, Simon kept walking.

Raider's Return

Wellington College International Shanghai, Xia, Marcus – 12

Li reluctantly dragged his aching body out of the safety of his bed and looked around for the source of the noise. Someone at the door. He stumbled around the furniture and creaked open the door. “Who is it?” he groaned, looking around.

“Hello there!” replied a young man.

“Just tell me what you want,” Li snapped.

“Right then, would you be my guide?”

“That depends, where are we going?”

“I would like to go to the Xijin tomb to investigate something.”

“No,” Li said bluntly.

“But—”

“NO! I am never going back to that god-forsaken place again, not for anything! Go find someone else to bother, and don’t come back here!”

Li was about to close the door when the man suddenly said, “We found your wife’s necklace.” Li froze. It was impossible; his wife had not been seen for 14 years. The police had searched for 3 days and 3 nights. It was like she had just vanished without a trace. Without hesitation, Li swung open the door, seized the man by the collar, and shouted, “Show me where it is! I need to see it!”

As they drove on the sandy road, Li took in the sights of the city. He had not gone outside in a while. Dunhuang city, with its crystal-clear oasis and the famous Mogao caves, was a crucial stop along the Silk Road; as such, many people travel here to learn about history.

They were splitting away from the usual bustle of traffic and onto a dusty dirt road.

A few minutes later, they arrived. It was a base for studying the Dunhuang tombs. It was packed with people, all hurrying with their tasks. Li was led to a tent where a man with a clipboard welcomed him. “Welcome, Mr. Li. I’m the coordinator of this expedition. My name is James, nice to meet you.” James introduced, smiling.

“I see you’ve met our new intern Chen.” He gestured to the young man who brought Li here.

“I need to see my wife’s necklace!” Li snapped impatiently.

“Yes, of course, over here,” James replied.

James led Li to a large table. “Here it is,” James said. On the side of the table, there was a tray with a necklace on it. The necklace was worn and dusty. Li rushed to the table and examined the necklace. It wasn’t special, just a silver necklace with some parts replaced he bought off a street vendor, but to him, it was priceless. Li put down the necklace.

“Where did you find this?” he demanded.

“The Xijin tombs,” James stated calmly.

Li clenched his fist. He couldn’t go back. But the only clue to his wife’s whereabouts was there. “Then I’m going, with or without your help,” Li said, heading towards the exit.

“While you’re down there,” James continued, smiling. Li turned.

“I have a favor for you.”

“Our instruments have recently detected an anomaly beneath the desert, and it seems to be a tunnel system, the equivalent of the Silk Road.”

“Such a discovery would greatly increase our understanding of the ancient people. We heard from the locals that you are familiar with the tombs, so we asked you to assist us. So, we help you find your wife, you help us investigate. Deal?”

Li thought about it for a moment, then hesitantly said, “Deal.”

James led Li and Chen to a buggy parked at the edge of camp.

“Take us to the tombs,” James told the driver.

They drove across the dunes. The driver parked the buggy outside, where they had set up a few tables with maps of the tombs. “If there’s nothing else, I’ll be on my way, good luck!” James told them as he signaled the driver to bring him back. Li watched them drive away and turned to Chen. “Time to get to work.”

They entered the tomb. Li was deep in thought; his wife could have found his pictures and... no time to think, he needed to carry on. They came to a fork in the tunnel, and Li took the left path without hesitation. They walked on in silence, only occasionally hearing the wind whistling in the tunnel. Suddenly, Li turned to a wall in the corridor and twisted a stone that stuck out of the wall. There was a clicking sound, and a section of the wall shuddered, then it slid to the left, revealing a hidden passage. “How did you know that passage was there?” Chen exclaimed.

“I’ve been here before,” Li replied.

They entered the tunnel, and the wall slid back into place behind them. “So...How did you come to know these tunnels so well?” Chen asked.

“Work,” Li said, his voice unsteady.

“What kind of work?” Chen asked again.

Li fell silent for a while. Then, hesitantly, he said, “I...I was a tomb robber.”

“What?!” Chen yelled.

“I’m not proud of it,” Li said with a tired voice. “Just let me explain.”

“Go on then,” Chen said angrily, “explain yourself.”

“Many years ago,” Li continued, “when I was young and arrogant, I had lost all my money to thieves and robbers while travelling the Silk Road. Just when I had lost all hope, a man reached out to me. He said I had talents for a very special line of work.”

“Tomb robbing,” Chen guessed.

“Yes,” Li replied. “He invited me to be part of his team, he trained me, and honed my skills to be agile and observant. I was living a good life, always on the move, braving traps and making plans with my team. After some time, they had felt like family.”

“We had robbed all the big tombs but one, the Xijin tomb. We had already made plans to enter the tomb. As we explored, I noticed that a wall that everyone had passed looked strange. After some searching, I found a switch, and the wall slid away to reveal a tunnel. Out of curiosity, everyone followed me down the tunnel, and we were amazed to see what was on the other side. A seemingly endless tunnel lined with stalls and shops, a magnificent sight. However, it was already deserted, and the place was already filled with a rotten stench.”

“We split up and scoured the shops and stalls for anything of value, and what we found was shocking. Someone had found manuscripts from ancient Rome, and someone else had found stolen terracotta warriors from China. Even more shocking, I had found another piece of the Rosetta Stone. All these treasures had been lost, and nobody knew where they were, while all the time they were right underneath their feet.”

“We were just celebrating our newfound riches when we heard a click and then a rumbling sound. Before any of us had time to react, toxic mercury flooded into the tunnel. Everyone ran for the exit, but I was the only one to make it out alive. After that, I vowed to stop robbing tombs and live an honest life.”

“I later got married, and life was uneventful until my wife disappeared. She must have found my photos and followed them here. I must find where she went.”

“I hope you won’t tell anyone about this, because doing so would ruin my reputation and no one would ever trust me again.”

“Why would I ever—” Chen started. But then the sound of cracking reached their ears, and a drop of silvery liquid fell at their feet. “Run!” Li shouted, grabbing Chen’s arm and pulling him towards the hidden door. There was another cracking sound, this time louder, and with it, an entire river of mercury burst forth from the wall. Li, despite being old, used his skills as a tomb robber to easily outrun the mercury. Chen, on the other hand, was untrained and fell behind.

Li, seeing that the mercury would catch Chen, quickly spotted a large, loose boulder lodged in the ceiling. Li looked around for a large pebble, and then, taking precise aim, threw it at the boulder’s weak spot. The boulder came tumbling down and hit the ground with a deafening crash, blocking the mercury for a while and allowing Chen to reach the door in time.

Li twisted the stone hurriedly, and the door closed just in time to stop the mercury from going any further.

“Phew!” Chen said, breathing heavily. “That was close!”

“We should never let another soul know about this place; no one else needs to die here. Better leave the Silk Road’s secrets be.” Li replied, panting.

“Good idea,” Chen said.

They took the path back out of the tomb and sighed in relief to see the surface again. Chen took out his radio and called base for a buggy to come pick them up. They arrived back at base, and after telling James they had found nothing, Li promptly said goodbye and headed back home. “Take care!” Chen shouted as he watched Li walk towards the sunset, unsure if they’d meet again.

The Legendary Prisoner

Wellington College International Shanghai, Yang, Madelaine – 13

Run. That was the only thought in his head. For the first time in his life, he was glad he was wearing these clothes. They were torn but light, making it easier to run with. He sprinted towards the border of Kashgar, Xinjiang.

“Hey! Prisoner 104, get back here!”

There was no turning back. He couldn’t go back *there*. After outrunning the guards at the border, he finally saw it.

Freedom.

Ming let out a relieved sigh. The first 20 years in his life were not pleasant. This was end of a beginning. He reached into his pocket. Fortunately, *it* was there. Although he didn’t know what challenges lay ahead, he wasn’t worried. Afterall, his life could only improve from here. Heart-racing and legs shaking, Ming started his journey into the unknown.

He quickly arrived to a stop. Ming glanced up – it was a mountain range. The mountains towered over him and extended to the clouds; a wall blocking his freedom. Before he could react, something even more astonishing distracted him. A colourful, glowing ball of light blinded his eyes. Slowly, a girl emerged. Ming gaped in disbelief. He took a step backwards.

“Sorry for scaring you. I’m Jennie and I’ll say this: I’m a time-traveler,” the girl casually stated.

“What?”

“You don’t believe me, do you?”

“No.” However, he had to admit that there were many unusual things about her. She looked foreign, wore abnormal and appeared out of nowhere. Most strange of all, she was glowing. The moon showed off its beauty in the night sky, yet she somehow outshone it. Was that part of being a time-traveler or an illusion?

“I’ll prove it!” she exclaimed, as she pulled out a purple bag. Suddenly, bottles of neon blue substances flowed out. Ming rubbed his eyes. It was real. According to Jennie, they were food and water. Ming forced the unappetizing substance down his throat after seeing that it wasn’t poisonous.

“Alright, let’s go!” exclaimed Jennie.

“Why should I go with you?”

“Higher chance of surviving.”

“Fine. I’m Ming.”

Jennie pointed to the mountains. “These are the Pamir mountains, with an average height of 4200 meters, with long, cold winters and short, dry summers...”

“Hey!” Ming shouted, snapping her out of her monologue.

“Anyway, wear these.”

Ming gave her a concerned look.

“I’m literally wearing the same thing!”

“Your face looks like a tomato.”

“Shut up!” Jennie shrieked, flustered.

Somehow, Ming felt warm inside.

As Ming took a step, he was sent flying. He almost fell, overwhelmed by the sudden speed.

“Each step with these shoes equals 100 normal steps,” Jennie explained.

He improved at controlling his steps, which allowed him to enjoy the journey. The view was breath-taking. Delicate sheets of snow decorated the mountains’ peaks with intricate hats. Ahead of him were endless mountains. It wasn’t intimidating anymore; it was a pathway leading to new possibilities. Best of all, he had Jennie beside him – his first ever ‘friend’ in many years.

“I’m exhausted,” Ming complained.

Jennie pulled out another peculiar item from her bag and fiddled with the buttons on it. A rectangle-shaped building extended from the ground. They trailed into the house and he scanned his surroundings. There were all sorts of machinery and furniture, all polished white. It looked simply depressing. Out of the corner of his eye, he spotted a tiny open window.

“What’s that window for?”

“Fresh air; you’ll suffocate otherwise.”

“Oh,” Ming cringed at his stupidity. He proceeded to fall asleep on the floor before Jennie could tell him that there was a bed.

The next morning, Ming woke up, restored with energy. What greeted him outside was the fiery sun naughtily peeking over the horizon. He ran in the breeze. Birds soared in the sky with their almighty wings. Ming was always envious of them; they were never barricaded by any walls, or limitations.

“What are you doing outside, Ming?” A bright voice interrupted his thoughts.

“Just the sunrise.”

Jennie turned her head and was immediately mesmerized by the bold yet beautiful light.

“I’ve never seen a sunrise this stunning before,” Jennie commented, her gaze fixed on the golden beam.

“The future is missing a lot...”

“Everything’s pathetic there.” There was melancholy in her eyes. “It’s why I came here – I had to experience the past, just once.” Ming and Jennie sat together, both immersed in the sight.

“Also, is it a coincidence that we met?”

“Top secret!”

She can only be serious for one minute, thought Ming.

After that, they decided to begin their new day’s journey. Many days passed. It was repetitive, but never boring.

One night, Jennie was startled by noises outside.

Bang! Clank! In a wave of panic, she woke Ming up.

“There’s bandits trying to attack us! Look at the security cameras. I can’t use weapons in front of large numbers of people here. There will be an error.”

Ming shut himself from the world. With Jennie's frantic shrieking, and the bandits' constant threatening, he couldn't think. *We can't just leave the house; it has too many futuristic objects and might cause an error. We can't fight them off either...* Time was ticking.

"If an error happens, I might die! We can't go out either," Jennie cried. The lightbulb in Ming's brain flickered.

"Ways out... how about the open window?"

"It's too small for us."

"Who said it was for us?"

Ming calmly strolled over to the window and demanded the bandits to come to the window. As expected, they hastily followed his orders, impatient for the prize. Instead, he dropped a rock onto a bandit's head. The others stood in shock.

"Dark magic!? We need to leave!" They carried their comrade and fled.

"Ming, that was amazing!"

"I guess," Ming turned away, embarrassed.

Jennie chuckled. "Tomato!"

"I guess we're even."

Winter arrived in the Pamir Mountains. Snow was building up, making it increasingly difficult to walk. Unfortunately, their shoes didn't work in the snow. And the worst thing was that winters last for 5 months. They had to avoid steep sides and constantly be on watch for aggressive blizzards. It was awful.

Suddenly, the ground rumbled, like a giant waking up after years of sleep.

"Ming, RUN!" Jennie screamed her lungs out. Ming ran, ignoring the pain in his legs. But it was too late. The avalanche came at him like a mighty beast. He still didn't give up, but he realized he was doomed. His body trembled uncontrollably. Normally, he could keep his composure in situations. This time, he was terrified.

Terrified.

Jennie, hands shaking, pulled out everything in her bag. *Yes, a rope!* She threw one end of towards Ming. She wouldn't forgive herself if he died. He desperately clung onto the strand of hope. *I believe in you, Jennie.* With all her strength, she yanked the rope, just in time. He was safe.

They exchanged glances, then let out a sigh of relief.

"Were you scared?" Jennie teased.

"No." Neither of them wanted to admit that their heart almost jumped out of their body.

Eventually, each day blended into the other. It just droned on and on and on. Until – the mountains abruptly ended. They stepped onto the ground; it was strange yet familiar.

Ming collapsed on the ground in triumph. However, Jennie had a bittersweet smile on her face.

"What's wrong?"

"I'm sorry. The truth is, I can only stay here for one more day." Those words lingered in the air.

"Then we can't waste time here! Let's go." Ming dragged the surprised Jennie along.

They were in Balkh, Afghanistan. Ming couldn't contain his excitement in exploring this new beginning. He was gonna make the last day with Jennie meaningful.

“It’s time,” Ming carefully took out the box in his pocket. “My parents left me this.” He opened it, just to find — a flawless piece of silk.

Soon, people were lining up just to touch the piece of silk, all amazed at how smooth the texture felt and how elegant it looked. Everyone gathered around them, all wanting to trade.

Trade? Ming thought. *That sounds like a good idea...* He was flabbergasted at how different the people and culture were here compared to China. It seemed as if they lived in separate worlds, both unaware of the other.

“It’ll be a trading route through central Asia. Everything can be traded, with the goal of connecting countries together. I’ll name it – the Silk Road.” The people of Balkh cheered in agreement.

Hereby the Silk Road was created.

Wanting to enjoy the last moments with Jennie, Ming grabbed her arm and set off; they sprinted through markets, houses, and churches. That dawn, the sun shone as bright as ever.

“Jennie, thank you for everything.”

“I could say the same for you, Ming.”

“Promise to never forget, okay?”

“Promise.” Jennie suddenly hugged him. Ming hesitated, then hugged her back.

“See you next time.”

“Hehe, see you next time!” Jennie grinned, but tears rolled down her cheeks.

In the blink of an eye, she disappeared.

A Cat Named Cloud

Yew Wah International Education School of Yantai, Cui, Yanyi Mia – 11

In the morning, a cat named Cloud awoke. Its fur was soft as cotton, like a tiny snowball, with jet-black glossy eyes and a damp pink nose. It couldn't find its owner, only catching the faint tea aroma from his cup drifting in the air. Following the scent, it darted out of the house and arrived at the ancient Silk Road.

Cloud saw vibrant silk scarves on wooden stands, sweet, dried dates in bamboo baskets, and camels with big packs trudging by, their silver bells jingling. Peddlers in colorful clothes called out to sell their goods, and folks sat sipping sweet fruit tea on small stools.

After walking a while, Cloud's stomach rumbled loudly. It spied sweet rice cakes at a stall, and the lovely smell made it drool. It snatched one, but the stall keeper caught it and locked it in a wicker cage. Terrified, Cloud huddled in the corner, letting out faint meows.

Just then, a brown spotted cat leaped onto the cage and murmured, "Don't be afraid!" It pried open the door with its sharp paws and saved Cloud, saying it had seen Cloud's owner searching the road, and told it to dash forward quickly.

From afar, Cloud saw its owner standing under a massive old tree, looking anxious. It scurried over, and the owner lifted it up at once, stroking its head gently: "Finally found you!" Beneath the rosy sunset glow, Cloud nuzzled the owner's hand, feeling utterly joyful and warm. The Silk Road bells tinkled softly, ending its little adventure sweetly.

Tom and Jerry's Wild Silk Road Adventure in 2027

Yew Wah International Education School of Yantai, Dong, Yilin Elsa – 11

In 9178, the Silk Road was as chaotic as a busy beehive—all thanks to Tom and Jerry! Tom, a clumsy cat with big merchant dreams, could barely tell soft silk from a scratchy dish towel. Jerry, his tiny mouse buddy, cared more about stashing sweet dates than helping with trades. Their plan? Sell the fanciest silk ever to Western kings, a grand conclusion they were determined to see through!

They set off with Doughnut, a chubby camel with fur like warm toast that loved pastries more than walking. Tom wore a silk robe as bright as a rainbow, strutting and shouting, “Make way for the greatest merchant!” Jerry stuffed dates in his cheeks like a chipmunk, eyes sparkling with mischief as he plotted tiny pranks along the way.

At a sun-drenched oasis, Tom tried to impress nomads with his silk but tripped over Doughnut's legs. The fabric flew into a camel's mouth—it chewed it like cotton candy and burped like thunder! Nomads laughed hard, offering to trade for his funny show instead of gold, and Tom huffed while Jerry snickered at the messy mix-up. Next, they reached a bustling spice market. A grumpy seller accused Tom's silk of having sand stuck in its threads. Jerry tried to help but knocked over a sack of fiery chili powder, which billowed like a red cloud. Everyone sneezed like elephants, and they bolted—leaving Doughnut to wander off chasing a colorful butterfly fluttering near a pile of cinnamon sticks. Tom and Jerry scrambled to find their pastry-loving camel, weaving through spice stalls and dodging sneezing merchants as they went.

When they finally found Doughnut and trudged into the Western kingdom, their silk was tattered like old rags, stained with chili powder and dotted with sand. But the kind king loved their silly tales of the Silk Road chaos—from the camel that ate silk to the chili powder storm—and gave them clinking gold for their entertaining adventure. Watching the sunset, which spilled over the desert like honey and rose petals, they smiled. This messy, fun journey was sweeter than any smooth, successful silk trade could ever be, and Doughnut got a mountain of buttery pastries as a reward for sticking with his chaotic companions. Tom learned that laughter is worth more than gold, Jerry had a lifetime of date stashes, and Doughnut proved that a camel's love for pastries (and butterflies) can lead to the most unforgettable adventures.

Aliens Invade

Yew Wah International Education School of Yantai, Hsu, Ting Yu Teddy – 12

In the year 2100, November 13 the China National Space Administration saw there was a special signal in the space then they try to connect with that special signal. When they connect with the special signal The content inside was a message of alien they said: if you connect with this message, we well come to destroy the earth”. Then on the radar all the countries saw there was many spaceships flying to earth. When all the country saw there was a spaceship, they come together to think the solution they first call the CCTV to tell people to buy some goods.

In China next to the Silk Road there was a man and a dog name Jimibanana and Donk they saw the new of the spaceship then they go on to the Silk Road to buy some food when they go to the first shop they saw there was a black button then Jimibanana buy it and go home when they lock the door they press the button and the bottom turned into a big door and emitted the green light.

Then Jimibanana go into the door and go to a depopulated zone then there was a UFO fall on to the ground and the ufo door was open then Jimibanana go into the UFO in the UFO there was a alien the alien said: I can help you but you need to fix our UFO” Jimibanana said: yes” then alien give Jimibanana a laser gun to save the earth and alien said: my gun is bater then the bad alien so you can destroy the alien and save the earth the Jimibanana go back to the earth.

One day the bad alien come to destroy the earth and Jimibanana get the laser gun and go to destroy the bad alien when Jimibanana save the earth and help the good alien to fix the spaceship then Jimibanana tern to be a Hero of the earth.

The End

Invasion

Yew Wah International Education School of Yantai, Hugo, Erhard – 12

One day, thousands and thousands of aliens gathered together in the world hall, the planet of Gobi all the aliens were wondering why the king was calling them.

The king said it in intriguing way you might be wondering why you're here it is because I've got it some of the best aliens in the world to take over the most resourceful planet in the world called earth and I scouted 2000 and thousands of aliens to take over this planet and your leader being my nine-year-old son Timmy so then they all got geared up to take over earth they gathered up laser, guns, guns, swords, and shields and they all were so serious. They were the most durable armour in the galaxy. The aliens were super scared. They thought if the planet was the most resourceful in the galaxy, they would be super strong.

All the vulgar aliens were told they would take over at 12 o'clock they took off in the ship, but halfway through they all remembered that they forgot their gear everyone panicked. They had to go back, get their gear and then fly back to earth the next day.

So they all headed back to the planet Doobie. The next day they redid everything they put all the gear on the ship and then they landed on they landed on the Silk Road the little king called to me told them to land right on the Silk Road. Everyone was scared of the big alien ship to me shouted where is your most powerful city?

A merchant nervously replied Xi'an the city is north. All the aliens were confused. Timmy said what does north mean the guy pointed in the direction and Timmy without a doubt killed the merchant on the spot because on their planet pointing somewhere is like doing the middle finger.

Then one of the aliens came to Timmy and said hey my king and their country pointing similar means that direction that to me understood so the aliens headed north it wasn't too hard to find the city of course Xi'an is stuck out like a sore thumb. It was the biggest city in the world told aliens to land right in front of the gate of the city because he was not scared of Xi'an When they landed, the archers were ready to fire, and the soldiers looked really intense and the threw a big speaker, the king of Xi'an said get out of here at once or we will have a catastrophic war, but the little team did not care. All he wanted was war so the aliens came out of the spaceship and charged at the other army. The aliens were expecting a massive fight, but the fight only lasted five minutes, the king of Xi'an was in disbelief. All the soldiers died. He could see the little king and all the aliens laughing.

Then day in prison, the king of Xi'an they can use a secret watch and call the elder guardian when the elder guardian heard what the King was saying so he broke the king out of prison, revive the entire army, and when Timmy saw this, he was furious, so he told his aliens to have another battle with them and in the end the city of Xi'an won and killed all the aliens, and then all that was left of the alien army was the little king and the elder guardian banished to me to the underworld never be seen again.

Golden Silk's Journey Along the Silk Road

Yew Wah International Education School of Yantai, Song, Jing Elsa – 11

On the ancient Silk Road, there were things that did not look quite right—things that were neither human nor animal came!

“Golden silk, green silk—come and see!” a girl sitting at the table called out. “Amelia, come help me!” The voice belonged to Amelia’s older sister, Victoria. As soon as Amelia left the table stacked high with silk fabrics, the surface began to tremble. Whoosh! The golden silk swirled and transformed into a human figure—and this was our main character, Valentina!

Many goods along the Silk Road had taken on human form, and Valentina was one of them. Woven from an ancient bolt of golden silk, she always dressed in gowns of gold and green silk. Her most striking feature was the shimmering golden ornaments adorning her body. She had three sisters: Liliana, Cornelia, and Adriana. Like Valentina, Cornelia and Adriana were also silk spirits—but Liliana was different, for she had been born from a piece of exquisite jade. All these enchanted beings from the Silk Road got to know each other and soon became the best of friends.

One year after they first met, the group gathered in the Gobi Desert to hold a secret celebration. “I’m so grateful to have met all of you,” Valentina thought, her heart filled with joy. “We’re as close as a family!” “You guys are the best friends anyone could ask for...” Isabella began, only to be cut off by a sharp cry. “Wait! Look over there!” Seraphina shouted, pointing excitedly. “Seraphina, that’s rude to interrupt!” someone chided—but she paid no mind. “Hurry, look at that!” she insisted. There, stretching out before them, was the magnificent Silk Road itself! “I’ve heard of this place!” Isabella exclaimed, her eyes shining with excitement. “It’s the great trade route that connects Asia to Europe!” “Why don’t we go explore it?” Valentina suggested. “It would be the perfect way to celebrate our friendship!”

So they set off along the Silk Road and soon encountered humans. The enchanted beings had never seen creatures like themselves before, but they were eager to learn about these new strangers—and the humans were equally curious about them.

Before long, the friends noticed that the human merchants often struggled with their trades. An idea sparked in Valentina’s mind. “What if we help them become better traders?” she proposed. “That’s an amazing idea, V!” Seraphina agreed, then hesitated. “But won’t they be afraid of us?” Valentina smiled confidently. “There’s only one way to find out—let’s give it a try!”

And so, the silk spirits and the jade spirit began to teach the human merchants smarter ways to trade. To their delight, the humans were not afraid of them at all—in fact, they welcomed their help with open arms. Before long, the enchanted friends were trading alongside the humans, and together, they made the ancient Silk Road more prosperous and vibrant than ever before.

In the end, this tale teaches us a timeless truth: when humans and beings of different kinds live in harmony and help one another, the world becomes a far better place for everyone.

Silk Road Adventure

Yew Wah International Education School of Yantai, Wang, Hongzun Damon – 11

During the Han dynasty, a small group of merchants set out along the Silk Road, but they mysteriously disappeared. Someone said that a group of robbers attacked them. Some older people says that it was an earthquake. Somehow, the truth of it no one knows. But the only thing we understand is that the absolute truth extends far beyond what we see with the eye.

The weird event happened once again in the winter of 1953. This time, only one person came back. His steps were staggering, his eyes were vacant as if the soul had been drawn from its vessel.

His face was death-pale, like a corpse. And the last thing he said was: "The story is true, stop finding the truth." Suddenly, his eyes became as red as blood : "Because one day I will lead my herd to revenge. The time that the blood moon ascends, the day your fall begins."

The times flashed forward to 1998, and the world had already forgotten that dangerous warning. Everyone was happy again, and life continued. However, there was still an adventure group which called "UNSTOPPABLE", they had an idea that was definitely crazy. Yes, they were going to find the final revelation lies, which is not in light but in the shadow we all refuse to see. They were going to unveil the truth that had been hidden for so many years.

However, on the night they left, a blood moon ascended. To save humanity, they must go on this trip. On the Silk Road, the air was dry, and the weather was scorching, and every piece of land they stepped on was full of weirdness. The team borrowed a small caravan and continued their journey. The time become midday, but the long, dry sandy path still seemed to have no end. Unfortunately, their cars were running low on fuel, and the water supply was also running out. They wanted to give up. Suddenly, a rustling sound broke the wonder of them. They looked at it. As quick as a flash, a terrifying monster hopped out. Every member was shocked. The terrible beast had a pair of red eyes, it has dirty brown fur all over it, and its paws were as big as a plate with light glinting on them like steel. Suddenly, they felt a tremendous shake. After a loud crash, they all fell into a bottomless cave. "They are falling..." After 10 seconds, they were still falling. Finally, they grounded with a wave of wailing; some of them had broken their arm, some of them had cracked a rib. Fortunately, all of them survived. They got up with difficulty, the only thing they could saw is endless darkness, and they felt wet and suffocated. One of them lit up the flashlight.

They were in a long cave full of darkness and dead bodies, and an awful smell rushed into their noses. However, the god didn't give them time to think. The water flooded in in a flash, and within a minute, the water was almost reaching their chest! Quickly, they discovered a secret keyhole, but all of them thought it was too late. There for, at the last second, one of the members used his finger to charge the key into the hole. In a second, all of the water flowed away, and a heavy, thick stone wall slowly opened.

The adventure group walked in curiously. Suddenly, a majestic chamber appeared in their sight. The chamber was made of stones and magic sand. In the middle of it, there was a 14-meter-high base, above it, there was a wooden box with a light ring surrounding it, inside was the King Yi. They had found the King's Yi tomb! History says that King Yi was the man who fought back against the monster invasion and suppressed those terrifying monsters. But now he's dead. So the power faded, and the monsters came out again! The only way to make the power take effect again was to let the chosen one sacrifice themselves to open the power again, immediately, the man in the team called "SKY" climbs onto the stone base and gets into the tomb. At this moment, "SKY" was standing brilliantly. He's looking like a giant, with a dazzling beam of light. The wooden box exploded! Everyone in the team shed a shiny tear; suddenly, thousands of souls came out, including "SKY". They were all the chosen ones; they had all sacrificed themselves for the whole of humanity.

Together, they held their hands tightly together. In a flash, a dazzling beam of light burst out. The power is opened, and King Yi came out of the box. He looks like a lion that has been asleep for a long time, suddenly awakens, and opens its eyes. He firmly pushed his sword into the turn table and spoke a magic sentence, sonorous and forceful.

Within a lamenting scream, all of the monsters were being suppressed, and every member of the team cheered and hugged. Fear is a human instinct, but courage is the anthem of humanity.

After a few days of rest, the team was ready to go home. They don't know who will be the next "the chosen one." They also don't know how the future will go. Maybe after a few years, the power will fade again? Who knows? But that bravery, fearlessness, and selflessness of a hero will last forever. When the time comes that quiet camel bells once again echo across the sky above the Silk Road, it will be the sign of a new seed of life quietly sprouting.

The Escape of Zidane

Yew Wah International Education School of Yantai, Zhang, Tianen Thomas – 11

Zidáne is 101 years old now, he was a great football player in France.

In 2050, Zidáne's hair had turned gray and his knees ached when he walked. Fearing the end of his life, he heard tales of a long-live potion hidden along the Silk Road—so he packed a leather bag with bread, water, and a tattered map, then set off on the ancient trade route to the Silk Road.

The journey was tough: the temperature was as hot as an oven, he crossed scorching deserts and winding mountain paths, meeting merchants and travelers who trade from China to Europe and other countries and warned him of bandits and strange forts. One evening, as he searched for a place to camp, he spotted a stone jail tucked between two high hills. Curious if it held clues about the potion, he crept closer—only to be seized by guards in rough uniforms. They threw him into a damp cell with cold stone walls and a tiny, barred window. Inside the room it was as cold as the winter breeze.

That night, the jailer brought him a meager meal: hard bread, a sip of water, and a small iron spoon. As he ate, Zidáne stared at the spoon—rusted but sturdy. An idea sparked: he could dig his way out. Every night, when the guards snored loudly in the corridor, he knelt by the wall and chipped at the mortar between the stones. His fingers grew sore and bled like pasta, but he kept going, hiding the loosened stones under his straw mattress.

On the fourth night, the hole was finally big enough. Zidáne waited until the moon was hidden by clouds, then squeezed through the gap—scraping his arms on the rough stone. He ran silently past the sleeping guards and they sleep like koalas, into the dark night. The spoon still clutched in his hand, he headed back to the Silk Road, determined to keep searching for the potion that would let him live longer.

Coco's Silk Secret

Yew Wah International Education School of Yantai, Zhang, Xinyue Emily – 12

One crisp Saturday morning, Coco the calico cat padded up the creaky stairs to her family's attic. After laying in her cozy bed and playing with her favorite ball of yarn, she decided it was just plain boring and desperately wanted a brand new adventure. Sunlight slanted through the dusty window, making motes of dust dance in the air, and the room smelled like old books and grandma's lavender sachets. Curious as ever, Coco nudged a wooden chest tucked under a pile of quilts with her warm pink nose—and the lid popped open with a crack.

Inside, a silk scarf glinted like a dazzling rainbow. Its fabric was softer than clouds, printed with bright red lotus flowers and twisting green vines. Coco stretched a paw to feel the softness of the scarf, and the silk slid through her claws like naughty water. She let out a tiny "mrow!" and climbed into the chest, curling up with the scarf draped over her back. As she closed her eyes, she felt like she was silently floating away!

Suddenly, Coco imagined she was in a tiny village by a wide, pristine lake. She saw women in bright blue aprons sitting at wooden looms, their hands moving faster than lightning as they wove silk thread into pretty patterns. Lotus flowers bloomed in the river, and she could smell their sweet scent in the air. She even heard the click-clack of the looms and the gurgle of the river water—it didn't feel surreal at all!

When her mom called from downstairs, Coco blinked dreamily and was back in the attic a few seconds later. She hopped out of the chest, the silk scarf still tangled around her paw, and trotted excitedly down the stairs. Mom laughed when she saw Coco's new treasure, then sat her down and said, "That's Grandma's silk scarf from her trip to China—those lotus flowers are her favorite!"

That night, Grandma came over and told Coco (and the whole family) all about the silk village. She said she was fascinated when she learned that the weavers dyed the thread with real flower petals to make the bright colors. Those silk scarves took time and patience, she said. Coco curled up on her grandma's lap, the treasured scarf wrapped around her, and purred so loudly the whole room rumbled.

To Coco, that silk scarf wasn't just a piece of useless fabric. It was a magical key that led her on an amazing adventure—one that turned a boring Saturday morning into the most unforgettable memory of her life.