

Fiction

Group 4



Glass Beads

Canadian International School, Boon, Yi Ching Hilary – 15

"Fei Fei!" My body jolted as I heard my name called, but my shoulders eased with the scent of Chinese herbs and worn cloth. My father was at the front door, his eyes crinkling at the side. He flashed me his mischievous grin.

"Baba!" I giggled and ran as fast as my little legs could carry me across the wooden floorboards. He grunted in amusement as he lifted me. Before he opened his mouth, my wandering eyes fixated on the red jewel tucked in his front pocket. I wiggled up and down. Was he going to give it to me? I tried to put it into words, but it just came out in claps of delight.

"Eager Fei-Fei," He chuckled and reached into his worn cotton robes. But as he brought it out, his smile dropped. My warbles subsided, and I poked him once, twice. My eyebrows furrowed. I began to shake him.

"Baba?" I asked. No response. I tried to grab his face with my little hands, but I was met with an unfamiliar glassy eye that sent chills down my spine. A small whimper escaped my lips.

"Baba!" I cried out as hot tears trickled down my cheeks. I knew something was wrong now. His face crumbled into tiny particles of sand. His body followed. My small body hit the floor as the wind swept up his remains. The only thing left was the shimmering red gem. Still glistening, still—

My hands reached out to grab him, but they were only met with the soft fabric of my quilt. The straw pierced through the mattress and into my skin. My panicked breaths turned into sighs of relief. The gentle sunlight reflected off the wooden beams that ran across my ceiling.

"Just a nightmare," I muttered to myself, but the haunting image of the red jewel lingered in my mind. I rubbed my head in frustration, wondering where I'd seen that object before. I pulled open my drawer, pushing aside my embroidery patches, pins, and string until my hands closed around a scrappy wooden box. I ran my fingers over the metal clasp, then unfastened the case. Transported back in time, my eyes skimmed over the assortment of items my father had gifted me, but I was only looking for one.

"There it is," I hummed, cupping a handful of knotted tiny red beads.

"They're magic beads," my father had said as he placed them into my tiny palms. "They'll protect you from any danger."

A smile reached my lips, but it didn't ease the doubtful voice in my head. My hands tightened around the red beads, and for a split second, they caught the morning light. The beads looked sparkling, as if—I blinked again, and the shimmer disappeared. "It was just the light," I reassured myself, but the image of the mysterious ruby in my dream flickered like a burning candlelight.

My thoughts followed me out to the Yuanzi, where the pungent smell of rotting cabbage filled my nostrils. Long strips of silk hung from bamboo poles stretched across the roof eaves, providing shade from the scorching sun. My mother was hunched over by the well, her arms stained blue from the rough dyes. The quiet slosh of the water splashing against the wet silk was a constant in my childhood, grounding me years later. As I approached her, she whipped around like a startled cat.

"Fei, watch your step," She chided, pushing herself up to her feet. When she faced me, my gaze quickly fell to the discolouration under her eyes and the harsh lines around her forehead that were more prominent than ever.

"Help me get more water from the well." She ordered in the same monotone voice that hardened the walls she built around her. The walls that her own daughter couldn't breach.

"I was just..—" My voice trailed when I saw the stern look on her face. "Yes, Mama."

Bucket in hand, I stomped off to the well. As I scooped up the water, my dream still lingering in my mind, I weighed my chances of getting a proper answer from my mother. I snuck a glance at Mama to gauge her mood. No cursing under her breath. A tiny pang of hope fluttered in my stomach, quietly urging me to ask. I placed the pail down on the floor, leaning over her shoulder. She moved her arm to cover the bowl as she continued her meticulous work, barely acknowledging me.

“Mama,” I nudged her.

“Hm?” She stopped wringing out the pieces of cloth.

“Did...” I hesitated, “Did Baba leave anything for me before he...”

Her jaw tensed as if the words “Baba” were venomous. My insides clamped with anticipation. “What are you expecting, Carnelians?” she said sharply, a slight tremor in her voice. Regret flashed on her face as if she was caught stealing.

“Hey, didn’t I ask you to fill this bucket?” She snapped, roughly pushing the half-filled bucket towards me. My hands tightened around the rim; the wall between us felt taller than ever. I swallowed. I thought about the countless times I asked about Baba without receiving a proper response. I felt like my unbreakable mother was made of glass, and I was the hammer knocking at her.

Once I finished my task, I ran into my room, closing the geshan behind me. My box of mementoes was still on my bed, the trinkets spilling out on the mattress. My gaze naturally fell upon the red string of beads from earlier, my fingertips brushing over the smooth surface.

My mother’s voice rang in my ears. Carnelians, she said. How specific.

“Ah!” I gasped, fumbling with the charm.

The beads slipped between my fingers. I winced quietly, bracing to hear a cracking sound. Instead, the bead rolled onto the floor with a small click. I picked them up carefully, checking for damage. Not a scratch. I wiped a drop of sweat off my forehead, noticing the contrast between my warm hands and the icy cold beads. I had left them out in the sun when I rushed off to the courtyard. A wild, unbelievable thought crossed my mind.

As a test, I knelt on the floor, searching for any trace of— There it was. A wisp of white striped across the fiery surface of the largest bead, an intricate pattern that spoke of careful craftsmanship that didn’t exist in the painted Liu li beads sold in the markets. Carnelians. I couldn’t help but let out a laugh—a laugh of pure, unbridled disbelief as I stared at my most expensive asset. This string of treasure cost as much as a thousand grains of silver. It would be impossible for my father to acquire such beads. Unless...

My trembling hands pushed open the geshan. The light from my oil lamp illuminated the Erfang. I stifled my coughs with my fists as dust particles flew up my nose. I shuffled across the room, eyes searching. If those beads were really authentic, who knew how many other treasures my father might have hidden? The weight of this revelation was right in the red beads in my hand. I wasn’t just the daughter of a widow anymore. I could be somebody with this amount of— Clack. I froze. In the corner of my eye, I noticed a faint glimmer stemming from a dilapidated wooden box.

Found it. I grinned, already picturing myself jumping into a pile of riches. I wrinkled my nose in surprise. It reeked of vinegar.

That sense of disgust vanished when I pulled up the heavy lid. Hundreds of gems captured the light from my oil lamp, glinting brilliantly in the dark room. Beneath the gems were folded bolts of cloth and unlabeled bottles. I frowned and felt the fabric’s rough, sandpaper-like texture. Residue powder stuck to my fingertips. Rice paste, not silk. I shook those thoughts of doubt away when I smiled proudly at the blood red gems that could only be rubies. I scooped a handful of the treasure in my palms, only for my smile to fade instantly. They looked enticing in the light, but they felt hollow in my hands.

I held a single thumb-sized ruby over the floorboards, praying to hear the thud of a genuine diamond. I let go, and it shattered on the ground. My fist clenched around the rest of the lies in my hand, the sting of my false hope piercing my heart. I was now elbows deep into the box in a desperate search to find something, anything that could prove that this crate had something for me, for my family. My hand closed in on a cold, sticky square. The base oozed out onto my fingers like wet blood. It was a seal engraved with a fierce tiger—Baba's stamp of approval.

Realisation like a punch to the gut. He was selling fake goods. My father was a fraud. My mind flashed back to the times Mama turned away whenever I asked about him, and it all clicked. My stomach lurched from the smell, forcing bile up my throat before I quickly swallowed. It was the same smell of the fabric that I helped her hang up to dry countless times. She was in on it, too. I looked at my imprinted fingers and thought I looked just like her. Branded as a crook by the dyes that stain her coarse skin. The badge was still in my hand when a growing shadow plagued over me. I didn't dare to move an itch. I heard breathing. I didn't have to turn around.

"Did you find what you were looking for, Fei?"

I didn't see her indifferent expression. The unbreakable glass that was Mama had shattered like the "rubies" on the ground. Her mouth hung open in pure shock.

"I found more than what I was looking for," I snarled, meeting her eyes with pure heat. The blood ran hot in my veins, blurring my vision. I pushed myself up with my imprinted hands, leaving red marks on the floor.

Mama visibly flinched, but schooled her expression. "We're in debt, Fei," She sighed, the raw honesty in her voice catching me off guard. "Baba was just trying to get us out. We are desperate."

"But at what cost?" My voice quivered. My pulse thrummed in my ears, drowning out every justification she threw at me. "At the cost of getting caught?" I pictured my mother and me, slaving away at the border mines under the baking sun until our backs ached.

Mama didn't even try to soothe my worries. "We're barely staying afloat," Mama speaks up again, the crack in her voice evident as she says the words we both didn't want to acknowledge. "I don't know what to do." The warm glow of the oil lamp deepened the pinched look on her face. A new expression took over her face. The wall was dropped, and rather than satisfaction, I felt unsettled. She looked so lost.

"I'll pay them off." There was something new in my voice, a steely resolve that didn't sound like mine. My mother didn't protest, but rather looked to me as a child might, with desperate relief. You shouldn't make promises you can't keep, but I knew I had to at least try.

I sat without protest as she gestured me closer. Her nimble hands bound my hair. The hemp cord dug into my scalp, but I bit my lip in silence. When she finished, she draped a coarse linen tunic across my shoulders, creating the illusion of a broad figure that didn't belong to me. Mama took a step back, her breath hitching as she looked at her handiwork. The punishing hairstyle stripped the warmth from my face and sharpened my cheekbones. I didn't look like Fei anymore, but a ruthless son of my father.

"Go to the main road and find the man with the grey mule. He'll take you to the Tianjin city walls. The fee is three coins. Don't let him negotiate." Mama instructed me, handing me a dai zi—my father's old one. "The Bronze Tally and money are inside. Do not lose the Tally. Without it, you are only a wanderer."

I nodded, every word I wanted to tell her throughout my childhood clotting in my chest. Our eyes met, and for once, we shared a common understanding. Neither of us knew how to say goodbye without collapsing, so I turned my head before my last shred of bravery withered.

The gritty sand entered my bu xie as I approached the man my mother had instructed me to meet. His face was stoic but honest enough for me to toss over my coins and hop into the back of the caravan. I shifted into a corner that smelled of dry earth. Eventually, my exhaustion outweighed my worries as I fell asleep to the faint clip-clop of the mule's steps.

I didn't wake from a voice, but from the rapid lurching of the cart once it halted. "End of the line, boy," the man's raspy voice rumbled, kicking open the wooden slat of the tailboard. My joints groaned as I rolled to my side, placing my feet on the cobblestone floors. Maybe my straw bed back home hadn't been so bad. As the mule trotted off into the distance, I was left to take in the buzzing trading hub that was Tianjin.

Endless buildings loomed over the city, swallowing me alive. The river's stench reminded me of the acidic dyes my mother had worked with. I made my way to a teahouse after being tipped off by a young merchant. It was where the high-level couriers discussed trades. The man inspected my bronze tally, his eyes darting from the cold metal back to my face.

Please, please work. I begged silently, clenching my fists shut as I fought to continue meeting the man's unblinking stare.

My body loosened in solace when he opened the door for me to enter. I scanned the premises, pausing when I saw a group of chortling men. I noticed jade wrapped around their bulging wrists. They clacked together as the men roared with laughter, an expensive sound that didn't exist in my hometown.

I sat myself as close to them as possible, ordering a cup of tea to avoid drawing suspicion. I was stuck there for hours, stirring the tea for the hundredth time. My ears strained, trying to pick up anything related to Baba, but I only heard hisses of complaints about the rising price of jewels. I considered finding another place to eavesdrop until my head whipped around at a particular word. Carnelian.

"My buyer in the South is desperate," one of the men spat, the cuffs of his midnight-blue pao getting stained by the spittle on the table. "I'm losing a fortune every day, and these fools are conveniently out of the supply!"

"At this rate, you might have to pay five times the price for authentic carnelian. It's madness," the other man added, shaking his head in disapproval.

I held the string of cold beads in my hand. I chose to leave the past behind.

"Five times the price, you say?" The three men turned around, eyes narrowed. I knew they were looking at my dirty tunic and youthful face, but I kept my head high.

I strode over and laid the beads on their table. The man in midnight-blue attire sneered and pulled out a hefty silver pouch. "Take it or leave it."

I turned for the door, praying that his greed would outweigh his pride. I was five paces away when I heard a voice.

"Triple! I'll triple it," the man barked. "Sit down, boy."

"Not enough. Quadruple it." I shot back, playing my father's game one last time.

The waiters stopped serving tea.

The man grunted and pulled out four more pouches. My body flooded with adrenaline. I looked around the room and realised that the people here didn't look at me like I was a pariah. Handing over the beads felt like I was losing a limb, but when I dumped the silver into my dai zi, pride flushed my cheeks.

The rancid air hit me, but I didn't mind. I asked a few passersby for directions as I rushed to the nearest Minxinju. I opened the doors, sliding a pouch of silver across the table. "To the Weaver's District in Cangzhou, door 3."

The clerk raised his eyebrows in surprise. "No letter?" he asked as he grabbed a heavy brass seal.

"Just write that she should keep the kettle hot."

There was an echoing thud as he sealed the letter. The debt was paid. I stepped into Tianjin with silver at my hip, nothing left to tie me to the past.

Tale of the Traveller

Carmel School – Elsa High School, Fan, Sophia – 15

“We are here!”

The familiar caravanserai stood in front of me. The khaki, sun-bleached architecture unfolded its mouth to swallow my exhausted fellow travelers who had gone through a long day of trudging in the merciless Taklamakan Desert. The air was infused with raised dust, now with the cacophony of metal clash, the raised volume of humans, and the grunt of camels like me.

It was my sixth time stopping at this caravanserai, if my worn memory still works. And every time we were here, I was with Wei, the man who was capable of leading caravans through the tough journey and had crossed the sea of death more times than I have. I was his most trusted carrier, as in the past decades, my back had moved the heaviest loads, my legs walked straight the longest days, and my body remained powerful with the least water. I was once the strongest camel most traders had ever encountered.

Wei finished his chitchat with the caravanserai people, smiled at them, and shook their hands like he used to do. He returned to me and stroked my coat, led me past the busy crowds offloading goods to be traded in the courtyard, walked through the archway, and to the barn, where it was dim and silent, with scarce camels.

“How are ya doing, old fellow?” His usual playful voice pierced through the quiet. He laid his rough hand that had been rubbed by thick sand grains and cut by bandits’ sharp knives onto my back, when he felt I uncontrollably bent my back and exhaled.

“Tired. That isn’t very much like you, huh?” Wei’s dark brown pupils met mine. Eyes with a hint of weariness replaced his usual sparkling ones. He fetched hay and raised it against my mouth. I started chewing.

“Replenish your energy, buddy; we are still heading west. We will leave in a few days.”

That night, I had a dream. A dream about Wei and I’s first meeting, when he was just a young man, and I was a teen camel.

My parents were freight camels. So, so am I. We were following a Chinese caravan, with me carrying only a few loads as I was young aged. We came back to Chang’an to recharge and prepare for our next trip. The bustling market in Chang’an amazed the young me. Seeing dazzling silk, smelling exotic spices, and hearing bells ringing on other camels made me so thrilled. I naturally turned my head to take in all the chaotic beauty, unaware of my caravan’s movement.

It wasn’t until a trader tugged at my reins that I realized I had wandered around. We walked back to our gathering place. To my surprise, I didn’t catch sight of my parents, but a new young man. Observing the way my team was treating him, he must have just joined us. He was well built, tough muscles apparent under the luminous sun, his smile as bright.

He noticed me, turned to an old caravan member, and said, “This camel seems very strong. It’s got potential.”

I should have chuckled to myself. Being called strong by humans can keep camels slightly lifting their heads in front of their kind. But the biggest feeling I had at that moment was the panic about the loss of my parents. They were elderly camels; their backs no longer straight, and they could no longer keep walking so many days without drinking water. That’s why I was so worried about them, with every fiber in me tightening.

But I have no way of asking. They can’t understand my groans. I was left to wonder alone.

Wei was so warm to all animals, unlike the other humans, that I soon forgot about concerning my parents. The days we spent in Chang’an were fun to recall. He chatted to me, although it’s more like he was talking to himself, and he took care of me. Wei especially liked the job of taking care of us camels, instead of preparing and packing goods such as silk, spices, tea, and porcelain, like the other members of the caravan were doing. Soon, we started our first journey west together.

The days in the caravanserai fleet away. Once the caravan traded enough goods, we were heading west. I heard our destination this time was Bukhara. Quite a long journey. For me.

Wei's discovery about my unusual tiredness was acute. My physical condition was indeed not as good as before. My back ached even faster, and I often felt like drinking water. The goods that I could so easily carry on our second and third times passing this caravanserai were now heavier. This reminded me of my parents.

But as I do my best not to let these show, Wei still had noticed.

The sun was behind us. Its piping hot beams were almost chasing us, urging us west. The desert was as vast as the first time I passed through it. The yellow stretched as far as our eyes could reach and went on and on. I heard the porcelain pots on my humps gently colliding with each other. Wei still let me carry the most fragile cargo, as he believed I was the steadiest walker.

I thought as we were plodding forward, and suddenly noticed a dark, advancing wall on the horizon.

Sandstorm.

I stopped my track and gazed straight ahead, like every time I remind the caravan of danger.

Wei gestured for the caravan to stop.

"Sandstorm! Immediate action from everyone!"

People were like bees gushing out of a beehive right after these words. They hurried to the nearest rock outcrop, got down on camels, tied goods and camels securely, made us kneel in a circle, and covered their faces with cloth.

Wei made sure all of these were going systematically, and the experienced caravan seemed fully ready. But I know, deep down in my heart and on every face with only eyes visible but brows clenched, that every time a sandstorm reaches, it symbolizes tragic loss. Sometimes goods, sometimes camels, and the worst members.

Every time the camel circles shields in front of people who lie on the ground to minimize the harm from the horrifying winds. Wei kept me at the edge of the circle close to the humans and twined my rein around his arm.

The storm was coming.

The wind rose with a low, furious howl. The air grew thick and heavy. Sand was lifted from the ground and struck our bodies like countless tiny stones, stinging our eyes and stopping our breath. I caught a glimpse of the desert. The horizon vanished, replaced by a yellow void that filled every side. Bells rang wildly as my kind shifted and groaned. Ropes tying us and the goods suddenly strain, tearing open coats and flesh.

It was over after what feels like a year. Wei launched himself from the sand and checked the caravan.

Luckily, only a few loosely tied goods were missing. Everyone else was either left with minor wounds or uninjured. Most camels stood up, with slight harm but nothing serious. However, I remained kneeling on the ground.

Wei rushed to my side, patted my back, and lifted my head; his eyes shone with disbelief.

"Are you ok?!" He yelled his question, which was not expecting an answer, and checked my body. I'm not seriously hurt, but I just felt too tired. I feel as if many big stones are pressing on me, especially on my knees. My body refuses to get up.

"Let's rest here. It needs some rest." Wei commanded.

The caravan hesitated, and the crowd began to whisper. I almost automatically stood up with all my energy left. We had to keep going; otherwise, the journey would be delayed. Because of me.

There's something in Wei's eyes I found hard to understand. The only thing he said was "Good boy," and he kept silent for the rest of that day except for necessary communication. It was so not like him. He talked so much with everyone and almost treated camels like his human friends.

That night, we were not able to reach the next caravanserai, so we camped.

Darkness covered the caravan like a thin, dark cloth. Bonfires flickered, casting dancing shadows across the sand, and the smell of burnt wood drifted faintly through the air. I knelt near the tents with other camels, pretending to rest, though my ears remained alert from years of experience that night was far more dangerous than daytime in deserts.

Then I heard a trader's voice.

"...too old! You kept it in the safest place, but it can't get up from that almost harmless storm? He really was not the strongest camel back in the day. Our pace will keep slowing down if it's still here," the man argues.

"It's just exhausted! Imagine each trip you need to carry the most valuable and heavy goods. You think you can do better than it?! No way." Wei was almost yelling.

"Still, it wasn't like this before..." The man replied, volume lowered.

"I didn't mean it, sorry." Wei realized his fierceness and returned to a calm voice. "What I'm saying is... It's the most capable camel. He is almost as careful as one of us with the goods." He spoke of deserts I've crossed, of goods successfully transported in conditions when other camels would fail, and of my loyalty through the decades.

"But..."

"We will deal with this later. End of discussion. We all need to get some rest," he answered firmly.

Then the tent curtain flipped open. I pretended I was asleep.

I felt he stopped in front of the camels for a while before he headed off to his tent.

We reached another caravanserai, a smaller one. But our caravan got two camels from merchants at the stop, wishing to spread the goods more evenly and speed up.

I was thinking about the words I heard yesterday. I was afraid, but not exactly sure of what I was afraid.

I watched Wei and others loading Eastern merchandise onto the new camels. When he came to me and took some of the weights off my back, he murmured, "Let's ease your journey," and continued without looking at me. I found him unfamiliar. His smiles disappeared.

Porcelain pots were passed to younger humps. I had carried it for decades without breaking it. Now I was the one considered cracked.

We didn't stay for long, but soon headed west again. My hoofs rubbed on the yellow sand, felt dust gently float into the air. Wei was quietly pulling my reins. We were both listening to the other people in the caravan; at least I felt he was.

"It's such a right decision that we bought new camels. They are fast and strong."

"Indeed. They carried half of the silk and can still bear more."

I lowered my head and kept walking.

"The old one has done enough," another voice said. "You can see it in the way he walks."

"He carried this caravan when your camels were still learning to walk," he said. "He crossed the Taklamakan carrying our country's goods when others collapsed," Wei responded with a certain tone.

The caravan was silent. Wei kept pulling my reins gently. The new camels moved ahead, bells ringing bright.

I watched their shadows stretch long across the sand.

Wei slightly pulled with more power, but surprisingly found I couldn't speed up anymore, at the speed I usually walked when I was carrying heavy metals. He looked at me, scanned my body, and turned back, although he was afraid of looking at me. But I caught something. I saw a glimmer of hesitation in his eyes, and something I have only seen in other traders' eyes.

I thought I kind of understood what I was afraid of.

That night, when we were in the third caravanserai, a local guide came hurriedly to our resting place, gasping for breath.

“What is it?” Wei asked with an ominous expression.

“You guys going Bukhara? Better quick, the city enforce strict entry bans, because rumour hostile force. Hur’y, the gate will close tomorrow morning, reopen date don’t know.”

“Thanks,” Wei answered abstractedly.

The guide left, and Wei instructed the caravan to start preparing for a night march.

“We are not far from the city gate. If everyone makes a push, we will be able to get there by early morning.”

Having said that, Wei made his way to me. I was still slightly panting from the long trek of the day. Sensing everyone getting ready, I tried straightening my legs, but knelt back because of pain. There was a complex light in his eyes. For a moment, I thought he was going to say something, like don’t try too hard, we will go to Bukhara and on our way back, we will pick you up, something like that. But I was instinctively afraid of what he was going to say. Something I would never want to hear from his mouth. So, with one final try, which I felt I could never achieve after this time, I managed to stand up.

I thought he was going to compliment me, but he was silent. He just stroked my humps, as he did with the precious porcelain, and went on with other work.

We set off soon into the tranquil nighttime. The desert was cool and still, the sky scattered with stars that were pale and distant. Our footsteps sank softly into the sand, muffled and slow.

The march was long. Longer than any before. Maybe it’s just my illusion. But I no longer know. My legs protested with every step, pain rising in my bones like heat from the ground at daytime. The weight on my back felt heavier in the darkness, although Wei had already made it as light as possible. I focused on his silhouette ahead of me, the steady pull of the reins, the rhythm of his steps. As long as he walked, I walked. For a million times, my body screamed, “Stop!”, but my mind shut down other thoughts and just one of “Keep going,” as I had a feeling that once I collapsed, I would never get up.

The younger camels moved ahead, their pace eager. Wei and I were now at the end of the team. He could have asked other members to be with me and walk in the lead, but he didn’t, as though he wanted to seize every opportunity to stay together with me.

I felt my strength fade away, yet something else held me. Not the straps, not the reins, but my faint memory. Chang’an. Silk brushing against my sides. The laughter of successful merchants, years ago.

We reached the gate as the sky blended from black to yellow. The guards searched us without expression. We went in just as the massive iron doors pushed behind us, swallowing us in.

My legs finally collapsed when we arrived at the caravanserai within the city. I knelt hard onto the stone, breath burning in my chest.

“You did it,” Wei said quietly.

We rested for a long time in this bustling city. Wei said it is a large trade center west of China. But I didn’t get to enjoy it too much, because most of the time I knelt in the barn, resting.

One day, our caravan grew busy again. People were collecting the western goods they traded, loading camels, packing.

I was motivated by the energy and got up. Legs aching faintly, but no matter, I could walk again.

But I was very confused when all the cargoes were loaded on other camels but not on me. Wei came in front of me, avoiding my stare, pulled my reins, asking me to follow him.

I kept looking back as I walked. I was very puzzled when he and I reached a vendor. I saw many camels standing here.

Wei went on chatting with the vendor. I stood there, blank. I thought about my parents, who vanished decades ago in a similar marketplace in Chang'an. I leaned closer and tried catching their conversation with my old ears.

"...we feed them with the best forage. Yes, you can rest assured about that. They will carry goods within the city. Very relaxed work. No worries." Wei's voice was so small that I could only catch the merchant's words.

I thought my parents were lost. I guess I was wrong.

I saw the merchants handing Wei some local coins. He came to me.

He looked at me deep in my eyes, his shimmering with water. And he leaned his forehead against mine, although I was his best friend. At one moment, I thought he was going to say something, as his pursed lips trembled. But he didn't. He gave the last pat on my humps and headed east, out of the marketplace, to the city gate, to the edge of the desert.

I know he hadn't abandoned me. He never would have done that. He was answering the road.

Sunlight embraced his shoulders, like he was the sun. But this time, the sun was walking away.

The Year of the Rat

Carmel School – Elsa High School, Leung, Anbe – 14

Fate

It has been roughly 16 minutes since Lin was submerged in silky white water. His eyes suddenly contract as he gains consciousness. He looks around him as an unlimited amount of white engulfs him – suddenly, a voice echoes through the realm.

“For thousands of years, we have been authorized enough power to control the world outside us, but have not gained the authority to control a person,” Yuanshi Tianzun declares, his chin held high, as his emerald jade robe cascades down the glass throne. “For years, we have overseen the teachings of our ways, and the horrors that life has planned for each individual. Yet we have never seen something as oddly fascinating as this.”

Yuanshi closes his eyes as he listens to his servants play the dizi. A white fox appears next to him as it swirls its feathered white tail, bamboo patterns streaming down from its body to its legs. Its pink ears perk upwards as it notices Lin, before resting on Yuanshi’s shoulder.

Lin’s eyes widen in horror as he shakes his head frantically. “Whe—where— where am I? Wh—why am I here?”

“Lin,” responds Yuanshi Tianzun. “It is clear where the confusion has come from; it will be hard to take in the fact that your soul is no longer with the present world. You have suffered a brutal awakening as the bubonic plague catches up to your body: your lymph nodes will erupt under your skin, and you take your last breath. Your soul has synchronised with the wave of life, transporting you to a realm where you can see every soul roaming around in the Ying territory.”

“Am— Am— I dead?”

As Lin frantically looks down at his translucent hands, his skin is no longer visible as the pellucid skeleton of his fingers appears. The worn—out clothes he stole still seem to be covering his body as he stares straight into Yuanshi Tianzun's aquamarine eyes. “Ha—hav—have I reached the livings of Ying?” he asks as if it is a plea for all his sins.

“You are not deemed worthy enough to reach the realm of Ying. Your sins in your former life have been proven to be unfit for our virtues. You have shown us flawed and immoral behaviors that are deemed to be unforgivable.”

Yuanshi Tianzun holds his hand up as a black apparition appears, *showing Lin’s face covered in crimson blood as he thrashes at his black-eyed spouse, with blood gushing down onto his spouse's brown gown.*

Lin’s eyes shut as his brows furrow together, not wanting to reminisce about the memories invading his mind. The protective shield he once cast on his mind shatters, causing him to remember the horrible thrashing he delivered when he heard about the job she had been offered at the palace – making silk for the emperor to trade.

“I— I have changed, Master Yuanshi. I no longer believe in violence being the core of humanity; those scars that I have inflicted on my wife have been resolved in my soul. During my lifetime, I have reached the sayings of the Ying, the teachings, and the philosophical ways of life. After the death of my wife I decided to become better, to be truthful, to embrace myself. Master Yuanshi Tianzu, my sole purpose is to enter the Ying border. If I do not succeed, then I will be in purgatory.”

Yuanshi Tianzu takes his time to respond. “Yet it is peculiar. I have not acquired the right to defy the wave of life. New souls enter the realm day and night. However, upon reviewing the descriptions of their past lives, they are known to be wise and righteous people. For decades, I have been allowing those who are exemplary into the

realm without a second doubt of failure. The wave of life decides the fate of every individual who crosses the Ying Border. I have only the right to let them enter the realm; yet it is odd. Your soul has not defied you to the wave of life, but your actions have exemplified to me that you do not deserve to enter this realm. It is truly extraordinary. I shall give you a chance to prove yourself worthy. When touching your forehead, you will be reincarnated into something, someone. It is your choice to decide whether this is worth it or not. The choice is yours, Lin.” A fan made with bamboo suddenly appears in Yuanshi's hand.

“Will, will you know what I will be?”

“Of course not, Lin — but how should that matter when you know at heart what you want?”

A light aura ignites from Yuanshi's fan; a doe walks out, its eyes stare right into Lin's, before rapidly running towards him.

“May luck be with you,” Yuanshi declares.

The doe dissipates when it comes into contact with Lin's eyes. A black veil of shadows blinds him and Crimson Light veils his eyes, mirroring his rapid heartbeat. His legs lose balance; the stuffed clouds, once holding him, vanish into crisp air; his eyes widen in horror while he loses consciousness and falls into the unknown.

Rebirth

Dust particles swamp Mei's eyes as he uses his hands to swat them away. His body turns towards the tent flap. A black figure appears in front of him, muttering something, causing his eyes to widen in horror.

A man with black eyes stares right into his soul. He is wearing a shanku with dirt smudges across it, covering the intricate patterns that were once visible. His black hair is tied into a topknot, with a fabric tied loosely around his head.

“Wake up! Wake up!” the figure shouts.

“Wha— what— what time is it? Where am I?” Mei looks at his hands, as the once—skeleton is wrapped in flesh. His hair cascades down his torso onto his abdomen. His nonexistent feet, once covered in a white gown, have turned into human flesh. He blinks again, and again, to check if he is dreaming.

Is he not?

“Come! Just come!” the man says. He pulls Mei up from the haystack as he rushes towards the other tent. The moon shines above the sky as stars illuminate the way towards the other tent. Smoke passes through the thin fabric as people surround the tent with apprehension.

“He's here! He's here!” yells the man.

“Move over! Let him pass!” another one shouts.

Stacks of people appear next to him, giving him the space to move towards the tent. Mei is confused. What is he supposed to be? Suddenly, his eyes dilate, transporting him into a distant memory.

“Will you know what I will become in my next life?” Lin pleads.

“Of course not, Lin — But how shall this determine your success in your next life?”

Before a hand grabs onto him, Mei is ushered into the tent. His eyes roam around the tent as he surveys the bags of dirty fabric piled up near the door, with blood dripping down. Bottles of herbal medicine are scattered all over the nightstand. The body of a man lies on the floor, seemingly unconscious. Black lymph nodes are scattered all over his torso as he breathes in and out through his nose. His face turns a bright peach; his ribcage shrinking as he tries to inhale new oxygen.

“Mei, Mei. Help,” pleads the man who had brought him to the tent.

Realization dawns on Mei. He is going to have to try to save the man on the floor.

Mei rushes out of the tent, shouting as loudly as possible, “EVACUATE IMMEDIATELY! GO ISOLATE YOURSELF!”

Multitude

Mei runs back into his tent before he hears a distant sound. It sounds distorted; it is ringing in his ears, while the sounds of screaming men gush in the background.

*“Do not save the man, do not save the man! He has contracted the plague, the plague! Think about it! What if we get the plague? Why should **you** care? How is he your problem? You have bigger plans in life! At the end of the day, we would not even know if he would live till the moment to tell this story. Think Mei. **Think! Is your life more valuable or his?**”*

Mei is about to put on his leather suit, but before he does, he lowers it. He shakes his head in dismay upon hearing another voice. It sound serene, ethereal, and at ease, with a faint whine lingering in the background.

*“That **the price of a life is sometimes measured in another.**”*

Another voice chimes in, with something similar.

“Of course not, Lin — but how should that matter when you know at heart what you want?”

He makes a choice, a grave yet gallant choice. Mei stares out of the tent flap, seeing all those waiting for him to march forward to his doom, before putting on his leather jacket and his professional mask. He tilts his head up before mumbling

“May Yuanshi be with me.”

As Mei sets down the herbs he has gathered from his tent, sweat beads inside his mask. His patient is convulsing, froth bubbling from his mouth. Mei touches the man’s forehead, the heat of the fever searing against his palm.

“He has a high fever,” Mei mumbles, rushing to grab the bottle of frankincense. “Ingredients are scarce while on the Silk Road, frankincense will have to do.”

He works quickly, heating the resin over the small fire. The grim reality settles upon him. “There is nothing more I can do in this situation. We can only hope that luck may be with him.”

A strange ache blooms in his own armpit as he leans over the fire. He dismisses it as a cramp from exhaustion. The aroma of the frankincense signals it is ready. He transfers the opaque liquid, darker than the night sky, into a ceramic bowl filled with extra herbs and approaches the dying man.

Gently, he props up the patient’s head, tipping the medicine. The man chokes, a spasm wracking his body, and a spray of the hot, medicated liquid splashes back onto Mei’s face, seeping under the edge of his leather mask and into his mouth.

Mei recoils, wiping his face with his sleeve. The ache under his arm sharpens into a distinct, throbbing pain. He ignores it, his focus on the man before him. For a moment, the patient’s breathing seems to ease, the rattling in his chest softening. A piece of dust lingers on Mei’s robes and he flicks it away in a rush, focusing on trying to save the man, but before the ceramic bowl reaches the man’s mouth his breathing stops altogether.

The body settles, the gray hue of death replacing the fevered peach. Mei stands frozen, the ceramic bowl slipping from his fingers to shatter on the packed earth. The silence in the tent is absolute.

“Time of death. 1:20 AM, 20th July,” he whispers to the empty air. No tears come — only a profound, hollow cold.

He turns slowly to face the tent flap, knowing the crowd awaits news. But as he takes a step, a wave of dizziness crashes over him. A furnace ignites in his core, and the throbbing in his armpit becomes a swollen, layer upon layer of skin, turning a grey hue before an agonizing knot ties it all up. He stumbles, his hand flying to the place under his robe. Through the fabric of his robe, he feels the unmistakable, horrific bulge of a bubo.

The realization is a physical blow. *He has it. That was not dust. It was the flea. He has contracted the plague.*

He had known the risk, had shouted for isolation, but in the frantic, final moment of trying to administer aid, the barrier had broken. The plague had crossed from the dying to the living.

As the fever begins to cloud his mind, a vivid memory finally surfaces, not as a dream, but as a final, searing truth. Thoughts of sacrificing himself shudder against his chest. He feels hollowed, numbed, desecrated. His sole purpose is to heal; does he have it in himself not to run and get aid? To not be treated?

To die.

A memory flashes into his mind, before everything starts to blur into tiny sparks of light. *“You shall be transported back, yet I do not know what you will become...”*

“But that might affect my chances!”

“Of course it would! But why should that matter when you know what your goal is?”

His goal. His choice. In the white silence, he had chosen a chance to be better. Not to be a king or a warrior. To be someone who could mend what he had broken. The wave of life had answered not with glory, but with brutal symmetry: a healer in a time of death.

Mei pushes through the tent flap. The crowd falls silent, reading the truth in his staggering gait, in the hand clutched to his side, in the fever-bright sheen in his eyes over the mask.

“He is gone,” Mei announces, his voice ragged but clear. “But he did not die alone, or in terror. He died cared for. Now, you must go. *I am infected.*”

Gasps ripple through them. The man with the doe eyes stares, horrified, understanding dawning.

Mei’s strength fails. His legs buckle, and he sinks to his knees in the dust. The world begins to tunnel, the faces around him blurring. The physical pain is immense, but beneath it is a terrifying clarity. This is the balance. Lin had taken a life in rage. Mei had given his own in the attempt to save one. The scales, in some cruel, cosmic equation, are now even.

He does not look up as the crowd scatters, leaving him in a widening circle of space. He looks at the moon, its light now swimming and haloed.

“Master Yuanshi,” he breathes, the words a hot rush against the inside of his mask. “I... chose... to try.”

The fever swallows him. The last thing he knows is not the pain, but a profound sense of release, as if a chain he had carried for a lifetime has finally snapped. He has not entered the realm of virtue. But he has, in the end, fulfilled a single, true virtue: sacrifice. He has finally given more than he had taken.

Epilogue

In the realm of Ying, Yuanshi Tianzun watched the flicker of a soul extinguish in the mortal world, then reignite as it once more synchronized with the wave of life. The soul pulsed with a new, complex resonance — not the pure, steady light of a righteous scholar, but a darker, richer hue, streaked with the crimson of violence and the silver of atonement.

The white fox whined softly as its brow furrowed.

“Indeed,” Yuanshi murmured, a note of finality in his voice. “His soul was not worthy of Ying. But it is no longer fit for oblivion either. He defied his own fate to meet a different one.”

With a wave of his fan, he did not summon the doe. Instead, he gestured toward the endless, flowing border of the realm, where destinies were woven and unwoven. “Let him travel to the border. Let him be a warning, and a witness. For he has learned the lesson few souls ever grasp: that the price of a life is sometimes measured in another.”

And the soul that was once Lin, and then Mei, neither ascended nor descended. It simply flowed onward, into the endless, murmuring stream of consequence, its final choice echoing forever in its wake.

To try.

The Crate and Sphere

Carmel School – Elsa High School, Ng, Xanthus – 14

Chapter 1

Wei heard his uncle's familiar voice echoing gently around him in his dreams, warm and close, yet somehow far away.

"I'll be back for your birthday."

The memory of his uncle's words was so clear that he nearly answered him. Six months had passed since his uncle Quan left, yet Wei could not stop thinking about him.

The sudden clang of the village bells broke the silence of the night. Wei opened his eyes to see the early rays of sunlight shining through the cracks in the window – the familiar sound of the shouting of men, and the snorts of camels loud enough to wake the entire village. The day had begun early.

Wei flung his window open and spotted his uncle, Quan, unloading a wooden crate from the cart behind his camel.

"Uncle! Uncle Quan!" Wei turned around and ran out the door, completely forgetting his breakfast and his shoes. Quan turned around to the tiny blur bowling towards him. He laughed as Wei launched himself in his open arms.

"Hey there, young chap, just in time for your birthday, yes? And plenty of time to tell you all about my trip with the boys!"

Suddenly, something hard hit Wei square on the back of his head. He turned around to find his mother, with her arms on her hips, sandal missing from her left foot, and a very annoyed expression on her face.

"Come back here, Wei! Your breakfast is not going to eat itself! Wash your feet also when you come in, they're filthy! Pick up my shoe as well."

She then rounded on Quan, "You better not tell him any stories before he finishes that breakfast!" before rushing up and wrapping him in a tight embrace.

"I've missed you much too, Mei, it's been a while," Quan chuckled softly.

That night at dinner, Wei was excited. He had found out what most of the wooden crates were containing: gold, honey, and animal fur. Quan and his men had also managed to secure a tall, chestnut horse, its dark mane rippling in the nighttime breeze, muscles visible beneath its skin, and brown, sharp eyes scanning the courtyard, the camels surrounding it. It was clearly nervous being there, pawing the ground in restless energy. Even in the dying light, Wei could tell there was a subtle wrongness to its presence. However, when Wei brought up the topic of the wooden box sitting at the center of the camels, his uncle always found a way to dodge the question and tell another dramatic story of how they had avoided bandit gangs hiding in caves or slipping behind waterfalls. Most importantly, Quan had gifted Wei a dagger with the words "Use Wisely" inscribed on its short handle.

Chapter 2

As Wei was going to bed, mind buzzing from the day and the stories Quan told, he heard his uncle talking to his parents in the hallway.

"I'm sorry, Mei and Tianyu, I must leave tomorrow morning, otherwise... trouble may come to our home. I'll go tuck Wei in."

Wei scrambled under his covers just as his door opened and Quan walked in.

"See you soon, Wei. I'm leaving in the morning."

As he left, Wei caught a glimpse of the tears streaked across his uncle's face in the dim light from the living room.

Before the house lights flickered off, Wei had already silently made up his mind. He was going to find a way to leave with Quan and his men. He had spent too long staring out into the boundless desert, his heart aching to explore the outside, knowing there was opportunity there.

At the crack of dawn when nature's alarm rang, Wei quietly packed his bag and climbed out his window, remembering to close it after himself. Crawling under the fence into the camel enclosure he slipped quietly into one of the sacks on the cart behind his uncle's camel, sinking past garments and clothes too thick for the climate, hiding himself from being found. As the procession started, slowly trudging forward, his uncle yelled out in front, "See you all soon!" And in a lowered voice, hissed to the men around him, "Horse and the crate are secure?" A murmur of affirmation later, the village bells began to bid them a solemn farewell.

Wei knew his sudden and unannounced departure would cause chaos within the village and worry his family, but he reasoned that it was for the greater good; he would be able to see the distant cities where people met, tales were created, and money was made.

As the village noises died behind them, the procession was cast into silence, with only the grunting of the camels and the occasional shouting from the riders. Wei had managed to cut a small hole in the side of the sack for air and sightseeing; the hole was small enough that no one would ever suspect anything. The passing of the green, lush countryside slowly gave way to yellow dunes – it would be a while until they reached their destination in the Great Forest. It was rare to see anyone out on the route these days after news had spread about elevated amounts of bandit attacks, and it was even rarer to see an entire procession.

Hours passed before the camels finally slowed. Quan called for a rest and to start preparing their camels for the next leg of the journey ahead of them. From the inside of the clothing, Wei felt the jolt as the camel bent down to a kneeling position at the front. He waited silently inside the sack, waiting for the perfect moment to climb out. When he heard no one close by, he pushed a little of the cloth away from his head and stuck out the top. Wei saw they were beside a cluster of rocks in a small clearing inside a forest. The chestnut horse was not too far away, and it was tied to a tree.

Quan suddenly appeared beside the cart. However, he was not looking at the cart; he was surveying the horse. "Loosen its rope a little bit – it's getting restless."

Wei held his breath, knowing if he made a sound or his uncle even glanced his way, he would be caught. But after a while, Quan stepped away, satisfied.

"Get me tea," he called out as he walked away to his men waiting for him. Wei decided it would be too risky to leave; Quan's men were constantly patrolling.

As the procession began moving again, Wei stayed quiet and listened to the men's low murmur of conversation; they were busy discussing routes and shortcuts through dried riverbeds and sandstorms. Everytime someone seemed to mention the crate, their voices dipped just enough to push Wei's curiosity. Sinking back into the sack, he ate the food he prepared and slowly drifted off to sleep.

Chapter 3

The clanging of bells dragged Wei out of dreamland. He peered out of the hole, and his heart leapt. A real town of brick walls, with flags fluttering in the afternoon breeze, took up his available view. For the first time, Wei felt the thrill he had dreamed of for years; he was heading somewhere new.

Quan's voice broke apart Wei's daydreaming just as they were passing into the town.

"No one talks about the crate, got it? Supplies only."

Wei knew, whatever was in that crate was important to keep hidden at great cost.

The cart jolted to a stop at the center of the town square. Through the cut in the sack, Wei saw people beginning to crowd around the procession. Some began yelling to bargain for the goods, while others walked around, interested but not buying yet.

Wei wanted to see everything. When no one seemed to be looking at the cart, he climbed out through the top and slid onto the sandy ground below. His foot landed for the first time in days, and he quickly began working his way towards the people gathered, wanting a view of the action.

“Wei!”

Cold sweat ran down Wei’s back as he turned around slowly – Quan was standing there, arms on hips, eyebrows raised, not angry, but not happy either.

“I wondered why there were noises from the cart,” he said in a quiet voice.

Wei started to explain, “I wanted to see, to see everything, and why did you leave so quickly?” His uncle sighed and pulled Wei close. “You should have stayed home... Stay close to me then, don’t say anything about the crate.”

Staring in awe at the market, Wei followed his uncle past the stalls of goods, clothing, scrolls, sculptures, lanterns, and fruits. Wei also saw the people who were clamoring for a good deal. He had never seen so many people in one place. As they reached the edge of the square, Wei spotted the horse again, this time it was tied to a streetlamp by a much thicker rope, pawing the ground. Its fearful brown eyes locked with Wei’s for a second, and a chilling feeling ran through his whole body.

Camp was set outside the town walls that night, and the men were discussing with Quan.

“The next few days will be hard, there isn’t another town for another week.”

“We need to be careful then, guard the crate carefully.”

Wei lay down staring at the moon. The food’s unfamiliar flavors made him ache for his mother’s cooking, and the mystery of the crate’s contents was at the front of his thoughts.

The men started to fall asleep one by one, the hum of voices slowly dying out, and the faint trickling of water from the canal took over the night. Just the horse remained alert and restless, its eyes scanning the nearby rocks, as if anticipating something. Then Wei heard it, the faint humming emanating from the crate. Wei stood up quietly and inched over, the horse’s eyes locked onto him.

The crate’s exterior was covered in all kinds of drawings. It was a normal crate, but its contents were obviously peculiar. It was bolted shut, but Wei was certain that what was inside sensed him coming. The hum was louder than before.

“Wei!” Quan’s voice came from behind. “I told you to leave it alone.”

His uncle’s voice still carried that same confidence, but this time there was a hint of fear in it. “What is inside the box, uncle?” Wei asked, and Quan sighed.

“There’s no point in hiding it anymore. It’s an item from ancient times, it contains great power, and should not go into the wrong hands. We’re moving it to a safer place.” He stared at the crate a while longer. “That’s why you should have stayed home, people hunt these things, some would do anything just to get their hands on it.”

The hum was gone as Wei lay down once more, the night’s sounds regained their domain once again. The horse still stood, nervous, its eyes roaming the surroundings, but this time, it occasionally glanced back at Wei

Chapter 4

The attack on the camp came at the crack of dawn.

Bandits rushed out from behind the rocks on all sides, each carrying a blade. Their faces were obscured by cloths that blew around, they moved fast and kept low. The chestnut horse produced a scream – sharp and hysterical, breaking the early morning stillness. Quan’s men also began shouting and clambering to retrieve their weapons, tripping each other as they went.

Wei was half awake when he heard the shriek of the horse. He was jolted into full wakefulness. His immediate thought was his uncle. He crawled around looking for Quan, dodging a bandit once before he got into a fight with one of the men. Wei spotted Quan next to the crate. He was grappling with two bandits trying to take the box away.

“Wei! Protect the crate!” Quan shouted.

Suddenly, Wei’s dagger was in his hand, and he lunged forward at the bandit who was about to attack Quan from behind, slashing at his arm, forcing him to back away, dropping his blade in the process. That’s when Wei felt it again. The hum, the heat, the power. Slowly emanating from the insides of the crate.

An image flashed before Wei’s eyes – a stronghold, far bigger than the town they had visited the day before. It looked ancient but also modern, its walls were a dull grey but seemed to pulse with blue. The walls were not stone or anything Wei had ever seen before. The image vanished as quickly as it had appeared. At the same time, the crate’s power vanished again.

“Go away!” Wei’s voice was stronger now, command poured from it, and the bandits faltered. A child whose voice carried so much power?

Then a horn’s sound came from the edge of the camp. One of Quan’s men was calling for help. In the distance, the town’s gates began opening, and soldiers were coming. The bandits heard the horn and started to flee. They backed away, melting back into the surrounding landscape with the rocks.

Quan grabbed Wei by the shoulders.

“Are you hurt?”

“No. I used the dagger wisely, as you told me to.” Wei replied.

Quan sighed deeply. “I’ll tell you what’s inside the crate, since you appear to have a connection with it.”

After a moment of staring into the horizon, Quan said, “What’s in there is old, way older than us, and not made by us. It holds great power over something more, the lost city. Which is said to be only unlocked by the key and someone it deems worthy. You were chosen by it, which means you can lead us there. It showed you something, didn’t it? You just need to guide us there.”

“Yes, I saw a city, it looked... different...” Wei replied uncertainly.

Quan looked visibly disturbed, much unlike his usual self.

“Then that means its power can now be found by others. We must be quick, before greed takes everything once again.”

Chapter 5

This time guided by Wei, the procession took other routes; they travelled through the bottom of dried riverbeds and canyons, well away from the main route where the traders usually travelled. Everything looked much less disturbed on this path, animals were scurrying about, and plants were growing.

“Someone is on our tail, not bandits this time,” one man at the back spread the message. “We must go faster.”

Quan made the men pick up the pace, and Wei continued giving directions, even when he did not understand where they came from.

By dawn, they were certain they had lost their tails, however, many of the men were tired. But Quan would not let them rest.

“We are close now, just a while more,” Wei reported. He could feel the city’s draw, it was close now, and its power was stronger, as if it knew what was approaching.

The power got stronger as the sun shone directly above – the canyon’s path was narrowing and curving, and all the camels started to get restless, as if knowing they were not welcome here. The air now felt charged with energy, the hum was everywhere.

The canyon opened as the men took yet another turn in its narrow path. A city, *the* city the crate had shown him was in front of them. It still stood as magnificent as before, its outside plain with the grey material, some parts covered with vines from the time it was abandoned. It lay quiet, but it beckoned for Wei to come closer. The walls seemed to be breathing, their blue pulse slowly seeping into the air around the city, just like lights under the water. The chestnut horse finally looked calm, as if it recognised the power from this place.

As Wei approached the gates of the structure with Quan by his side, the crate’s hum grew stronger, as if communicating with the walls directly, and the gates began to vibrate in reply. Slowly beginning to open for the keyholder, Wei reached out and lifted the crate’s cover off. Inside lay a sphere, as large as a camel’s head, made of the same dull grey material pulsing a slight blue. Wei laid his hand on the sphere, and images flashed once more in his mind – wide and grand halls with paintings, vast rooms containing different items, and one which contained similar-looking spheres levitating on altars, with different marks on every one of them, and a vault door behind them. One sphere was missing from the altars. Wei knew it was the sphere he was holding, the final piece to the vault, and the potential treasure it held.

Holding the sphere now, Wei took a step towards the open gate. He felt a hand on his shoulder, it was Quan. “Go now, Wei, we’re all right behind you.”

Wei stepped across the threshold of the gates, knowing his uncle and the men would follow into the unknown. The horse also obediently followed Wei’s footsteps and passed into the structure. Then the light swallowed everything.

New Tales of China's Silk Road

Chinese International School, Mak, 麥曦桐 Hei Tung Ava Jillian – 16

Across the vast expanse of deserts and steppes, where camels trekked along routes sketched not on paper but woven in memory, and where empires ran into each other clumsily like water into silk, the Silk Road flourished. But the Silk Road's greatest invention was not silk, gunpowder, or the compass that steered it; it was invisible. It had no name, no flag, no patent. Yet, it bridged thousands of miles, hundreds of tongues, and countless lives. It was trust. A frail protocol of humanity, not written in code or ink, but in ritual, gesture, and most importantly, a collective belief that is the sole reason behind the Silk Road's success.

Some might ask: How was it possible that a Sogdian Merchant, with his adaptable trade practices, and a Chinese Official bound by Confucian ideals and rigid bureaucracy, separated by language, law, and loyalty, were able to establish an agreement? Were goods exchanged without tribunals and contracts? The reality is that they constructed the “Syntax of Silk” – subtle signs, shared customs, and rituals that surpassed all borders.

The merchant flourished through negotiation and enjoyed working with many cultures, whilst the officials took order and tradition very seriously. However, despite their differences, they agreed on their shared goals. The merchant had a desire to increase trading routes, whilst the official hoped to accumulate wealth for the empire. Their agreement marked the reality of how divergent paths can come together for mutual benefit. Now, centuries later, in this glass-and-steel era of instant translation, we've forgotten it. With the advent of technology came the end of the Syntax of Silk. Human connections were replaced with digital transactions, eradicating the cultural changes that once defined commerce. Dr. Anya Lee, a linguist turned diplomatic advisor, was on the search for not just forgotten words, but for a forgotten language of humanity. She embarked on this journey to honor her late great-grandfather, a Sogdian Merchant, who had previously told her stories of the “Syntax of Silk”, hoping to bring back the lost connections between various cultures. She began on her journey, horsebacking before she was unexpectedly summoned to a modern crisis....

The sun sank low over the caravanserai at Kashgar, casting a honeyed light on an ancient, crumbling stone. It was the 8th century, and Becruz, the Sogdian merchant was tightening the last knot on bales of indigo blue silk. It was a complex knot: One loop within another, twisted to the left, twisted up. It was no ornament – it articulated meaning. To any trader traversing the Silk Road from Chang'an to Samarkand, it meant: High Value. Handle Carefully. Thus, the merchant's oath declared: if the knot comes undone, they would replace the silk twofold.

The Chinese Official, who was reserved but bursting with curiosity, watched as Becruz flipped a gleaming silver coin into the air. The resounding ring of the coin as it struck the flaking table was a perfect sound: so bright and clear – the silver was pure. The two merchants did not share a spoken language, but they shared the sound, the code of conduct. Next was the tea, hot and salty, savored in comfortable silence. One sip of the tea, then negotiation. Always. This was the Silk Road's unspoken language, sustained not only by fear but with reverence and through generations of wisdom. Fraud was as rare as a desert mirage, not because it couldn't be accomplished, but it was sullied with shame. To betray this sacred trust was to condemn oneself to exile, not just from a place, but from community, allowing the threads of shared beliefs to slowly unravel.

The meeting room was cold. Shiny chairs and harsh white lights populated a table featuring crystal clear cups of water, all untouched. Dr. Anya Lee was squeezed between two polarized camps: European engineers on the left, and Chinese infrastructure leaders on the other. However, they all had a shared dream: A new, and improved Silk Road. However, as Dr. Anya observed them further, she realized there was a lack of harmony, a stark contrast to the stories her great-grandfather had told her. The stark difference from the collaborative spirit frequently described by her grandfather in his stories of the old trading routes had her thinking – could the spirit of cooperation possibly be restored in a room with this much separation? It was troubling to her, and next to the dream of restoring the Syntax of Silk seemed further away than it ever had been. The tension in the room was so palpable, you could cut it with a knife. “This spec is impossible”, said the German lead engineer, emphatically pointing a finger at a heat map. His words were piercing, with a sharpness that cut deeper than the numbers on

the spreadsheet. The Chinese team stiffened as their silence hung heavily in the air, their lips still as an ancient statue. Their unresolved silence did not stem from pure stubbornness; rather, they were executing an ancient practice to respond with a degree of dignity and avoid confrontation. But the Western minds processed this painful silence as resistance. The misunderstandings piled up like heavy bricks, and soon, it became increasingly difficult to communicate with one another. Dr. Anya quietly observed centuries of trust, once in trade routes and desert slopes, completely crumble in mere minutes. As she got back to her room, she slowly recognized what the exchange lacked. The “framework” existed, protocols being polished and precise as ever. However, the basic human connection, the ancient operating system that existed and strengthened the trade on the Silk Road, was never there.

Later that night, Dr. Anya tossed and turned in her bed and thought of a solution. She suggested running a simple social experiment. At the next meeting, no slide decks or statistics would be used. Instead, she arrived early to set up a simple gift from the European side: A hand-forged rail spike in a carved oak box. In exchange, the Chinese side offered a teacup, precisely glazed in a dazzling shade of imperial blue. Each gift had a quiet life, strength, and elegance, the industrial era and artistic continuity. Then came the meal. A zen-style East-West fusion – roasted lamb seasoned with cumin and Sichuan peppers, wine poured in translucent porcelain cups. The conversation drifted – softened. Faces relaxed. Only then did Anya slide across a handmade contract sealed with not an impressive digital signature, but with wax and the pressing of thumbs. The standoff was broken, not because a clause was taken out, but because a real, authentic human layer had been restored.

As we have come to understand, the Silk Road was never a facilitator of trade; it was the world’s first successfully operating system of cross-cultural collaboration. Its meaning was not spoken but performed, like an intricate but elegant dance. A flick of the coin, a knot in the rope, an offer of shared tea – all of these actions held meaning. However, we don’t need to replace this in our high-tech world. We need to reinstall it. We need its rituals and unspoken beliefs that strangers can build together, not because they are the same, but rather because there is trust.

The new Silk Road has the potential to be more than just a route for goods as the world shifts; it can become a map for a new global consciousness. Now, in an age of perfect digital translation and instant communication, it can fulfill its purpose, namely: to shift our focus from transaction to relationship and to weave back in the ancient, unspoken language of trust: the shared ritual, the symbolic gift, the respectful pause, into the cold calculus of modern exchange. Ultimately, this represents not a rejection of progress but an essential evolution of it.

Bodhisattva and the White Horse Temple

Diocesan Girls' School, Chan, Tsing Yi Vanessa – 15

7th Century BCE, Unknown location

The forging fire blazed with the intensity of ten suns, bright in the icy night. A weary goldsmith peered into the flames, watching as the minuscule piece of gold melted in a glowing haze. This would be his final creation, his polished skill the culmination of thirty years of gruelling practice, the daily ritual of shaping, carving tender callouses in the firm flesh of his palms. He pulled the reflective block out of the fire, expertly bore down his hammer, and within minutes, the outline of a serene goddess became visible. The gold figure was draped in a flowing robe, with innumerable arms extending from her back, poised and erect.

The goldsmith perched the completed *bodhisattva* on his workbench; the statue would cool down overnight. From afar, the faint howling of the wind pierced through the walls of the small workshop, an indistinct voice singing a dissonant melody:

*Oh Great Guanyin, hear us whisper,
The morning brings a fateful winter,
On the Silk Road they come swifter,
they come swifter...*

The endless cycle of murmuring echoed through the chilly night, reverberating across the workshop, encompassing the newly forged statue...

68 AD, Eastern Han Dynasty

The snow cascaded down in thick drifts, blanketing the bustling city of *Luoyang*. A large caravan of Indian merchants had arrived at the crack of dawn, recounting suspenseful tales about dangerous encounters along the *Silk Road*. They bore various bundles of smooth silk and rich spices, all of which no doubt would be sold at the enormous city markets.

As a crowd gathered to peer curiously at the foreign tradesmen, two distinctly isolated foreign monks were lingering at the city gates, as if they had purposely detached themselves from the incoming group. They were swathed in bright amber robes, and their bald heads dripped with beads of sweat, though they barely carried any baggage, and they appeared stark against the snowy landscape. They sat atop two white horses, which by contrast were almost invisible against the frost. As they approached, the sharp sound of clinking metal emanated from one of the horses' leather harnesses.

A gold *bodhisattva* hung carelessly next to the horse's ear, swaying in the crisp breeze.

The two Indian monks spotted a small temple near the outskirts of the city, almost hidden by the towering city walls. As they approached, the shabby, faraway image of the temple began to fade away as the ornate gold carvings on the stone roof tiles sharpened into view. The two men turned to each other, and nodded in soundless agreement.

Outside the temple, the two monks were greeted by a small flock of eager priests, who invited them courteously into the vicinity of the temple. Both Indians clutched their belongings as they were ushered into their living quarters.

A young priest gestured at the lodgings, his expression keen. "Please, masters, rest. Your journey along the *Silk Road* must have been exhausting! We have been expecting you for a year; even Emperor *Ming* ordered the construction of this temple to house the very first monks *Luoyang* has ever received!"

One of the monks took a step back hastily, towards the altar room. "Thank you for your kindness and hospitality – you will be well-rewarded for it. But in fact, we cannot settle down yet; we must make an offering to our Goddess, *Guanyin*, to thank her for our safe journey here."

In the monk's palm lay the gold *bodhisattva*; the face of *Guanyin* stared, untroubled, a relaxed smile on her face. With a flourish, the monk set the statue on the altar and knelt down. He began a soft, melodic chant, rounded vowels blending into the fluctuating tones of his voice, words spiralling into the scented air. He prayed for fortune to the city, for blessings from the goddess, and the eternity of *Luoyang's* wealth. After his chorus had faded into meditative silence, the monk stood up from his post and motioned to the young priest.

The monk pointed at the small statue on the altar. "This is a pure golden *bodhisattva* of our Goddess *Guanyin* – the final piece of work from an ancient goldsmith master. This will be our gift to you, along with the Buddhist teachings we shall preach; please treasure the statue. It is a symbol of generosity and mercy, but it will also bring great fortune upon your city."

Word of the first newly established Buddhist temple, and the new Buddhist teachings, full of wisdom and spirit, began to circulate all over the region, and locals as well as visitors from distant provinces travelled to visit the temple. It became known as the White Horse Temple, after the snowy white mares that had brought the enlightened Indian monks to Luoyang. The temple also marked an endpoint of the Silk Road, commemorating the extensive journey the monks had taken to reach the great city.

Many worshippers who came to the temple to pray and meditate noticed something strange – there was a small bodhisattva perched on the altar, and whenever they sat in silence, a voice seemed to whisper to them:

*Oh my child, hear me whisper,
The morning brings dark sinners,
On the Silk Road they come swifter,
they come swifter...*

When the worshippers opened their eyes, they saw the bodhisattva's eyes gleaming brightly in the gloom of the temple.

1476 AD, Ming Dynasty

Zei crouched behind one of the temple pillars, the roughened fabric of his concealing mask harsh against his face. The night was pitch-black, and the moon hung high in the dark sky, a pale sliver of glowing white. Peering into the altar room, *Zei* could make out the indistinct outline of the embellished altar, with sticks of incense standing erect, the wafting scent of smoke still heavy in the air.

With the complete hush, *Zei* quickly leapt into action. He stole through the unguarded entrance and locked his gaze onto the one thing he had come to the temple for – the golden *bodhisattva*. Even under the hazy moonlight, the statue shone with an unnatural glow, as if calling to *Zei*. He had heard rumours about the *bodhisattva*, ones that had circulated for decades: the *bodhisattva* was a sacred object, a priceless gift from the ancient monks who had helped to construct the first Chinese Buddhist temple. It was made of the most refined gold and renowned ancient craftsmanship and had witnessed the devoted worship of thousands of believers.

Zei gazed lustfully at the invaluable antique and could only picture the huge amount of wealth he might gain from this small statue alone. He knew that there were innumerable wealthy patrons who would kill for this statue – the *bodhisattva* apparently had the power to bring great fortune upon those who worshipped it.

With a swift movement, *Zei* approached the altar, and gripped the *bodhisattva*, shoving it into an inner pocket within his tight robe. With the temple marking an endpoint of the *Silk Road*, he could make his hurried escape; he would be miles away from *Luoyang* before anyone noticed that the *bodhisattva* had gone missing.

The valuable *bodhisattva* sat nestled in the roughened cloths swathed around its figure, its bright, metallic surface hidden behind matte, black-dyed fabric. *Zei* firmly clutched the prized parcel as he hid in the litter perched on an old, cantankerous camel. The animal stumbled along the rocky path, a lengthy main road that would soon branch off into the web-like tangle of routes that made up the *Silk Road*.

Zei did not feel particularly anxious – he had been stealing since he was a fresh-faced child. This was only the latest of a string of robberies that he had been conducting along the *Silk Road* for many years; he not only raided unsuspecting caravan merchants, their litters heaped with jewellery and spices, but also small temples in cities along the Road. He was quick-witted and strategic, and knew how to wind his way out of a slippery situation.

What *Zei* had not noticed was the distant sound of hoofbeats, unusually concentrated, approaching like the ominous pattering of rain, warning of a storm. It was a band of uniformed guards, a pack of keen wolves narrowing down on their prey, with their grey robes flowing behind them, a trail of ashy smoke. With coordinated efficiency, they quickly raced to the front of the caravan, stopping *Zei's* camel in its tracks.

With a pounding heart, *Zei* emerged from his litter, the *bodhisattva* still tucked tightly into his robes. An imperial guard dismounted from his horse, his face expressionless. With a hulking physique and a shiny silver blade tucked into his leather belt, the guard was the very picture of dark menace. As he walked towards *Zei's* litter, he drew his sword with a flourish, pointing its tip towards the terrified thief.

“The monks in the *White Horse Temple* have accused you of theft! The sacred *bodhisattva* was found missing from the temple this morning. Your greed is despicable, and you will be punished severely for the crime.” The guard’s voice rang balefully in *Zei's* mind, echoing in a persistent, overwhelming rhythm.

Zei could not believe what he was hearing – he stood, frozen in shock, his hands shaking uncontrollably. He could feel the golden statue becoming heavier and heavier inside his robes, a physical weight that was pulling him down. Frantically, he pulled out the *bodhisattva*, offering it to the guard, a crazed expression on his face.

“Here, here... you can have it! Please let me go!” Ignoring *Zei's* desperate cries, the guards seized the *bodhisattva* and began to grapple with *Zei*, restraining his arms and seating him roughly atop one of the horses. At the front of the party, the hulking guard sat upright, the *bodhisattva* resting in his open palm. It seemed to stare at *Zei*, and – perhaps it was just a trick of the glaring sunlight – its eyes glowed in red intensity. The *bodhisattva's* arms were stretched out, palms facing the sky, a symbolic gesture of generosity, the core Buddhist value.

The condescending smile that it wore was burned into *Zei's* mind. Years later, as he lay rotting away in the Imperial prison, he would never forget this smile.

The next day, the bodhisattva was reinstated in its rightful position in the White Horse Temple. As the centuries passed by, it watched, with patience, the various worshippers that came and went. Merchants would come to the White Horse Temple to pray to the goddess Guanyin, who they believed would bring them fortune.

Zei remained in prison for many years until his body succumbed to a fateful illness, his head burning with fever and his chest heaving with strained coughs. The prison guards reported that as Zei slept, he would mumble strangely, a repeated sound in the last, draining weeks of his life:

*“Oh Great Guanyin, you wretched deity,
You have cursed me with tragic misery,
The Silk Road only a memory,
only a memory...”*

With gasping breaths, Zei seemed to pluck at the empty air, his fingers pressed harshly against his palm. Almost as if he was clutching something small and heavy in his hands. His last words were screamed into the cold prison night, an anguished voice left unanswered.

1948 AD, Second Chinese Civil War

Sizi marvelled at the enormous structure in front of her, an ancient remnant of fervent worship during past dynasties. As the first Buddhist temple in China, centuries of religious growth had translated into the steady expansion of the temple since its construction during the *Eastern Han* dynasty. A local Communist soldier, *Sizi* had been tasked with securing the quiet *Luolong* District, depleted of life in the wreckage of a recent Communist attack.

The temple rose from the lower, greying buildings of the area, rectangular beige roofs stacked high to form a staggeringly tall structure. At the temple gates, its constituent bright scarlet bricks shone in the warm sunlight, and a stone statue of a mild horse seemed to welcome *Sizi*. Clutching her pistol close, she waved away her passing comrades and stepped into the ancient building.

To her surprise, when *Sizi* entered the altar room, the main altar appeared to be bare, save for a singular golden *bodhisattva* situated at the centre. She recognised the statue immediately – it was the famed *Guanyin bodhisattva*, an idol worshipped for centuries by the ancient Chinese, who claimed that it brought good fortune.

An idea began to take shape in *Sizi*'s twisting mind, dark and cunning.

Sizi's hand hovered hesitantly over the precious statue. If she took it, she could hand it off to her company captain as a bribe and possibly escape her duty as a regular soldier. The *bodhisattva* was worth more than she had ever owned in her life – it was a free path to escape the possible death and suffering she would soon have to face. The precious statue was supposed to be missing and had been reported as stolen after the Japanese ransacked the city. With a firm grip, she took hold of the statue, slipping it into her discreet pants pocket.

Suddenly, the candles at the altar, blazing flames burning vividly in the suffocating darkness of the temple, started to dim. *Sizi* could feel the wind pick up, sending a chill through her body. It seemed to whisper, a hushed song:

*“Oh my child, hear me whisper,
What you hold to keep, please consider,
Or on the Silk Road you shall suffer,
you shall suffer...”*

Abruptly, the temple returned to its previous state, candles brilliant and paling in contrast to the sunlight streaming through the entrance. *Sizi* felt unsettled, but in a heartbeat, she had already forgotten what she heard. With a shrug, she walked out of the well-lit altar room and onto the stone bricks of the courtyard.

“What did you want to see me for?” The captain hissed urgently, a frowning expression overtaking his face.

“I wanted to give you something special.” *Sizi* reached into her pants pocket, unclenching her fingers to reveal the *golden bodhisattva*. It appeared even more beautiful under the radiant moonlight, its metallic surface reflecting all kinds of incandescent patterns. *Guanyin*'s smile was mystifying, as if hiding a thousand words behind that singular expression. “This is the *Guanyin bodhisattva* of the *White Horse Temple*.”

Instantly, the captain's expression shifted to one of utter surprise, and his gaze became calculated. *Sizi* motioned to the statue: “This *bodhisattva* is made of pure gold, and is worth thousands of dollars. It is supposed to bring you great fortune and wealth. If you let me leave the army and secretly discharge me, you can keep it.” Her tone was completely even, and her voice came out placidly.

The captain stared straight into *Sizi*'s eyes, and in the blackness of her pupils, he found nothing. Her eyes spoke nothing of remorse or guilt at this blatant bribery. With a cautionary tone, he questioned. “Do you not feel any kind of loyalty to the party? To the comrades you are leaving to fight and perhaps die alone on the battlefield?”

Sizi replied dispassionately. “I care only about my life and preserving it, and I don't care what it takes to get that. Please take the statue – it will bring you more wealth than you could ever imagine. ”

In the end, Sizi was arrested for disloyalty and attempted bribery and forcefully hauled into a cramped, filthy cell. Throughout the entire process, she was recorded to be “screaming incomprehensibly”, of cursed goddesses and black temples.

The precious bodhisattva was never returned to the great temple. But it never really left Luoyang.

2015, Modern Day

From the tinted skyscraper windows, the *bodhisattva* could see the whole expanse of *Luoyang*. The *White Horse Temple*, its ancient and former home, was now only a grey speck on the horizon, barely visible. With time, even

the masterfully crafted statue bore signs of age, subtle blemishes and slight cracks on its exterior. It was perched atop a glass cabinet, in an office on the highest floor of the building.

Dao sat at a large rosewood desk that faced the vast windows, his hands running furiously through his hair. It had been the worst month of his career. The company's stock, in a plummeting fall, had completely collapsed. He stared out towards the bustling city landscape, into the endless cerulean blue sky. Suddenly, he turned towards the *bodhisattva*.

"Why? Why do the gods treat me like this? You were supposed to bring fortune, no? So where is my fortune?" *Dao* gestured wildly, raving and pacing across the room; he was in hysterics. "Yes, I made some stupid mistakes, but why is it always my fault! Don't I also need to save my reputation, to win bigger! It's not enough, it's never enough? How can you blame me for that?"

Dao rounded on the statue, now the focus of his anger. In a moment of deranged frenzy, he clutched the statue harshly, and after a moment's pause, flung it –

The sacred bodhisattva crashed through the shattered glass, jagged shards scraping the golden skin. It tumbled down towards the expansive city stretching for miles below. Just to the far right, the White Horse Temple came into view, the red bricks of the gate, the tall stack of beige roofs, a stark contrast against the modern metropolis. From the ancient gates, a roughened road ran towards the distant mountains, where the great Silk Road once stretched far and wide.

The wind, ever-present, sang her melodic sound:

*Oh Great Guanyin, hear us whisper,
Back again come the human sinners,
On the Silk Road they come swifter,
they come swifter...*

Throughout the centuries, the temple had molded to shape the Buddhist ideals of the local population, the Silk Road had shifted its many routes to suit the changing needs of merchants, yet the humans had never changed – filled with greed, they continued their hungry pursuit of fortune.

And the bodhisattva, with her serene eyes, watched it all.

Asunder

Diocesan Girls' School, Lau, Yi Fei Charlotte – 16

I

The September evening humidity wrapped around your ankles like damp socks you couldn't peel off. You shrugged your way off the MTR at Sham Shui Po, your schoolbag thumping against your hip with remedial Chinese grammar books and maths worksheets inside. Hong Kong was hardly a breather from bustling Manila. Outside, street lamps cut yellow through the steam rising from food stalls, diesel haze mixing with frying oil. You sidled over to that noodle stall you'd eyed yesterday and tried the classifier again: "Yat woon mai fun?" It still came out a bit off, your Manila accent twisting the tones, but the noodle stall auntie nodded once without so much as a side eye and turned back to her wok. A steaming plastic bowl of chili-flecked noodles greeted you shortly. Small wins.

You shuffled home while slurping the vermicelli, mind drifting. Lola's stories always scratched at the back of your mind during these moments—the ones she told over adobo back in Tondo, about Wei, the rich Shanghai boy from the family line who got sent off on a trade route with a donkey called Stubborn Cloud because his dad caught him reading smuggled Western books. "Too soft," Lola would say, her voice dropping like she was sharing a secret shame. The Hexi dust was supposed to fix him, scour away the city weakness, when his father thrust the reins forward, voice flat as the stone road ahead:

"Show some spine out there, or don't bother coming back."

Wei had snatched the saddle with a scowl, accustomed to sedan chairs and houseboys, not this swaybacked beast under endless dunes, Qilian mountains stark against the sky. On the first night, stars pierced the cold dark, wind carrying the dry scrape of tamarisk. With only the idiot donkey's labored breaths for company, he detected hooves approaching from the shadowed scrub. Ah—his silk robes betrayed him in the wind.

A reluctant sigh. He secured the jade sigil within his boot sole, then exchanged the embroidered finery for a herder's plain sackcloth by firelight. It carried the scent of goat piss, yet served its purpose.

The pursuers altered course at dawn. Efface yourself, the wind whispered to Wei—or it might have been his father.

II

The pass guards examined Wei's pack at first light, discarding the dried apricots without ceremony amid the chalky dust of the ramparts. "No tea bricks, no passage." Wei straightened, chin high from years of deference paid to him: "Article Seven permits a seasonal waiver for merchants like me." They conferred briefly and permitted him onward.

By midday he had joined a caravan; the master indicated a broken axle under relentless sun. "Repair it, or follow on foot." Wei chafed inwardly at the command, though not as much as his palms did as he bound it with leather from a camel harness—entirely unfamiliar labor for scholar's hands. The heat clung to his rough robes, but the merchants's stares cut deeper—

DEEPER even than the awful scar you'd sustained as a kid from a bicycle accident. You tried to shrug it off, marched doggedly through the school corridors; it couldn't be helped that you were the Chinese-Filipino kid with Lola's Shanghai blood running thin as watered-down adobo broth.

Morning assembly dragged through roll call and announcements. Then came the school queue for form collection: the mistress eyed your student visa stamp like it was fake under the fluorescent buzz.

Chinese class. "Your classifiers need to be crisp, Kai, or you'll repeat the year."

You scribbled out "yat go, yat wai, yat fo" in your notebook during break in the canteen line, the margin doodles a jumble of twisted lines...

Mere lines they were not, but Wei's oasis diagram still induced scrutiny when thirst overtook the camp three days from the next source.

The camels stood empty of waterskins; merchants accused the Qiang herders of withholding their mounts; Wei tasted the flat metallic tang of blood. He had bit his cheek. Was it an impossible request for these people to simply listen to reason?

"Commonfolk—er, you lot—no, everyone! Look here!" Wei cried, exhausted. Heads turned He drew a qanat diversion in the sand with a reed: a secondary channel with reed filtration. "An established method—excavate here."

Doubts were voiced, yet the shovels turned earth. The Qiang herders proved much more efficient laborers than the merchants, and a modest flow appeared by midnight. The master allocated the initial share to him. The herders offered grudging assent, though one observed: "Han methods weaken in time."

Wei offered a smile. He scrubbed off dirt from his palms with springwater. The scrapes stung; he grimaced

III

—from the salt and grease amid the clang of trays and steam vents. You stopped scrubbing the restaurant counters to attend to your phone's alert: Tita texting from Tondo.

"Hong Kong eats soft kids alive. Speak full Chinese or we'll ship you home."

You sighed. The student council proposal sat half-scribbled in your bag—a plan to merge the Pinoy club with the Chinese debate team, creating joint events and shared reps to give mixed kids like you a real voice in school activities. The pages were probably creased by now—

by the time Jade Gate bazaar hummed with thick Bactrian voices rolling over the stalls, Wei's robes were in an irreversible state of disarray.

Sogdian caftans hung striped like hazard flags in the wind; the pony-walks etched patterns on the salt pans: hours testing gait and gasp before any coin touched palm, air thick with animal sweat and brine. A stall merchant caught Wei staring too long. "You buying or just wasting air?"

Wei poured a cup of brackish tea from his flask instead, masking irritation at the rough tone. "Guards at the pass—they stick to order. Papers first, then tolls. I'm just passing time." The man's scar-deep laugh boomed out, and he slid over a dried apricot. "Sit. You sound like you've been to the capital. Any news?"

He shook his head before thinking better of it and handing over a folded sheaf of

POETRY—smuggled photocopies of Li Bai verses for extra rice portions—swapped with the canteen auntie, who raised an eyebrow at your Tagalog lilt when you thanked her amid the sizzle of woks. "Those old poems—family keepsakes? The paper is yellow and all."

No real accusation in it, just curiosity mixed with the wariness locals had for anyone who didn't fit clean. You shrugged the Filipino way, loose shoulders, and stuffed the council pitch deeper in your bag where it burned hot against—

Wei's shoulder, as the merchant Barzanes clapped it at the Dunhuang caves later that week, the murals flaking away like old skin under torchlight. But for now, they sat over

IV

"THE TEA, will you? I know the gates inside out," Barzanes said, his voice gravelly from years of road dust amid the spice-scented smoke curling from braziers. Spice mounds glowed crimson under the torchlight; Wei traded scraps of raid-path news for tips on tax skips at the inner checkpoints, concealing his disdain for the merchant's table manners. Barzanes tested him over a handful of figs: "Does rigid order bind men or just break them?" Wei poured another round of tea.

"It binds if you do it right." Laughter boomed again, and the caravan creaked in response.

But the cavernous shadows hid a pickpocket's quick slip: Wei's boot—sole jade was gone clean by morning. Barzanes just shrugged when he mentioned it. "The road always takes its tithe. Keep walking anyway." Wei swallowed pride, pressing

ON, and on and on you walked. Your student visa contact had messaged you right after school, a *ping* with a flagged notice: the council forms had triggered a lineage query from immigration. You had flagged a taxi right away, but the queue at the immigration office still loomed, seemingly unavoidable. You fanned out your passport, visa stub, and Lola's notarized Shanghai birth record—the order had to be strict or it'd get rejected outright, the clerk enforced the exact sequence like

LAW, requiring Wei, to his annoyance, to recite his full lineage at the Jade Gate patrol halt. Sigil-less and dusty with wind.

"No jade proof? These papers look torn up," the patrol leader said, squinting. Wei kept his voice steady: clan scrolls from memory, third son of the merchant guild, tolls paid in full last pass. The patrols exchanged nods and parted ranks. Utility outranked blood every time on

V

THE ROAD to renewing your visa was long; the immigration queue snaked through dawn fog the next morning; two desks over, a clerk rejected a jumbled stack of proofs with a sharp pen tap amid the hum of printers and shuffling feet. You caught the harbor salt on the breeze from the open window and restacked yours crisp: funds statement first, residence card second, Lola's notarized birth docs last. The clerk's pen scratched approval without looking up. "Next."

Tita texted you as you stepped outside into the gray light: "Those Shanghai stories from Lola—true grit or what? Don't let them push you out." Her voice crackled over the line, half worry, half dare. You pocketed the phone and headed for the MTR.

Back in the carriage crush, you refined the council pitch, eyes tracing the faces around you: office drones with crow's-feet exhaustion, maids gripping remit envelopes tight, students staring into the bright glare of an iPhone amid the sway and metallic screech of rails. Who barked clipped English at strangers, who nodded quietly in Cantonese? It was all an auditory map you read...

read in the Sogdian scar—glints around the second-night bazaar fires, where Uighur whispers spread about khan loyalty shifts. Wei poured tea again there, dodging hooded pickpockets in the crowd. Safe in a rented yurt, Barzanes halved a fig and passed half over: "Trust pools thin out here. You keep it up daily, or else."

Wei bit his lip. A prime pony swapped hands for the scouts' lead through the next pass.

The glorious echoes of the Dunhuang cave hid the jade-loss ache, but Wei walked taller into dawn anyway.

VI

A taller walk accompanied your step into interclass debate prelims the next week, hoping to gain experience. The auditorium smelled of old varnish and nervous sweat; your opener aimed to bridge Pinoy culture to the history of the Silk Road, but you fumbled a classifier mid-sentence, tones lilting wrong under the stage lights. The judges' blank faces went blanker; the room held its breath through the awkward silence.

The coach pulled you aside after the loss in the empty hallway: "Content's fine, Kai, but *practice*—no slips next time." Lola's voice looped in your head that night as you rewrote the pitch until midnight under your desk lamp: Wei walked those sands heirless and came back with something harder than jade. The student council vote hinged on getting this right, but the words all seemed to twist on the page, so terribly—

wrong, a word burned into Wei's consciousness, stinging like his eyes from the dusk sandstorm that foamed the oasis yellow. Camels trampled tents in thirst-mad panic; a herder snarled right in his face: "It's dig or die out here, boy."

Wei shoved through flying grit, not even pausing to add: "There's a shallow basin off the main tributary—line it with reeds, old qanat style." The air itself seemed to shove back—a panicked digger's blade nicked his forearm, blood streaking sand—hot down his wrist.

Dawn brought the saving trickle. Wei bound wounds in silence. A Qiang elder sized him up: "You're useful now. Get steel on that belt next time."

VII

Council vote night packed the gym with shuffling classmates and creaking chairs under harsh overheads, the air thick with teenage restlessness and basketball court polish. You laid the proposal flat on the head table—Pinoy club intros slid clean into debate team closers, joint events mapped step-by-step to give mixed students real seats at school decisions.

The chair flipped pages slow, testing the spine under everyone's eyes. "This holds up solid. Let's vote." Hands rose uneven; faces like you tipped the tally your way just enough.

Coach's words echoed as you walked out into the cooling evening: "Came through clean today." The first real relief since the visa ping washed over you on the pavement.

Relief fleeting as Wei's final barter at Dunhuang, where scrolls traded straight for camel berth on the next caravan leg amid the dry cave wind rattling loose stones. Barzanes sealed it over the deal: "Utility crosses any gate worth crossing." Dawn patrol gave the nod—no sigil needed anymore, just the memory of proved worth. The road forked endless ahead, each turn demanding fresh proof all over again.

The throes of the gym glory faded into your walk home through sodium-lit streets, council seat ensured but the threat of the visa office still looming Monday. Tita's follow-up call buzzed as you reached your building: "Proud of you, kid. "

VIII

Visa office gleamed under cold fluorescents Monday morning: long counter, clerks tapping forms in steady rhythm amid the low murmur of queues and rustle of papers. You joined the line with your stack of documents neatly clipped—council acceptance letter on top, funds proof, residence updates, Lola's Shanghai birth record buried midway for ancestry proof. The clerk ahead of you got waved through quick; yours took longer as she methodically checked each page. She flipped to the birth doc, paused at the faded Shanghai seal. "Family from there? Old road?" You nodded, throat dry. "Lola's side." She stamped green without another word. "Renewed. Next term solid."

Outside, harbor wind cut sharp through your uniform, gulls wheeling overhead against the overcast sky. Lola's tales landed differently now—not Tondo myths but maps etched in blood under Manila skin and Kowloon steam. No big reveal, just quiet fit: Shanghai grit threading your stride. Roads didn't end; they forked ahead, sequence learned.

IX

The Council's first meeting commenced the next week: Pinoy club reps eyeing debate kids wary across folding tables in the stuffy common room, fluorescent hum mixing with nervous coughs. Your proposed opener came out crisp—no accent slips, sequence locked from Manila stories to traditional Chinese logic as you walked them through the first joint event plan. Questions came fast from both sides; you fielded them steadily, your communication gaps closing real-time with nods around the table.

The Chair wrapped the meeting up early: "Solid start. Monthly from here."

Your handshake was tentative, but firm.

Firm was Wei's grip on Stubborn Cloud's reins as he pushed past Jade Gate, blisters

fresh, jade long gone, wind carrying the salt sting of the distant sea. The caravan

*master's parting words stuck through final twists and turns: "Keep walking, or the
dust always claims you back." He did—dust plumes followed him home changed, if
lighter.*

Lightly, Lola's old Shanghai family photo fluttered out from an envelope you received that month—a boy in simple robes staring out, eyes like yours under the dust. "My great—great—grandfather. Roads fork," her note read. "Family maps them."

Silk, and Blood.

Diocesan Girls' School, Wong, Yin Zaria – 16

Fate was, as they claimed, strewn in red.

My eyes scoured the room for the colour, only to be attacked by mountains worth of gold. Plates. Accessories. Shoes. Even their faces lingered with the familiar dust.

“Your Majesty, the army is ready.”

My words came out garbled.

I smoothed out my furrowed brows and stared at their golden silk robes instead. I ignored how they melded together, like how I ignored them. *My* fellow courtiers.

“Oh, look! The commoner is gracing us with his presence again!” One of them murmured in a mocking whisper.

The others snickered, not even bothering to keep their voices down. Why would they? The mere sight of my flesh made them salivate.

My dark blood, smearing their lips; my dark blood, dripping through their teeth...

“How many guards are at their borders?” The Jin Emperor asked, shovelling the golden dishes into his mouth.

“Several hundreds,” I replied, keeping my head bowed. They should not witness my calculations.

He raised his golden goblet. “To victory!” He tipped it all the way back, downing it in one gulp. “To our empire!”

“Long live the Jin Dynasty!”

I cheered along with the rest of them, the words trickling past my lips like water through a row of stones.

He took another swig from his cup, frowning before he went for the flask instead. “We never relied on them for salt and silks, unlike how they always needed us! Though the Song never stood a chance, it is even clearer now!”

Cheers erupted again.

However, that was not entirely true. Without trade, we would be a sturdy carriage, but ironically, without the wheels.

I clenched my fists, sinking my nails into my palms. I forced them open. Then, they lifted themselves to fix my helmet...

The courtiers' snickers followed me out. They echoed in my ears long after I left the wretched place, the sounds tangling with the praise for him, and *his* genius plan...

Their snickers faded into carefree laughter...laughter that erupted from the killing machines before me. They were making jokes, gathering smiles and grins like little boys would shiny stones. Did they expect praise? Yearn for it, even? I supposed it was laudable, commendable...perhaps.

The reminder left a bitter tang on my tongue. I spat out the coppery taste, watching it dye the grass an ugly brownish black. The spreading colour reached out for me, as if it were inviting me to join them in their domain. Beneath my soles.

My hand had unconsciously drifted to my sheath. I traced the pattern on it over and over again.

Jin.

Gold.

As if I could forget the Jin Emperor and the Jin Empire on this sacred mission.

The men formed neat rows, their formation more prepared for a performance than an invasion. My mouth twisted.

Where was the fear in their eyes? Where was the grim determination? Where was the forced acceptance? I shook my head.

“To victory!” I shouted, thrusting my sword towards the sky.

“To victory!” They hollered back, mirroring my stance with even more enthusiasm.

My stomach twisted too, until it took up some shrivelled form. I forced it into a chest, locked it, and threw it overboard. I watched it plummet, and plummet, and plummet...until it reached the riverbed. I licked my dry lips. This mission was set up for success. I would make sure it stayed as such.

Those were my last thoughts as the junk pushed away from the familiar lands...

Hours crawled by, yet all I did was watch the lands shrink smaller and smaller, until it disappeared with the distance, as if it had never existed at all. It was fitting. It had never felt like home.

Sweat trickled down my brow, crawling down my neck at an infuriatingly slow pace. I took off the helmet, swiped it away, and waited for fresh air to hit my lungs. If they did, it was not fast enough.

I rolled my stiff neck, and twisted my head left and right, left and right...eyes widening when they fell on the flag. A splash of bright red amongst earthly tones, the familiar stain of blood on the enemy's soil. I could see the victorious smile stretching on its lips as it savoured the attention it captured.

I knocked an arrow, and let go. It tore through the air, tore through the fabric, leaving it in mere tatters, ribbons. The smile gone, replaced by blood.

“Lieutenant.”

“Yes, General!” He answered, standing at attention.

My men's eyes burned holes in my back as I stared at the remains of the flag. I gripped the railing. My knuckles grew whiter.

“Tell the captain to turn left at the next split.”

The right path would bring us to the Southern Song naval base, whereas the left led to an abandoned creek. It would be a tight fit, but still wide enough for the junk to wade through.

In my peripheral vision, the Lieutenant tightened his grip on his spear. He did not move from his position.

“Excuse me, Sir, are—”

“What did you say?” I asked, voice deceptively soft.

“It's just—the map...”

“Are you questioning me?” I asked again, my voice quiet, gentle, contained.

The others shifted uneasily.

“No, General.”

The Lieutenant lowered his head.

“Then keep your mouth shut!”

He shrank into himself, cowering more with every word.

I bit my tongue. Useless. Worthless. Just another official born with a golden spoon in their mouth.

I turned to the rest of them. Their eyes scattered like grass in the wind. Who would have thought? The Jin army, obsessed with their dirt covered boots.

“Any other stupid questions?”

My question met the top of their heads.

Good.

“General's orders! Turn left!” the Lieutenant shouted as he headed in the captain's direction. “It's the General's orders...”

My throat tightened uncomfortably at the absurd amount of red Southern Song flags lining the harbour. Instinctively, I reached for the dagger at my belt.

My fingertips brushed against my clothes, brushed against air. My sheath was too light, too empty.

Breathing in deeply, I attempted to calm my erratic heart. This had to be believable. It was not only me, but every single soldier.

Exhaling slowly, I forced the tension away from my shoulders. I walked down the gangplank, each rise and fall forcing a creak out of it. Still, the brittle thing supported my weight.

Settling my gaze on the harbour, one person stood out in particular. Purple silk robes moulded his body, a jewel studded crown framed his head. My eyes snapped to his. They were sharp, just like my blades.

“Welcome to Lin'an!”

He sounded regal, confident, *in-charge*. His company of soldiers certainly believed so. Their spines were straighter than planks and their spearheads brighter than diamonds. Their eyes followed everything on the junk—the people, the cargo.

“Your city is really...nice,” I said.

“Thank you, Ambassador. Allow us to escort you to our palace.”

The Prince led me to the waiting carriages. His soldiers flanked us on either side. I turned back, watching an official lead the merchants in another direction.

My lips tipped up. The Southern Song emperor wanted to keep an eye on the Jin emissaries, and who better than the royals themselves?

“We will be hosting celebrations in the honour of our Silk Road negotiations,” the Prince started, “a feast, dancing...”

I wondered what he saw when he looked out the window, what he felt. Pride, perhaps? Familiarity? Maybe even fondness?

His guard glared at the Lieutenant's spear. Though his lips moved rapidly, no sound escaped.

“What a perfect opportunity to present the finest Jin horses and furs,” I mused.

Perhaps this would be the hammer that broke the ice between the two empires. I knew they needed them. Of course, their popular goods would not hurt the Jin economy either.

The Lieutenant glared at the guard's weapon with equal hostility. Low cursing exploded from his lips.

"Enough is enough."

At his prince's command, the guard clamped his mouth shut. Though reluctant, he did not open it again.

"They're guard dogs," the Lieutenant spat out, eyes ablaze.

"Lieutenant."

My hand drifted to the leather, to the memory of my blade.

"Enough."

He clenched his teeth, but he did not utter another word. His eyes flashed. Regret, perhaps? I did not care.

Silence forced its way into the carriage, into the space between our seats. It would serve as a powerful shield...

"Come get the smoothest silks from all of Song!" vendors yelled, their voices drifting through the wind as they showcased their fabrics. "We have the most intricate porcelains too, for the very cheap price of..."

I scoffed. They were spiders who showed off their beautiful webs, the very predators who trapped the passersby before they knew what they were flying into.

I closed my eyes...

A servant opened the carriage door, bowing as the Prince stepped through. The Southern Song soldiers saluted at the sight of their prince, their actions synchronised to the very second. All of them stayed in position too, when I stepped out.

We followed the Prince deep into the palace. With every twist and turn of my head, reds and golds jumped out at me. They collided together, but never forging, never mixing...

"Excuse me, Ambassador, where are you going?" The Prince asked, eyes narrowed as he scrutinised me from head to toe.

Unconsciously, I had strayed from them, drawn to the branching corridors. This time, I was turning down the left one.

I joined them again, forcing my face into a blank, indifferent mask. "Nothing. Thought I heard something..."

My legs had mindlessly brought me in that direction. Even now, they itched to head left, for whatever reason. No more slip ups, I told myself, none.

The Prince tilted his head, and stared. He turned around, and continued down the hall...

Until he locked us in with the door's ominous thud.

The Jin soldiers stared at me, their eyes darting uneasily to each other.

I toyed with the rough ends of my hair. Grime and muck stuck on their leather boots, the dried blood on it also dyeing it a lighter shade.

"Give the signal to the rest of the Jin army."

I stared at the intricately designed window. It had been years since I had seen a style like this.

"Locate them, and invade at sundown."

I didn't look at them when I uttered it.

Blood. There would be so much blood.

A knock sounded on the door.

"Ambassador, your presence is required. Please follow me," the servant said, his head bowed.

It was time.

"Remember," I said, my voice soft. My gaze swept over the warriors one last time, staying on the Lieutenant for a second longer. I did not wait for a reply.

The servant led me down the twisting halls, stopping before a door. I waved a hand, dismissing him.

He bowed.

"Yes, Your Highness."

I slid open the door to my chamber, the unexpected serenity greeting my racing pulse. I looked around.

My crown, my robes, my books. They were all here, untouched by time. I could almost imagine my younger self touching them, wearing them like he had all the time in the world. I shook my head. What a fool.

My footsteps echoed.

I turned around slowly, appreciating the mess I had made. Wrinkled sheets. Discarded belongings. Broken vases. All by my own two hands.

I walked closer to the dressing table, the bronze mirror catching my eyes. That object was not here before.

On the back, a mythical creature rose from the ashes, its fiery feathers igniting the room. I blinked. The flames glowed bright, before swimming into blood splatters. I blinked again. They were gone. The phoenix transformed into grey, grey dust...

My robes stuck to my body. I tugged at it. I tugged and tugged until it finally peeled away from my skin. Flinging the sweat drenched clothes over my shoulder, I slipped into my royal red robes, the gentle caresses rivalling baths in the smoothest milk.

I flipped over my mirror. I recoiled, stumbling.

Dark circles decorated my eyes. Bones jutted out at my cheeks. Snow kissed my lips. Only my eyes stayed the same. No, they had not either. My eyes. They had become cold.

I averted them, catching sight of the song pinned on the wall instead. I pulled it down, staring at my creation—my poetic lyrics, my angelic score.

I let go. It descended towards the floor, fluttering, fluttering, fluttering...until it finally accepted its fate. How dramatic. It would've suffered a worse fate, had I desired.

I stared. I knew it. My family knew it. My enemies knew it. Everyone knew it. The dreamer was better off dead.

My brother burst through the door. A smile spread on my face when I saw him. He had become taller, his shoulders broader, his legs longer. The sparkles in his eyes stayed though, it was still the ones I said goodbye to all those years ago.

"Brother! You're back!" he exclaimed.

I nodded slowly, my lips spreading into a grin. My lips froze when I saw the familiar emotions there. The promise of love.

"You welcomed me, just like how you promised."

Gratitude filled my voice. He was the only one who did.

He nodded vigorously. “I begged, and begged, and begged, and begged until Father relented. Are you not proud of me?”

I was proud of him. Of course I was...

“You did good, Brother, truly.” I managed another smile. “How has Mother been? Is she well?”

“The best! I took care of her the way you instructed me to! I will go get her...”

I shook my head. I would go to her later, I told him. I still had to finish my mission. He nodded.

You need to go, I said, now.

His smile faltered. His outstretched hand froze, before dropping back to his side. Confusion flickered through his eyes, a candle at the softest gusts. He looked down, shifting his feet before he ambushed me, crushing me in his arms.

The hug transmitted his warmth to me, melting the ice that encased my heart. It was not enough to revive my frozen heartbeat, but it was enough for me to feel the first glimmers of something again. I knew I should not steal his warmth, but two more seconds wouldn't hurt. I pulled him closer.

The scents of familiar citrus hit my nose. I was seven again, and Mother was holding me close. Mother, she...

He lifted his head, his eyes once again locked with mine.

I closed them. I could not bear the thought of him witnessing *me*.

Go, I said again.

He did, his eyes straying, before they fell on me again. It stayed there for one second, two.

Then, he was gone.

I climbed the final steps, my feet falling on the wood in soft thuds. My lungs used to burn when I made my way up here. Now, only my legs did.

I adjusted my silken robes, feeling the sleeves whisper against my skin. I lifted my hand and shifted my crown towards the centre, and then, the left. Its weight pressed down on my head, almost crushing my skull. But at least, it felt comforting, familiar. Almost enough to erase the memory of a helmet that squeezed.

The Jin army knocked down the gate, pouring into the city like a pack of wolves. They continued forward, united by their desire for blood.

Heads swivelled. The soulless gleams searched and searched...waited and waited, for the command. One that would never come.

I pushed down my victorious sneer, and forced the sick glee away from my face. They had not realized it, and they would not...would never understand how they were in the position of the ones they used to laugh at. A dumb rabbit caught in a snare...

I clenched the leather hilt of my blade, and squeezed. I willed it to give out, almost wished it would cut through my skin. They would smell my blood then.

They continued to march forward, their size no larger than ants from the watchtower. United, but so, so small—enough for me to squish them with my soles. Exactly how I planned for the Jin to be destroyed.

Dark red droplets fell from the sky. They transformed into long, thin arrows right before reaching the dry earth. This was it.

Our reign. Our victory. Our success.

Their flag fell.

I smiled. Even after all these years, my men did not disappoint.

Their soldiers scattered. Where was that camaraderie now?

The reds and golds continued to clash with each other, both sides fighting for dominance neither was willing to give up. They should have known better—red always won. For red was too powerful to ever be conquered, like intense, dancing flames. Always lively, always hot, always blazing, always burning, even when they were about to be extinguished...

The world waited, silent, as death breathed life into the air.

The winds blew softly, scattering the horrid scents of metallic blood and pungent decay. They spread to the skies, the splatters of dark red invading the mixture of light blue and pastel yellow, like ink diffusing in water. It spread slowly, ever so slowly, before it infiltrated the heavens, before it completely chased away its reign.

The once golden sun now too dripped with blood from the battle. He bowed his head in shame, casting his gaze away as his guilt dragged him over the hill. Under, under, under, until...darkness swallowed it whole, finally drowning the blood with it.

The bitter taste of ash coated my tongue, swelling it, making my mouth feel queer, strange. I focused on the way my flesh felt under my nails. This was a victory—*my* victory.

Finally, finally, I understood. At long last, I had a conclusion, an explanation.

Because fate was, as they claimed, strewn in red.

New Tales of China's Silk Road— Longing and Sacrifice, Intertwined

ESF Island School, Au, Joy – 15

A princess of the Silk Road, whose tale touched the hearts of many, becoming the legacy and epitome of peace and sacrifice.

The story that starts before the journey – the princess, 33BCE

A Heqin. Political marriage. The words echoed inside Wang Zhaojun's head long after she overheard it from a passing maid. Zhaojun knew, from her past readings, that there was a constantly unresolved conflict in the empire with the Xiongnu nomadic tribes in the northern region. *Filthy beasts*, those in the court called them, *untamed and bloodthirsty creatures*. Apparently, and as of recently, they posed a threat to the mighty Han dynasty, seemingly ready to challenge the empire through war and bloodshed. In order to prevent that from happening, the Emperor Yuan needed a lady in the court that would carry the title of princess and become this bridge between the two sides, through a marriage with their leader Huhanye. A token of peace. But no lady wanted to do it, afraid to leave their homes and familiarity behind.

Zhaojun, though, could picture no better opportunity for herself. Her life in the imperial harem was one of negligence, a lady in waiting never visited by the emperor because she couldn't earn his favour. She often wondered why... and she would come to the conclusion that the painter who illustrated her portrait took a large part in it. Unlike the other ladies, Zhaojun had refused to bribe the painter for a more flattering look because she was confident in her appearance, not needing enhancements – so it was unfortunate that the painter must have been overcome with frustration and greed. All it took was a malicious alter, warp, or distortion and the lady's outer beauty was reduced. Thus, the chances of the lady receiving visits plummeted to the ground.

Now a chance arises, once again. Zhaojun made her willingness clear to the palace messengers. Soon, she heard back. She was summoned to the Emperor for a departing note and blessings for the safe journey ahead. Just like that. Her willingness was met with a nod and brisk action that followed, just like the efficiency of every other event that happened in the palace. She was to be named a princess, then married off.

Zhaojun remembered the surprise on the Emperor's face. The quick flashes of disbelief, regret. It was clear that the Emperor did not expect her to be such a rare beauty. His regret was prominent, but there was nothing to be done anymore. The marriage, the agreement was settled. She was to begin the journey northward the following day.

Right before her departure, Zhaojun had heard that her portrait painter – allegedly, Mao Yanshou was his name – was executed by the Emperor for the deceitful portrait. Word circulated that the Emperor was still angered by the loss of the “immense beauty”, and had raged for hours that led the empire to a momentary mess. Within that chaos, Zhaojun's resolve did not waver. She began her journey on horseback, carrying a pipa and heading off towards the horizon.

Legend in the making – the travellers, 33BCE

Zhaojun, now officially named a princess, travelled incessantly towards the north. She was alone with her horse for a short time before her accompanying group of imperials caught up to her. It didn't matter that they were here, because they were ordered by Huhanye to leave right away when she arrived. Now, they were only giving her the independence she would face later on. She looked around. She was travelling across a winding sandy path, a wide road that brought her upwards in ascent. There were footprints of many shapes and sizes, widths and depth. Zhaojun could make out the direction they went, the parts where travellers have stopped, or slowed, perhaps for a break or to savour the feeling of being out here on these wide, thrilling roads. The sun showered everything in an incandescent glow, and the sand glistened, like an enthusiastic respondent that

mirrored Zhaojun's emotions. Excitement washed over her like never before, an exhilarating rush that comes with a person's first taste of freedom. She felt infinite, like she was hanging high above the boundless possibilities before her. She felt the urge to play music, an art she had mastered in her years of youth. Zhaojun reached backwards towards her satchel, and took out the instrument she treasured. She strummed a simple tune, and soon, the notes washed over her and she let herself sink into momentary bliss. The sun was warm on her skin, the wind a pleasant breeze. Sitting gracefully on top of her horse and with a pipa in hand, she looked like the incarnation of a goddess and a queen.

Sounds of thundering hooves stopped the four travellers in their tracks. Together, their gazes tracked the approaching figure on her horse. It was a curious sight indeed, a lone figure on the journey towards an unstable destination. They then heard a tune. It was music so melodious and rich that it could capture any person's attention. It came from the figure on the horse. A young maiden. In her hand, she held a strangely shaped instrument, some sort of stringed device that was plucked to play. The sound grew louder and sweeter, and her features too became clearer with her horse's every step. There was a collective gasp, one of awe and admiration. The maiden was absolutely stunning, her posture and her features and her strumming ones of grace. She seemed unaware of their gazes, her eyes closed as she swayed her body to the sounds of her instrument. The fascinated travellers only stood there, watching intently and as she passed by. She never noticed them. Back at home, they had to spread the story of the mysterious, beautiful maiden. They wanted people to know of this lady, one whose grace could rival the goddesses. So they spun an elaborate tale for others to hear – that when the maiden appeared, an instrument in hand and music in the air, geese would fall from the sky. Majestic and regal creatures would drop clumsily, messily, because once enraptured by the maiden's beauty the geese would forget to flap their wings. It was from there that more stories were told, each more elaborate than the last. They built onto the maiden's tale, then drifted from it and became ones of their own. Legends of kings and queens and mythical creatures and great warriors were passed on from generations, kept alive through constant retelling. These stories, moments captured in time, acted as a benchmark for moments of significance in history

The price of sacrifice – the merchants, 31 BC

A lot happened shortly after the death of Huhanye, the leader of the nomadic tribe, two years after Zhaojun's departure from her home. There was grief, from Zhaojun, for the death of the man who treated her well during her time in the tribe. Then there was hope. A selfish type, the one that strummed Zhaojun's heart like the strings of her pipa. Hope for the possibility of home. In the north, she had accumulated an exceedingly large amount of knowledge. To adapt to the new environment, she studied the customs of the tribes. She learned their culture, their language, and stayed persistent in adapting to the new life. But she always dreamed of home. The imperial harem back in Han was her home, and though she changed in many ways in the two years time, she could never forget her roots. The hope and possibility of returning drove her, and now, with the death of her late husband, that feeling bloomed and amplified. Home. She could finally go home. Perhaps the weight of her sacrifice was lighter than she thought, the price not too hard to pay if she persisted. Then there came despair. The one type that crushed her heart into a million splintering pieces. From the Emperor's decree, she was to follow the customs of the tribe and marry the successor of the late ruler. With every death, a marriage followed. It was ironic to her, because marriage, the tradition she once thought was an escape of her trivial life, was just a cage coated with gold. An illusion of free will, and an underestimation of the heavy weight of sacrifice.

The merchants left their homes for long periods of time to deliver goods. The knowledge they accumulated was abundant, and what they learned could be taught to others for many years to come. But they know, from experience, that there was always a prince. The sun was a scorching ball of rage, and the heat wore them down mercilessly. Leaving their homes for years might turn into decades, then never going back. A story of a princess of the Hans served as their reminder – some sacrifices were too big, the price too painful. They kept her tale with them as a story of caution, passing it on along the road they traveled in and using her name as a reminder of a home, awaiting their return.

Zhaojun, no longer a young maiden but a woman who remarried twice, was now well accustomed to her life. Though she had eased into acceptance, a deep part of her still remembered and yearned for her life back in Han. Her mind constantly wandered to experiences of her past self. She remembered encountering a group of dancers. Sensual and beautiful, they had the grace of a lethally honed blade. Their movements were fierce, yet each muscle was controlled to a sharp precision that felt almost dangerous. Mesmerising to the eye. The twirls and dips were complex, each miniscule movement carefully curated. They told stories with their actions, her body. Like a snake in the desert, a swordtail fish in the rivers, a princess in the night. Zhaojun pictured them now. So liberated in their travels and unconstricted in their flowy garments. The dancers embody freedom, everything that Zhaojun had wished for. Perhaps it was that her resolve had held on for way too long, the well of sadness suppressed and held for as long as she could, but Zhaojun felt her strength begin to collapse. The many years of holding on, staying strong, being the token between the Han Empire and the Xiongnu tribe. In the end, she decided to hold on to a part of her that longed for another life, to become anything other than the isolated and lonely woman she ended up as. She didn't carry resentment, though. She carried what she brought to Xiongnu, many years ago. Peace. She knew peace just as much as she knew that her time would soon come to an end.

The dancers traveled the lands and the seas on their caravans. They were a family, tight and coherent, and they experienced the world together. They had stories, these dancers. Met people that showed them different sides to their cultures, which the dancers then passed on with their own interpretations woven into their dances. This way, stories and cultures were exchanged through the most unique ways. There was one dance that they enjoyed the most. One that, when performed, conveyed the burdens of a great sacrifice, a woman who awed many with her musical talent, and a beauty that brought peace to her home. The dancers loved depicting the story of Zhaojun because it was a reminder of one of the greatest sacrifices that was followed by centuries of art that depicts the tale

Lives, intertwined – The ending

In the end, Zhaojun never returned home. Her suppressed yearning, her heavy sadness and her eventual, graceful acceptance all died with her, disappearing in wisps of air. But stories and legends of her great beauty, unmatched talent and immense sacrifice lived on. Tales were told through art – in poems, operas, dances. Titles given: “Peaceful Queen”, the epitome of sacrifice bringing harmony, and one of the Four Greatest Beauties in Ancient China. Like many, many others before her, she had walked the Silk Road. And like many, many others before her, she brought change to the culture, the trades and the peace that makes our world the vibrant and rich place it is today. Her story, though a lonely and ultimately tragic one, was intertwined with many others who lived during her time. Travellers, merchants and dancers, those who defined and enriched the culture of the Silk Road, narrated Zhaojun's life in many different ways. Through them, her story was passed on, her legacy told and her name remembered: Wang Zhaojun, the princess who grappled and lived with longing and sacrifices, hand in hand.

The Journey of Yun Qi

ESF Island School, Cheung, Andrea – 14

220 CE, Nanhai (Hong Kong), Han Dynasty

Yun Qi was born into a middle-class fishing family that worked gruesomely under the scorching hot sun every day to make enough money to support themselves. As Yun Qi grew up, he was surrounded by his father's friends, who were also experienced fishermen and learnt how to master the craft of fishing. However, as he grew older, this fisherman's lifestyle began to torment him; he wanted to pursue something else in life. Moving away from his family and this small community was never something he thought about, until one day his cousin told him that he was going to leave the village and move to a city called Chang'an, in hopes of becoming a merchant. From that moment on, his community began to change; people moved away to find better opportunities, often relocating to the north, leaving their families behind in the hope of a better future. Yun Qi was still too young to live independently, so he continued relentlessly working every day, fishing to earn funds to support his future trip on the Silk Road.

210 CE, Nanhai (Hong Kong), Han Dynasty

Yun Qi had just turned sixteen, the age when children turn into adults and must find a job to do for the rest of adulthood. After seeing his cousin come back home recently decked out in jewels and silk attire, and receiving a god-like welcome party as villagers cooed over his wealth and buckets of gold he brought back to his family, Yun Qi became lividly jealous. Yun Qi couldn't believe that someone with a similar status to him could become so incredibly wealthy by just being a merchant! Determined to do whatever it took to come back as the wealthiest son of the village, Yun Qi decided that being a merchant was what he was going to do for the rest of his life.

Aspiring to become better and wealthier than his cousin, courageous Yun Qi leaves his family for the first time to venture onto the Silk Road. One last wave. Yun Qi steps out of his family's wooden hut, trembling, with tears sprouting out of his eyes, fearful of whether this would work out or not. His polished shoes, freshly laundered clothes, and a brown sack filled with gold and silver were all he had to face the challenging, unplanned journey lying in front of him.

209 CE, Chang'an (capital of China), Han Dynasty

On the journey away from his hometown, he saw magnificent scenery: plains of barren land with wild cats and monkeys, vendors with their caravans selling all sorts of goods, including strange animal parts such as tiger bones, and the closer he got to Chang'an the more people were dressed in silk and draped in gems just like his cousin when he arrived back home. On the way to the multicultural, vibrant city of Chang'an, Yun Qi picked up a bit of Venetian on the way from his kind-hearted guide, who emphasised to him that this would be handy and the key to success on the Silk Road. Since foreigners were the customers who rake in the most gold, as they often pay triple to quadruple the amount that is usually charged for goods!

Getting off the mighty muscular horse that brought him to the hustle and bustle of this city filled with people meant that he had to finally say farewell to his wise guide. Deciding not to waste any time, Yun Qi made his first purchase with a merchant from a town nearby who owned his own flock of silkworms, before entering Chang'an. He got five sacks of mulberry silk for just three gold coins, hoping to resell them to foreigners to make his first fortune on the Silk Road. Proud of his purchase, he decided to use the remaining half of his gold coins to buy a camel, which was an essential for merchants on the Silk Road. Not only are camels able to carry huge amounts of stock, but they are also able to survive a week without eating food and brave the tough conditions on the Silk Road. With his new companion, named Fei (the Chinese word for fly), Yun Qi decides to find a place to stay for the night.

After a long day of travel, he was famished and decided to stop by a local marketplace for goods. Jumping off Fei, he looked at the array of vendors who were in straight lines as if they were soldiers heading to war. These stalls sold food which included dried snakes, spiky orange fruits and seasoned pig organs, which terrified him! Some

less unusual foods included jackfruit, meat on sticks which have been cooked over a fire, spices which had a pungent smell, and drinks which had dried leaves in them. Disgusted by how some of the food looked, he decided to just purchase some lamb coated in herbs, which reminded him of his mother's cooking and a bunch of massive purple grapes. With all of his goods secured, Yun Qi rode his camel for a couple of miles before he found a nearby caravanserais (roadside inn) to settle in for the night before heading into town the next morning.

As soon as dawn broke, the explorers, buyers, and merchants in his inn were already ready to embark on their next journey, as daylight was precious and once nightfall hit, nothing could be done. Yun Qi drowsily hobbled onto his camel again to venture into the town square filled with people talking in various dialects, farm animals kept on ropes tied to a pole, vendors bickering with each other, and servants with their masters purchasing expensive goods. What a sight!

After taking it all in, Yun Qi spotted a young man dressed to the nines, with brown hair and blue eyes, with a servant behind him, carrying all his recent purchases. Yun Qi figured out that he must be one of those wealthy foreigners his guide had told him about on the journey here! Slowly approaching him, Yun Qi showed the foreigner his bags of silk and used his hands to show that he was selling them all for 15 gold coins. The young foreigner looked at him with amazement and quickly took out 15 shimmering gold coins from a chest filled to the brim with gold jewellery, bars and coins of all shapes and sizes. Astonished by his fortune, Yun Qi thanked the foreigner and trudged back to his camel to continue with his journey, aspiring to be like him.

206 CE, Dunhuang, Han dynasty

After three years of trading silk and other precious goods, Yun Qi had arrived in Dunhuang, home to another trading oasis. With his newly bought jars of spices and silk from his recent stop at a small market, he smiled as he saw the sun rise, which signalled a new day for more trading.

Just before entering the city, Yun Qi bumped into a strangely dressed old man who was dressed in saffron coloured cloth, draped in earthy coloured beads and had wrinkles on his forehead. He was interested in the large array of spices Yun Qi had attached to his camel earlier that morning. Yun Qi gave him a bottle of nutmeg for a silver coin. Interested in who he was, Yun Qi asked him, "What do you do? I've never seen someone dressed like this before!"

The old man replied, "I'm a Buddhist monk who shares the beautiful teachings of the scriptures from Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha and his early followers! His scriptures recite tales that have happened a long time ago and use these stories to teach us to learn from the mistakes people have made in the past. Siddhartha Gautama's teachings also help us to face challenges and help us improve to become the best version of ourselves. Do you want me to teach you something?"

Yun Qi curiously retorted, "Sure!"

They sat together for the rest of the day and chatted about stories and scriptures, learning more about each other. Yun Qi learnt that life involves suffering, which is caused by cravings and attachment, which can be ended by the Noble Eightfold Path. Actions have their own consequences, which shape our future and potential rebirth, but it's also possible to acknowledge your wrongdoing and change your inner self for a fresh start. After a long day together, Yun Qi had never felt so calm and sure of himself in a long time. He was inspired by the simplistic, disciplined life the monk lived and how he wasn't distracted by cravings like wealth.

Yun Qi felt the power of Buddhism and truly believed it was fate that brought him and the monk together. After a spiritual week together, the monk had to leave for Xi'an to continue spreading the word of Siddhartha Gautama. Before the monk left, he gave Yun Qi one of his own earthy coloured bead necklaces in the hope of it helping Yun Qi remember the best way to live life and what to value in life. After reciting a mantra together, Yun Qi goes on his knees to thank the monk for the light he brought to his life.

200 CE, Dadu (Beijing), Han Dynasty

Marco Polo, son of a wealthy Venetian merchant and Kublai Khan's trusted foreign emissary, the chances of running into him on the Silk Road were slim as he often travelled in a private caravan which brought him from one meeting to another, often making no quickstops along the way as time was precious and shouldn't be wasted on small errands like purchasing from street merchants.

For some bizarre reason, Marco Polo decided to stop at Yun Qi's plaza stall to purchase some silk for Kublai Khan on his way back to the palace. Marco Polo was dressed in a deel (a traditional Mongol fitted robe), with a threaded gold belt, a head turban to keep warm and fur boots. His bright eyes, round chin and energetic voice made everyone fall in love with his charisma. Yun Qi was also captured by his sense of charm and decided to learn more about this interesting foreigner dressed in traditional Mongol attire. After asking around, he found out that this was one of the emperor's favourite servants, and that he came from an extremely wealthy family of merchants from a faraway land.

Jealousy bubbled inside of him as he saw the young boy live such an amazing life; not only was he born into wealth, but he was also a close friend of the emperor. Although Yun Qi had also become a successful merchant, he believed that he still hadn't reached the level of wealth he desired; he just always wanted more.

The next day, Yun Qi decided to devise a plan to sabotage Marco Polo. After spying on Marco Polo's daily routine and behaviour, it had finally come to the day when the deed would be done. The dark sky was lit by a pale moon with uneven bumps like a off-white skull in the sky, the road was eerily quiet except for the occasional croak of a raven. With multiple makeshift bombs filled with gunpowder, Yun Qi sneaked to Marco Polo's caravan parked against the rocky road and stealthily slipped it through a gap into the cart he was supposedly fast asleep in.

However, Marco Polo already suspected that something was to happen tonight and couldn't fall asleep. As he spotted such a familiar object being slipped into his cart, he immediately jolted and screeched out loud, causing the ground beneath him to shake. The object he held was filled with gunpowder, and the man behind this plotted murder was unknown. Marco Polo's servants were already beside him in a protective circle, as investigations were made in the surrounding area.

Yun Qi hid behind bushes of fruit nearby, trembling, as he saw that Marco Polo's servants had also realised what happened. His heart dropped, his hands froze, and his eyes gazed at the scene in disbelief. He had to run away now; he knew he was in deep trouble and would soon become the most wanted person in Dadu.

199CE, Venice, Han dynasty

After a year of fleeing from Dadu, Yun Qi's many prayers to the Buddha were in hopes of the Buddha providing him guidance, safety, and forgiveness. Yun Qi, realising his unskillful doings (doing things that cause harm), turned from a boastful, greedy man to a generous, helpful person. Yun Qi started meditating and sharing the stories and scripture the monk had told him with other people. One day, a voice in his dreams told him to settle down in a small town in Venice to be protected from all the people who were on the lookout for Yun Qi. Yun Qi thought this was a ridiculous idea, hiding out in his enemy's hometown. Only a psycho would do that. However, he followed the bold voice in his head and left for Venice.

Once Yun Qi arrived in a small close-knitted town in Venice, he changed his name to Andrew to fit in with the villagers and to not stand out. Using his Venetian skills, Andrew (Yun Qi) managed to communicate with other villagers and run errands in his day-to-day life. He stayed in a small hut in the suburbs of the town and grew his own food and spent time every day to offer incense and thanks to the Buddha who he believed was the voice that talked to him on that day.

However, not long after he settled into the small town in Venice, a deadly plague spread to their town. With no proper cure for it at that time, Andrew (Yun Qi) passed away after living a wonderful, adventurous, and arduous life.

2026, Hong Kong

After Andrew's passing, he moved to Nirvana, a place with unconditioned peace and enlightenment, which is achieved in the human realm (human life) from a good balance of pleasure and suffering.

From Nirvana, Andrew (Yun Qi) sees the advancements made to the modern world and how easy it is now to buy goods from around the world. It isn't necessary to trek for miles and miles every year to find a good you want to purchase; it only takes a couple of clicks on the internet for you to have something you want shipped to your doorstep.

The roads which Andrew (Yun Qi) used to travel on for days at a time have now turned into railways for high-speed trains, which can move you from a city to another in moments. Highways have been built for advanced caravans (modern-day vehicles) to create another method of transportation. The new Silk Road connects Asia, Europe and Africa to create a faster and cheaper trade network, helping to create more opportunities for economic growth for all.

Now his hometown, Nanhai, known as Hong Kong, has turned into a melting pot filled with cultures, a city known for its dynamic skyline and, most importantly, trade. With duty-free trade allowed on the ports which used to be the home of fishermen like Andrew, it has attracted many international companies to import and export goods. Hong Kong has also become an important financial hub, home to digital trade and a stock exchange.

Silk Road's transformation has been incredible. Without brave merchants like Yun Qi travelling thousands of miles, who laid the basis of trade, we wouldn't have the complex network of trade we have today. Only time will tell what the future of the new Silk Road will look like.

Viper's Silk

ESF Island School, Fu, David – 15

Taklamakan Desert, 8th Century AD

On the Silk Road, everyone lives for themselves. The golden promises of wealth and status run through every person that sets foot on the jungle of goods, currency and cultures. And that includes me. The fragmented, unfinished dreams with fountains of silk and jade are more than enough to give myself hope.

I look into the hollow shell that is my pouch. Countless rolls of silk and two bags of peppercorns. All my savings for this. In the east, silk is almost a commodity. In the west, a roll is worth a year's worth of grain. One task, and I won't have to work anymore. I'll have a caravan, food, water...

There's no water nearby. Dust wafts and drifts through my throat, searching for traces of liquid. A stabbing pain emerges within the drought that is my stomach. Its churning croaks serve as a far cry from the explosive, exasperating groans of the past. The sun beats down on me, its scorching taunts growing more obsessive. Its arrogant, devastating illumination mutilates my vision as an orchestra of deformed colours suffocates my already blurry eyes. Where am I even? Khongor? Are those cliffs in the distance the Huoyan mountains? How far am I from Gaochang? I have spent two weeks on this route, this marred pavement stretching endlessly. My neglect on supplies now borders on insanity. Drops, crumbs, gone. Just an empty abyss.

A yellow speck appears in the distance. The creature gnashes against the jagged pebbles that hacked my feet into disfigured husks of flesh and bone. I freeze in place. A gurgling bellow erupts from the creature's mouth, silencing the nearby plains as they bow to its authority. A golden silhouette appears. As if they had bulged out, a pair of woolly mounds emerge from the creature's back, spitting out residual fur to the dismay of two men, engulfed in an amethyst layer of chalky silk. One carries a *Taomujian*, its sumptuous surface of peach timber being repellent against the wrathful gathering of desert spirits. I see it. A caravan, glimmering with a harmonious assortment of spices, paper and pomegranates atop a camel. Easy pickings.

My pouch unveils a tarnished dagger, foaming with a punctured film of rust. Not yet. I hold on to my congested lungs as a continual gag despondently scavenges for oxygen within the desolate, dust-filled conditions of the desert.

The camel euphorically rejoices as the two men leap from its back, consumed with panic. A crimson glow bursts from their cheeks, lathered in sweat. One of them takes out a *hulu*, its emerald pigment unblemished. Now. Without notice, my cutlass launches out, slicing through the rough air. The man stumbles back, revealing a clean cut within his silk tunic as my dagger hacks his prestige to shreds. I make an announcement. "Unless you want to be treated like your robe, stay still." Every man for himself. The other man, astonished and unarmed, delivers a petrifying shriek, piercing through the delicate strings of soot. My wrist jerks forward, the blade's tip snapping towards the man's neck. They stand there frozen. The dust pummels their once pristine faces in their bamboozled state.

I'm ready to commemorate the occasion, yet I barely manage a whimper. My eyes lock onto the silk. My wilted tongue flails against the desiccated remnants of my lips, foaming with the miniscule remains of fluid. As I propel towards the ethereal offering, a rush of exhilaration gushes through my veins.

However, my actions may have brought about intense malediction. I lurch forward, maintaining a shred of stability. I gag and retch, hands unyieldingly clutched to my neck as my lungs gasp and wheeze for air. My dagger is liberated as it dives towards the ground. Before I can hear the impact, I go limp. My legs jolt back to life. Small vestiges of sunlight slowly approach, pouring out from cracks within a meek, modest selection of windows. A pitch black chamber is reshaped into a motherly assortment of grey tones. My tongue flounders, revealing a greasy blanket of moisture. Reassurance floods through my blood as I slither around

a cotton mattress. Below, my belongings. The holes in my pouch are critical, but its sacrificial effort was not in vain. The items are still intact, if not in mint condition. Panic and fear dissipate as a layer of gracefully delicate silk delivers a tender embrace. My eyes dart towards a marble table. A conglomerative gathering of jade and marble are in attendance, their luscious ornamental patterns reflected in the delightful bliss within my eyes. Whether I have been reborn or this is a gift from the Buddha, the viridescent, robust shades of jade will be representative of my idolatry.

Someone knocks on the door. It quivers, its chiseled physique growing nauseous against the uneasy, unrelenting vehemence of the towering silhouette. Without notice, the man reveals himself. A vigorous layer of vermilion ruthlessly imprisons a pair of shrivelled eyes, barricaded by marble-like bulges of oil. A film of feeble, dulled skin creates faded, droopy patches across their face. He opens his mouth, producing a hoarse croak through the gravelly wasteland that are his lips. "You're in Gaochang. The same travellers you attacked brought you here." My relaxed pupils dilate, swelling profusely. If those travelers upheld my beliefs by living for themselves, I would have rotted in the desert, my decay solidifying an untimely death. Those fantasies I let drift were nothing more than delusion, fragmented illusions blooming from hyperbolic fables and fairy tales. I was wrong. "Your condition was so bad we had no choice but to leave you here. Be grateful." As if a horde of ashes were confined within, his throat summons a tumultuous cough. "We'll see if you're really guilty in a second. Don't try anything."

I rise up from my bed, only managing a limp from the carnivorous conditions of the dehydrated wasteland. The marathon to the door seems never-ending as a vast network of hallways and rooms create a royal labyrinth of tiles and bricks. As the hallway ends, an angelic gleam peers through the outer garden. I walk out, greeted by a *siheyuan*. Bamboo spears sprout from the soil, their lush green hues towering over the roof. A carmine accent manifests across the walls, creating a synergistic ensemble of colours across the rich coating of green radiated by the unending bloom of keen, hospitable grasses.

The man and some guards suddenly appear before me, a dull layer of rusted steel serving as an impenetrable barrier. "We're taking you to the Yamen." Seeing the bloodthirsty, burnished blades glimmering in the sunlight, my mouth binds itself shut. As we walk, I see thriving ecosystems in marketplaces and neighbourhoods. However, they all seem like lethargic husks of their former selves in the man's presence. Unfortunately, it doesn't look like I can find answers.

We enter the magistrate, revealing a graceful yet intimidating courtroom. A wooden table appears before me, its flow of lines and patterns rippling across a gentle, smooth surface. This was perfect for the silky, mirror-like smoothness of the symmetrically positioned calligraphy paper, screaming to be written on. The brushes to the table's side emit wisdom and experience, their black hues representing battle scars from previous use. Golden streaks create a glamorous pattern of shine across the sturdy marble floor. It may have been centuries since then, but history burns brightly through this room. It's the site of Xuanzang's meeting with Qu Wentai. It may seem unassuming, but this was the birthplace of a legend. The man moves to sit on his wooden throne, calmly dipping his brush into the ink-filled crucible. Questioning begins.

"Don't make this any harder than it needs to be." Solemn, genuine undertones tore through his otherwise unsympathetic demeanor. However, those shreds of emotion were unceremoniously discarded. "Those men reported you with attempted theft using a weapon. That's the rusty dagger you dropped, I presume?" In an instant, a torrential downpour of thoughts and deliberation storm through my mind. However, one prevails over all the others. The old me would certainly lie, clinging on to any signs of freedom. Because of my previous philosophy and lies, I would have dried out if not for those people. Their generosity brought me here. It's time to repay it. "Yes," I mutter. "Good choice."

Thin scraps of hot air squint through the windows, suddenly thrust into the spotlight. The man's brush strokes are eloquent and serene, a tranquil dance across the unmoving, obedient paper. The verdict is decided. "You have two options," the man claims. "You can give up your belongings. We can even let you stay here, as you admitted to wrongdoing. The second option is a year of penal servitude." Although the previous choice was

difficult, this one would be a lot easier. If I lost my items here, this journey would have been worthless. The man groans. “Well, you’re going into the cell behind the door over there. Service starts tomorrow.”

I’m thrust into a wooden cell. An ink-coloured void bathes the room as drops of water trickle out from the ceiling. I become prey for the nighttime tundra, as a paper-thin sheepskin sheet becomes my only source of warmth. Claw marks envelop the walls, its bright brown hues becoming a lavish meal for the immeasurable masses of termites. My only sight apart from wood is a rotting rectangular hole on the door, only to reveal my warden, his brush relentlessly slaving away at the paper. Occasional groans and whining cause creaks in his emotionless facade, hinting shreds of vulnerability. I have been reduced to a blot, a curious stain on an otherwise spotless reputation. My restlessness continues for hours as the arctic gales and tormenting drizzles stir my insomnia. My final sight before sleep is the man, continuing those mundane, repetitive actions, as if he was a fellow prisoner.

A rough strike of the door rocks me awake. My pale eyes frantically blink, prancing around to maintain consciousness. As the fog clears, a thunderous yell punctures the silence. “Get up!” Covered in hunk after hunk of metal, this guard was clearly different. As I look up, a swelling belly’s hulking weight brings his armor to its limit. A pale grey forest engulfs his chin as loose, baggy wrinkles mask his eyes and nose. Getting up, my arms droop to the floor, rhythmically swaying with the drunken wobbles of my feet. Not amused by my performance, the guard viciously strikes me with his *zhang*. The searing pain echoes through my body. His ear-splitting screams gradually grow numb as I slither outside my torture chamber.

Trudging across the outdoor heat, I’m led to a dry field. It hisses, spitting out a torrent of dust. The guard looks unfazed, becoming a statue as I’m submerged in the storm. As it clears, a small spade and a pair of baskets appear on the ground. “Fill the baskets and carry them over there!” I’m confused. I squint as if I were a dragonfly. In the distance, as if it was across the planet, I see a sandy smudge in the distance, probably a home for a new citizen. Seeing the brash, arrogant cane glued to its owner, I have no choice but to start working.

As I smash my spade into the sand, it bounces off, twisting and turning to reveal a small slit. Hacking away at the surface, any breath, wheeze or rest was met with a cane to the back. Every excruciating scoop of soil was a mere drop in the bucket, a light dessert for the basket’s voracious appetite. After what seemed like hours, I had completed my first bucket. I began my trek. Battered and bruised by the naked heat, the sun’s incessant orbit drains my remaining moisture away. My age-old *khata*, its once silky texture reduced to thorns, claws and tears off my skin, as bulging, mushroom-like blisters sprout from the tormented flesh. The heat-infused scalds of my sweat writhe as their boiling does nothing but intensify the abuse. When I return, tears drown out my vision. A guttural holler interrupts my festivities. “What took you so long? Five more times and you can return!” With every yell, dust storm and cane, going to the west feels more and more distant, like an invisible barrier has descended along the continent. I just want this to end.

I’ve finished my first day, but my body feels a year older. My once warm beige pigment is reduced to cindered blotches of tar, shrivelled and crisp from the sun’s boiling. Returning to my cell, the lifeless, uninspired man continues stroking at the paper, looking into the ink-filled abyss.

The past few days have been a steaming pot of misery, mountains of pain held together by bread scraps and muddy soybeans. In my occasional sights outside the little rectangular hole at the door, the man continued to work, usually past my bedtime. In our respective boredom, I began conversing with him. “So, where are you from? How’d you find yourself here?” Sensing no hostility or malice, the man calmly replied, “Quanzhou. I worked my way up to become a *cishi* and found myself here. How about you?” “Dunhuang. It’s like here, but more desert.” We fly through past environments, through the azure, gentle ripples across the water in the ports of his hometown, and the bottomless, impenetrable dunes of mine. For the first time, I have something to look forward to.

For the next couple days, even as the guard’s shrieks ring in my ears, we keep talking. Whether it’s folk tales, stories of our travels, or viper attacks, our laughs tear through the chilly air. As we grow closer, the man starts

telling the guard to lower his voice. He also gets me a steel shovel, and cuts two of those tortuous trips from my schedule.

I'm a month into my sentence. The sun's beginning to glimmer. My bodily functions are refusing to function. The guard calmly knocks on my door. "Stop," the man says, in a similar state. "He deserves a break." It's a blessing for the heavens. My broken down body has some time to mend itself. More importantly, I've got some very important questions to ask.

"Well, where were we?" I joke. The calm before the storm. The man snickers, peering at my cell through the window. "I believe it was Zhang Qian's life in captivity." I lay down, preparing for my question. "This may seem unexpected, but why do you work until the middle of the night? And alone, for that matter?" He gently lays his brush on the table. It was like no one had ever questioned him, challenged his authority. "Well, I handle pretty much everything here by myself." I shoot back. "Why don't you have others help you, then?" He raises his shield, leaving his answers hidden. "That's none of your business." It doesn't matter. I need answers.

"Well, I was planning to turn my items in, because I'm tired of all this digging." The man raises his eyebrows, pleased yet visibly befuddled. It may seem malicious, but I'll reveal my true motives later. "You'll let me out, but I won't until you let someone work with you. How long do you expect to live like this?" I don't care about silk or jade. What matters now is the wealthy yet haggard man right in front of me. He stays silent.

Deafening silence goes on for what seems like lifetimes. The man hesitates, opening and closing his mouth, before releasing his feelings. "There's a reason I chose to leave Quanzhou. There, I wasn't seen as a friend or old schoolmate anymore. I was a walking favor, just some rich man. I never want to be part of that life again."

I deliberate for a few seconds, and retaliate. "There's a reason no one's ever questioned you. Here, you're a walking pen, just some rich man, drowning in documents and reports. As I stand in this cell, we're one and the same. Prisoners." The man stays silent. "Two options. You can give up this isolated lifestyle, and live like a human. The second option is a lifetime of self-servitude, just to decay in the prison you created."

For the first time, he stops sitting still. Friction circulates through his bones. The echo of the market dances through the room. The clock seems heavier. Louder. One option quenches his insatiable thirst, while the other lets him wither in the desert. His mind seems to tear itself apart. "Let me choose. I'll deal with your belongings."

The man arranges guards to send me back to his home. Taking off the lamented leathery debris from my cloak, I'm given a silk tunic, its velvety strings gliding across my skin. I'm brought back to the same room I woke up in. Those riches are mere decorations, a hindrance to my inner workings. His decision is top priority. The wall stays silent as I mindlessly stare for hours, shuffling through the endless possibilities.

The door suddenly shifts open. A guard enters. "He wants you to know he's made his choice." I follow him to the yamen, praying for the answer I'm looking for.

I enter, revealing the tormentor guard, his graceful armor splattered with ink blotches. I laugh. "Is this the best person you could find?" Crevices appear through the man's fading eyebags, shining with a tranquil discharge of oil. Sensing comfort and relief, the ruby patches across his eyes begin to dissolve. Unlike me, he made the right choice. "I'll be back by evening," he says, a smile painted across his lips.

I wake up from a short slumber, to a soft, dignified voice. "I just remembered from our conversations. Don't you want to go to the west? What happened to that?" My eyes widen, revealing a hidden determination. I brush it off and grin. "Don't you remember the last time I headed west?"

Threads Through Time

ESF Island School, Tan, Zac – 15

I remember the way every story I listened to of ancient times used to explode in my little child's head. The way details of fearsome warriors or fallen empires sparked my imagination was an adrenaline rush. As a grown adult whose profession lies in archaeology today, I often get asked: "Marco, what has kept your passion for history alive up to this day?"

"Well, there is always something new to learn everyday." I reply.

Lately, however, times were different. Frankly, this feeling of boredom was like a familiar muscle memory that just takes over your actions. All that filled my tasks at work were documents and paperwork of lethargy.

Desperate to snap out of this horrid mood, I strolled to where, since childhood, I would never stop calling my second home. Nowadays, the Biblioteca Angelica was as bare as a desert, with not a single soul in sight, as the popularity of the internet was a zombie virus.

It's just too bad for them; they had missed the gold I have craved for an eternity! Hours of searching had finally led me to a point in history where many, especially in the city of Rome, are oblivious of. As I opened the book to the very first page, I surrendered to my imagination's indulgence of whichever world I transported to today, in which I fell into a world twenty-two thousand years ago on the other side of the globe...

...

Where was I? I had no clue. All that surrounded me was sturdy brown bamboo and tall grass. I could practically smell the greenery in the air; it was nothing like Italy at all. The sun, beaming down on the top of my head, eradicated every drop of water vapour from existence. I started to walk forward, feeling the skin on my lips shrivel as I quickly realised the lack of humidity in this foreign land. As I enjoyed breathing in the unpolluted air of this ancient world, my eardrums started to vibrate – someone was approaching. In the corner of my eye, a young girl with a basket in the palms of her hand, full of small white pellets, trotted past my ghostly existence towards the small cocoon in front that somehow I did not even notice. I squinted. Long black hair and abnormally small eyes, as well as a robe full of holes that covered her entire body. Pale bony fingers emerged from the sleeves of the robe as they plucked off the oval white cocoon dangling from the branch like a lantern. Despite her frail calves, her speed showed no sign of slowing down as she ran off farther into the bamboo forest. Trying to keep up with her pace as hard as I could, even in the blazing sun, I thought I heard a little whisper escape, a voice saying, "We'll need more than this."

The sun was slowly fading into the horizon. Spiky leaves and long branches pricked and tangled my way as I slowly lost sight of her. Just when I thought my sore feet could not dash any longer, I stumbled out of a forest of bamboo and into a forest of huts and roads. The people? Panting, I rubbed my eyes and looked again. Families sat on the dusty gravel next to hordes of children with their hands on their stomachs. What seemed to be the main entrance of the village only greeted the very few travellers with a small sign that read "LongCun". As the girl guided me through the suffering, I could not help but notice that food and water seemed to be scarce. At last, I caught my breath as the girl leaned over to a skinny couple and 3 other children.

"Ma, I collected more than we have ever had in months. This will surely bring food for the whole week."

"Good job, Lian," the fatigued woman on the floor said. "But I'm afraid not even selling silk can bring us satisfaction now. The drought has taken our last farmer's land. It's as if the sun had burned it all to a crisp."

Lian seemed devastated. I could tell that Lian felt her efforts had been in vain. A trickling tear fled from the grasp of Lian's face, but evaporated away before it even reached the ground. Just then, a man in completely different clothing phased through me, startling me as my heart skipped a beat. Lian, just as surprised as I, was stunned by the sight in front of us.

"Who...is he?" Lian questioned.

Her mother replied, "They rarely come due to the lack of supplies we can offer, darling, but I guess their trade is the only source of nutrition now. Judging by the accent and clothing, he is probably from WuHai."

Maybe not for this world, but no doubt I saw a light bulb in Lian's head...

...

"I'm leaving."

A week had passed. I turned around to hear a voice coming from a familiar girl. Large bundles of silk, which were supported by two long bamboo sticks and a tight rope gripped onto her back. The sky, crystal blue, shone its scorching spotlight on the girl as many had gathered around, eyes in shock. At Lian's feet, brothers and sisters screamed from the agony of their hearts.

"Where is your hope?" cried Lian to the astonished crowd, "I'll say it again. We need this. We have no other option. If I do die, I'll know I died at least trying!"

She sprinted. The monstrous strength in her sculpted calves, fueled by determination, pushed her forward away from the children, but also from the weeping elderly couple that fell to their knees. Where was she going? Not even world governments of my time would know. All I could tell was that she clearly intended to go far, far away from the famine of this land. My curious mind manipulated my feet into following the same road.

Night had fallen, and the piping hot temperature finally settled down. Lian had been walking all day, yet her eyes had never looked more alert than now. As the rumbling in her belly was the only sound that could be heard, she sat and wrapped open what looked like rice inside one of those large leaves the cocoons were hanging on in the bamboo forest. One bite after another, I sat next to her, observing each morsel made from her skeletal jaw.

The whole day felt like watching paint dry on my house, yet so many more days, maybe even months or years, await us. Watching all of Lian's relatives break down into tears felt so long ago, I can hardly recall their mental suffering. Did Lian realise them weeping in their hearts?

I turned back to look at Lian. All the rice had seemed to instantly vanish away. Lian scurried her fingers through the small red pouch hanging from the side of all her silk. As I leaned in to see what she was doing, one thing became clear: if Lian's silk does not sell soon, she, along with the rest of LongCun, will perish away.

...

Third day. The landscape remained as a dry, thin forest with only one road in front. Yet how has the flame in Lian's heart still lit? Even though she could not see me, I had been the only one with her ever since she left the village. That was until the endless road ahead rebounded the sound of footsteps...

A traveller, probably going to LongCun, shaped itself from a blob in the distance into arms and legs, plus a heavy load. The flame, now a roaring wildfire, burned Lian's legs as her defined calves charged forward. Now I had to run as well.

"Nihaol!" greeted Lian with open arms as clouds of dust heaved off the chalky road. "Would you care to trade for silk?"

Eyebrows bounced up the man's smooth forehead. His curious expression matched mine whenever I found something new, digging in the ground I'd never touched before in my life. Lian eagerly grabbed a pile of silk from behind and cupped it between her two hands.

"Interesting," murmured the traveller as his fingers ran down the soft texture of each of the silk cocoons. "What can I offer you for 2 of these?"

"Two-thousand yuan and five zongzi, please!"

"That's absurd! What kind of fabric costs this much? If you really want to make sales, go evaluate your demands."

"Wait—"

But the man had already strolled off. I did not know much about negotiation myself, but if I were the traveller, I would too cut that conversation as swiftly as he did. Lian's mouth hung open in frustration. I'm certain she saw it all, what needed to improve and what had to be achieved. If she wanted this risky journey to work, she would have to boost her communication skills, and I meant fast. I was learning more about this peculiar girl every second.

...

The days of heavy air were finally over. At last, the edges of the Xiyu desert reach in sight. Seven months had slipped away so fast, yet LongCun was now terrains away. Honestly, this expedition had so far been interesting as listening to all of Lian's conversations kept me from eroding from boredom. As we passed by occasional villages and towns, I could visualise the progress she was making with each attempt to trade a bit of silk for more yuan and zongzi.

A white flake falls gently on Lian's head. Grabbing it into her hand, her jaw dropped again from pure astonishment. Staring at it a bit closer, the icy chill spread across the palm of her hand. Another dangled passed her line of sight. Looking up into the sky, Lian froze. A barricade of rock blocked the desert from the western world. Sprinkled with snow on each tip, the mountains were as if the heavens had marked the ends of the Earth. At this moment, both Lian and I knew that the newly discovered snow was not a blessing but a curse.

Despite the snail-like speed we were moving at, I could hear the huffs and puffs of Lian's lungs louder than the wind itself. Her body was clearly not adapted to this altitude. Pellets of snow barraged Lian's chest. Just as she fell to her knees in weariness, a zongzi and a cocoon of silk fell from her giant load. Scraping them off the ground with a numb hand, she hurriedly peeled the bamboo leaf open and devoured the rice inside like a hog. I watched as she picked up the cocoon with her other hand, inspecting it with thought so deep that from my perspective, it looked as if she was interrogating the little cocoon. Her hand tightened. Her energy had returned. Just like that, her renewed determination boosted her ahead, melting away her surroundings as she kept leaping forward.

Traversing through these snowy Tengri Tagh mountains, I observed as Lian continued to build her persuasive spirit. I could see the improvement she was making as now she had a fuzzy fur coat, as well as an assortment of exotic foods she collected over the trip, including mutton, fermented milk and apples. Language barriers did not seem to hold Lian back in any way. Deal after deal, she was like a magnet in the Xiongnu region, attracting money and food from anyone who seldom passed by. She was learning more about this vast world, which honestly sometimes made me want to slap myself in the head. My poor eyes had to bear the sight of her eating a whole apple, including the seeds and stem, wearing a coat upside down and trying to build a blanket out of snow.

When we exited the other side of the 'wall', nothing looked like Lian's homeland. No bamboo, just open land with endless rolling hills filled with sheep and horses. Fluffy clouds dotted the clear blue sky, yet not a burning ray of light shone on the ground. Lian and I knew things would get easier from here. After all, she did need plenty of rest after trekking through mountains for weeks.

We hopped from village to village. Lian's precious silk seemed more and more valuable every step we took westwards, as now, no one we encountered had seen this material ever in their lives. Lian had picked up on that, effortlessly receiving food and gold, since Yuan was redundant now. However, her bundles was depleting. More than half her bundles of silk had been traded away now, and I could tell by the sweat dripping down the back of her head that she was worried, worried that this already year-long trip was worthless...

...

Brick-red rocky terrain and shrubs were all we saw now. Out in this barren wilderness, Lian's previous success quickly left. It had been seven months since the last patch of grass. What once was the fiery determination of certainty for success was now a flame of desperation for mercy on this world. I knew Lian tried her best, but it seemed even after selling off all but one cocoon of silk, the world had told her it was not enough. Her bones went from twigs to thin wire as food was scarce in this region, so rare that I cannot count how many times I have pitifully watched Lian buy overpriced food with gold just for one meal. Life definitely was not sunshine and rainbows. Lian was panting for air. Her shoulders ached. Her mind was dizzy. Her knees trembled. Lian was a zombie...even when civilization rose above the horizon.

Entering the gates half a day later, it was clear her body had reached its limit. Her soul could only go so far. Lurching towards the marketplace, a thump shivered goosebumps down my spine...

Lian collapsed.

A gang had gathered to witness the lifeless body. Phasing through everyone, my ghost stood, wanting to help but could not as a girl twitched on the ground. A couple of kind young men who ran from the back of a heavily-loaded camel carried her back to her feet, though her eyes barely opened. Chatter filled the crowd. "You are not from Levant. Where have you come from?"

Lian, taking advantage of this opportunity, potentially being her last, leaped onto a large step and slowly lifted her head above the crowd. The two gentlemen stood in front. Lian gazed out at the ends of the crowd. I could see it in her eyes. She had clearly never seen this many people before. She took a deep breath. Almost two years of travel led up to this moment. Sweat poured down her face.

"My village needs you! I come from a land far away, where flesh rots before someone even dies, where a grain of rice is worth more than a house. Our village cannot take this anymore. I cannot take this anymore! My family's hope had vanished, but mine is still alive. I have travelled for two lunar years to reach this foreign land because I need your help, help to regrow my village, regrow my nation!"

Whispering built up like fog.

"How can we help?"

A voice out of the blue—the two men from before. Reaching into the bundle behind her back, she blossomed her fingers like a flower and revealed what was inside.

"My village's speciality," replied Lian. "This is a fabric called silk used in clothing. You cannot find it anywhere else. I used to have lots, but I had sold the rest of my stock on my trip. I can tell you guys are merchants who travel a lot. I would need many of you to join me back to my village to purchase more. Please, kind sirs, would you buy?"

The two men, rubbing their fingers around the cocoon, smiled and answered.

"We will—"

...

A corner of the page in the book was missing. A snap back to reality. My imagination's children's playtime was sadly over. The window radiated with a tinge of orange. Turning my head side to side, no one except a cleaning janitor working night hours was around. I flipped through the pages, but it seemed this was the end.

Strolling down the streets of Rome to go home, a booming gurgle shook my stomach. I had been so hooked on history that I forgot to get lunch! Nevertheless, I ate an apple from a convenience store without eating the seeds, and stumbled upon a clothes shop I never knew existed in this neighbourhood.

The clothes were extravagant. Clean; soft; weaved to the finest detail. A red jumper caught my attention in the corner of my eye. As the tips of my fingers slipped along the sleeves, an employee walked my way.

"This jumper," I questioned. "What...what is it?"

"This is no ordinary jumper, sir," replied the worker. "It comes from the far city of Xi'an, the birthplace of silk. But this one is special, coming from a silk farm in the Middle East, made around two-thousand years ago. Would you like to buy it?"

The Silk Plague

ESF Island School, Tsui, Ernie – 14

700 CE, 28th day of the 5th lunar month, Tang Dynasty

Worms. There were worms everywhere. The once-bustling city of Dunhuang had warped into a mortifying fever dream in less than fourteen days, with unbearable aridity curling in suffocating waves across the vast expanse of the Gobi Desert. Tiny, countless silkworms had infested the streets, crawling sluggishly between the cracks of the walls, the dip of dented cement, the narrow surface of wooden fences... Everyone knew a mere graze of the silkworm's touch meant death— yet there was nothing they could do.

Empress Wu Zetian had demanded immediate quarantine: no villagers were to set foot in or out of Dunhuang, and no goods were to be imported or exported through the looming gates of the Yumen Pass. This sent Dunhuang into a spiral of chaos, and the villagers' fates were officially sealed away with a bold red stamp on parchment from the palace of Chang'an.

No one really knew where the lethal disease originated. It started simple. Some beggar spotting a domesticated silkworm wiggling uselessly in the dirt of a dim street corner. Why would such a valuable item be there, discarded? They picked it up gingerly. The silkworm seemed to be in an unusual shade of sickly green, but was otherwise normal. To the beggar, it was a savior. A sign that they were favored by the divine beings above. As they made their journey back, the silkworm lay unsuspectingly in their hands. A ticking time bomb, silent yet deadly. Just the day after, the beggar was said to wake up with translucent skin spreading from his hands, as if it were made of silk instead of flesh. Their eyes were clouded, fine threads of silk blinding their whitening pupils—they could physically see the weakening pulses of their blood as breathing felt harder and harder, the revolting sensation that sent their stomach lurching in agony whenever they dared to take a bite of any type of grain—

No one noticed anything was wrong. After all, nobody was prone to notice a minuscule silkworm ever so visible on their wrist, were they?

On the fourth day, the beggar takes their final breath. Glassy eyes flickering dull as they stared into the sky, lifeless. That's when the silkworms latched onto them like parasites to a host. It fed off the whitened veins and multiplied overnight. A kind-hearted villager happened to find them motionless while returning from a recent trading trip. Whilst dragging their corpse back to the city for a memorial, the very same silkworm slithered into the hem of their sleeve. The villager was reported to have the exact same symptoms as the beggar, passing away directly four days after.

Upon hearing the news of being forcefully caged in the diseased area, Li Rui, an experienced silk merchant well-loved by the people, decided to flee. Having been in a panic, he simply stashed a week's worth of grain and some robes with delicately embroidered patterns— made of cotton, of course. He had long thrown away his cloaks of fine silk the second he realized it was infectious. People scrambled to obtain the scarce material, which was the symbol of power and wealth, hoping to sell it for a fortune. He didn't think to tell them how this very material was the root of their suffering.

Click. Li Rui spared a gaze at his bedchamber one last time before he turned and treaded out of the room, holding his jade talisman to his chapped lips and praying to Buddha for enlightenment. The instant he creaked his gates open, a bitter, sulfurous odor slammed into his senses like the harsh reality of the situation. Ashen-faced villagers stumbled blearily across the clearing of the square, broken whimpers escaping them as their eyes fogged out of focus every few seconds. Some were more conscious than others, wailing to the heavens for forgiveness or shrieking at innocent passersby for their cruel destiny. Bodies lay limp in eternal slumber, greyish veins mapping out the hollow slopes of their malnourished form. Despite carefully selecting a thick quilt and heavy-soled boots to protect himself prior to his journey, he flinched at the grotesque scene, a chill set deep in his bones that nothing could eradicate.

He gripped the strap of his duffel bag tighter with his calloused hand, exhaling through his nose. He'd have to get through these pests to reach his horse's stable. Just as he was about to leap on his stallion, a hesitant voice called out his name. Zhang Hao.

Zhang Hao had been Li Rui's accomplice ever since they were young—cliché, Li Rui knows. They'd even started their silk trading business together, but they'd drifted apart recently. Zhang Hao is a great friend, sure, but he was always too...unambitious. Reluctantly, he glanced back at him, drifting his gaze towards his muted indigo tunic, taking note of how he seemed a bit paler than usual. A bit more ragged.

"Rui! I haven't seen you in a while..." Zhang Hao trailed off, taking notice of his large luggage. "Where are you going? You know it's dangerous to—"

"Mogao Caves. I'll be safe there." He explained curtly with a flick of his saffron-dyed robe—a rare, imported delicacy due to the fact that it is specially imported all the way from Iran.

After a brief moment of silence, he blurted out an unexpected invitation. "...I suppose you can come too, if you want."

That request caught them both off guard. However, the other man recovers quickly and flashes him a crooked smile.

"Of course."

"Where exactly are the Mogao Caves?" Zhang Hao inquired as his own stallion trailed behind Li Rui's, running his fingers through his choppy raven hair as they travelled amidst the tumultuous mess of a city.

"Southeast of the city. I'm positive Buddha will be protecting the sacred place from harm." Unconsciously, he gripped his talisman tighter.

The entire city appeared to have a grey sheen of fog cast upon it, complemented by the faint coo of the rustling wind. Even with the ghostly presence of the breeze, the stifling atmosphere seemed to strangle them alive, as if a pair of unwavering hands were desperately clawing at their throats. Every direction they went, the watchful eyes of small specks of silvery silkworms tracked them relentlessly. Li Rui knew there was no true escape. Just the foolish thread of hope that they clung to while they waited for their impending doom.

How did it come to this? Li Rui couldn't help but ponder. Life outside of Dunhuang probably continued operating. No one would dare to question the Empress's orders—they were disregarded, deposited by the palace just like how he deposited his silk. Trash.

"We're lucky we got to escape the area... You know, why don't we go back to get some of the villagers here? They'll definitely appreciate—"

"Certainly not." He scoffs without thinking before quickly regaining his composure. "I mean, what if they've already been infected? We can't risk destroying the only safe haven of Dunhuang at this time. I'm sure we can shelter some of them after the outbreak settles down a little."

Looking a little skeptical, Zhang Hao slowly nods his head in agreement. "... I suppose so."

It felt like a millennium until they reached the Mogao Caves. The peerless shrines appeared like a lifeline, a temple frozen in time where the Silkworm Outbreak hasn't dared touch just yet. Empty patches of sand came across as almost unnatural without the presence of those damned creatures. Li Rui breathed a sigh of relief. Slowly testing the fine grains of sand for any signs of danger, they hopped off their horses to approach their "hideout". Striking vermilion brands the graceful slope of the entrance, layering up several floors before blending with the earthy sandstone cliffs. For a brief moment, everything faded away as the impressive sight enamoured him. *I've been blessed by this sacred temple*, he breathes. However, the fragile moment was interrupted by Zhang Hao's awkward cough.

"Uh— we should head inside before those silkworms catch up to us."

Being snapped out of his trance, Li Rui steps into the elegant arched doorway wordlessly, with Zhang Rui following close.

The first day was tranquil, taking into account how the pair blatantly ignored the disaster outside. Rooms of the Mogao Caves were a luxury in themselves, adorned with brilliant frescoes that enhanced the picturesque grotto. Seeing the incomparable beauty with his very eyes, Li Rui kneeled in front of one of the monumental Buddha statues and clasped his hands together.

*May I nurture wisdom and compassion to face this tragedy with clarity and courage.
May the power of the Enlightened One guide me so that harm is lessened and that this obstacle becomes my cause for awakening, as what I merit will come to me.*

As he rose to his feet, brushing the dirt from his robe, Zhang Hao spoke up once again.

"Rui, are you sure we shouldn't be helping the villagers too?"

"Of course we would, on a later date." He sighed, barely able to suppress his mild annoyance towards the repeated question. How would they save the villagers when they couldn't even save themselves? Sensing his discontentment, Zhang Hao never brought the topic up again.

For the following hours, they mostly unpacked their baggage and caught up with each other. It turns out that Zhang Hao had settled on farming, preferring to stay within the city, while Li Rui developed his silk-producing workshop, which eventually led him to success, if he did say so himself. Although Zhang Hao didn't earn much, the crops he brought along were quite useful: the carrots were the perfect combination of sweetness and crunch, the dates rich and caramel-like... They shared a pleasant meal and exchanged small talk, with Zhang Hao doing most of the conversing.

"It must be terrifying for you, Rui, knowing how silkworms were the cause of all of this and how you owned a literal workshop of them. Since you're a silkworm expert, do you know what might've made them infectious?"

"...Someone probably just accidentally imported some poisonous ones or something. Why are you not eating?"

"I'm not hungry." Zhang Hao simply shrugs, picking at the hem of his tunic sleeve like a nervous tic.

Li Rui woke up the next morning at the sound of his door groaning open. A cloaked figure stands at the doorway, unmoving like a bad omen. The lingering darkness of the room makes it impossible to decipher who the intruder was.

“Who’s here?” He jumped to his feet, clambering to take hold of the nearest makeshift weapon he spotted.

“Rui, it’s me.”

Zhang Hao. Oddly, his voice sounds a bit croaky, and the absence of his usually cheerful tone was undoubtedly eerie. Before he could inquire about the weird clothing choices, the other man reached for the hood with a trembling hand.

His heart drops.

As the hood fell away from his face with a gentle slump, murky, clouded eyes stared back at him instead of the usual hazel ones— a telltale sign of infection. His back was hunched as if he were carrying the weight of the brutal truth. A dark cloud hung over the confined space, shifting as Zhang Hao took a hesitant step forward. Li Rui flinched.

“Stay away—”

Zhang Hao quickly recoiled at his command. His hands lifted upwards in surrender, making his worn sleeves dip down and revealing the crystalline skin underneath, greyish veins wrapped around his arms like wired restraints. It almost looked surreal in a twisted way, if it didn’t mean he’d drop dead in less than two days with filthy worms as a coffin. His heavy, laboured breathing echoed in the room, mirroring Li Rui’s pounding heart.

“Don’t worry—”

“Leave.”

“Rui, I just—”

“I said *leave*. I—I’m sorry, Zhang Hao, but you’re dangerous now. I want to survive this, okay? And you— and you understand, right? I mean, of *course* you’d understand. You’re smart. You can think logically.” Li Rui blabbered away, panting heavily as the words tumbled out of his mouth.

“Okay.” Zhang Hao exhales softly through his mouth, head dipping down to avoid eye contact and shoulders quivering ever so slightly. “I’m sorry, too.”

A brief pause.

“Farewell, Li Rui. It was truly an honour to meet you in this life. I hope I’ll meet you again in my next one.”

Li Rui stares at his retreating figure as Zhang Hao limps away agonisingly slowly.

He doesn’t utter a word.

“There’s got to be something here.”

Back in the city of Dunhuang, the disease shows no signs of decline. Hundreds had lost their lives, and hundreds more were contaminated. A man stands in front of the now—abandoned silk manufacturing plant. Not one living soul had dared to enter that place ever since the Outbreak occurred— no one, except for him. Yang Qing knew he didn’t have much time left— death was waiting for him outside his very door. It was only a matter of *when*, not *if*, he dies at the hands of the manmade disease.

Upon entering the place, Yang Qing proceeded cautiously along the hallway, the sound of his footsteps reverberating off the walls. His father had been a worker in silk production and was one of the first to contract the incurable sickness. Moments before his death, Yang Qing begged him to reveal the truth about the manufacturing plant. The whole family always knew the production was shady: his father would leave at the crack of dawn, only to return to their cottage deep into the night, his aging, fatigued features marred by dark patches of swollen skin. Whenever they tried to ask about it, he would only smile grimly and change the subject— Yang Qing had always known his father simply did not want him to be concerned.

At the end, with his dying breath, his father explained it all: The owner of the manufacturing facility was greedy to a fault. Money—hungry to a point where he’d exploit the workers, forcing them to inject hazardous chemicals into the silkworms, which eventually led to the infamous Silkworm Outbreak.

Feeling the unfiltered anger coursing through his veins and the gnawing urge to avenge his father, Yang Qing made the irrational decision to track down the one who started it all. Eventually, he reached the end of the corridor, where the rustling of wrinkled paper caught his attention. It’s a map. More importantly, a map with directions. Inspecting it thoroughly, he narrows in on the tiny signature engraved in the corner like a sick invitation.

Li Rui.

He’s found it. He’s found him.

A knock on his door. Had Zhang Hao come back? Warily, Li Rui approached his azurite doorstep and unsheathed his sword. The worn lantern flickered in warning in the dim light of the room as his hand clutched the iron handle.

The hinge screeched in protest when he inched the door open by a fraction—

He plummeted to the ground as a silhouette lunged at him.

What—

His blade clattered to the ground. Pain shot up his spine and his legs flailed, kicking wildly at nothing but air.

Thwack.

The figure reeled, tumbling into the wall. Their lungs spasmed as they wheezed for oxygen. Li Rui took the precious moment to drag himself up to his feet. He'd long given up retrieving his sword, instead backing up to a defensive stance.

With his vision clearing slightly, he lifts his eyes to meet his attacker.

It was a man. An infected one. He wore a feral gleam in his eyes, lips drawn back in a manic snarl as he clutched his stomach in writhing pain. Li Rui could tell he was far gone—the man was bound to collapse any second.

“*You*. You did this to us. You—”

“What do you mean—” Li Rui jerked back at the rasp of his dying voice.

“Don’t— don’t interrupt me. You *ruined* everything. Tell me. Was it worth it?” He sucks in a shaky breath.

“Was a few extra gold worth it if we ended up paying with our lives instead?”

“It was an accident!”

“Was *running away* an accident, too? You’ve known there was a problem with the chemicals. My dad— your workers were ending up sick left and right. You didn’t even bat an eye. And now? Now you decide on a great disappearing act as if that would ever make things better for anyone but *yourself*.”

“Don’t you dare pin this on me—”

“You *disgust* me. Do you— do you even know what you did? Trade routes shut down; my neighbors—*our* neighbors—lost their jobs—” His sentence is cut short by a violent hacking cough. “Our ancestors proudly expanded this network with their blood. Zhang Qian didn’t travel all that way 800 years ago for you to crumble it into pieces—”

The figure's hand shot out to encircle Li Rui’s wrist as he stumbled again.

“Remember my words, Li Rui. One day, you’ll drown in your avarice, your ego. And when you reach out for the surface? You’ll realize that there’s no one to save you because you’ve killed them all. You killed them all when you decided to chase wealth above the people.”

“...You—”

Li Rui didn’t get to finish his sentence— the figure crumpled beneath his feet like a rag doll.

He slammed his door shut. How’d the figure track him all the way here? Were there others coming?

Trying his best to shrug off the thoughts, he dragged his hands across his face when something on his knuckles caught his eye.

A pale, iridescent—sheened silkworm glistening faintly under the harsh artificial light of the cave.

Perhaps this was the karma he deserved.

Trading through time

ESF King George V School, Li, Yichu – 14

620 AD, Tang Dynasty, China. I arrived before sunset at Chang'an, five months after leaving Bukhara. Our caravan of around thirty marched through the grand city wall. With carpet bags slung across our shoulders, droplets of sweat gleaming on our faces, and somewhat reluctant camels trailing behind us, we were quite drained but tremendously glad to finally reach the last stop of the Silk Road. All newcomers paused to marvel at this capital city: a forest of delicate wood-paneled pavilions, with glazed, encaustic tiles that reflected the fading sunlight into soft rainbows. Scattered between were dozens and dozens of vibrant vendors, run by merchants, scholars and priests from all over the world. Locals sold steaming tea and bundles of herbs; some examined boxes full of translucent, radiant stones; some piled up mountains of intricately handwoven carpets; some were even consumed in deep discussions on astronomical calculations.....

After the porters dropped my luggage at a caravanserai, I carried a wired basket laden with beautifully woven golden silk, and set off into the bustling evening. The market was in full swing, bursting with a sea of faces, colors and voices. Laughter, bargaining and chatter of a blend of languages gushed continuously into the air. By nightfall, I had acquired a jade belt hook; several finely sculpted porcelain mugs; and a mind blown away with tales of travel, folklore, and far-fetched philosophies.

Somewhere far away a Gong was stuck, its deep toll resonating freely through nearly empty streets, a stark contrast to the day, as everyone hurried to return home before the local curfew. Indigo curtains draped over the city and distant stars blinked like curious eyes through the vast expanse of darkness. Packing up, I hastened back towards the caravanserai. Magnified tapping of my own feet filled my ears as I winded up long, vacant alleys.

Gradually, these echoes were accompanied by something else: a sinister chanting of the wind. A few weathered, browning leaves were thrown into forced vortices. Prelude to a storm? Before I took another step, however, a small object was suddenly hurled at my feet. I whipped my head up in alarm, but saw nothing except a dull black sky. Gingerly, I lifted the object up, flipping open folds of paper coated with a thick, sticky finish. Curious, I angled it towards a shaft of pale moonlight, and found Chinese characters written —no, not written; they were all the exact same blocky black letters, each stroke aligning perfectly with the next: too identical to be hand-written. But how else would it be there? Squinting, I could make out a line, thankful for the little Chinese I'd learnt on the way: "Tang West Market Museum", I read feebly. What place is that? Is this a prank?

As if to answer my questions, the ground beneath me creaked—! I was surely hallucinating, tired from a hard day of travel. But the cobbles continued to screech and crackle, like the first stretches of a monster waking up from an eternal slumber. Then the flat beneath shifted entirely towards the right, dragging trees and benches with it, progressively accelerating like an old engine whirring to life. Before I had time to scream and run, I was balanced precariously on the tip of a maddened carousel. What was happening? A wild caged animal smacked against my chest, frantic for escape. The only thing left to do was to shut my eyes and pray this would stop.

And it did. In a sudden. The momentum jolted me straight off my feet onto my back, head pounding in my ears. The first difference I noticed was sudden brightness fighting to seep into the back of my eyelids, radiating sunlight heating my face. I reluctantly opened my eyes, bracing myself to face what I would see... I was lying on smooth, light grey slabs, very unlike the cobbly street I was trudging through a moment ago, night somehow fast-forwarded to noon. Slowly, with heavy, sharp dread weighing down my stomach, I pushed myself upright.

The small, petite pavilions of Chang'an had disappeared. In its place were boundless rows of gigantic beasts, glinting with sparks of sunlight, thin and unimaginably tall. They stood authoritatively against the firmament. In front of them were criss-crossing paths of dark gravel, endless coils of inky snakes, so different to the caravan tracks I regularly trekked through. More disparate were the vehicles running on it: fully enclosed, with a metallic tint, wheels spinning themselves into a blur, and rushing away in a blink. Screeching incessantly, they also seemed to clog the air with a suffocating, smoke-like odor.

I was surely in a feverish dream — Except, I wouldn't wake up. Wheeling around: another building, quite different to those behind me: tent-shaped, covered with glass tiles, through which sunlight poured into a clean

marble hall. Outside stood a large undulating loop of wood, balanced on a dark grey block carved with the words “Starting Point of Silk Road”.

Absorbed in the absurdity of it all, I started when I suddenly found a man standing in front of me. He stared with the most incredulous expression: a mash of anticipation, nerve, shock and elation, as if I was a new specimen in his lab. He had a stout build, black hair that spiked up in little triangles, and small crinkly eyes. Most peculiar was how he dressed: a black coat squared at the shoulders with a thin white cotton shirt underneath, buttoned down the middle — simplistic, formal, unlike anything I’ve seen before.

An eternity passed before his dramatically twisted features drew into exaggerated realisation. With considerable effort, he pulled his face straight and found his voice, bubbling to the brim with tangible excitement.

“Hello sir! Forgive me if I seem rude, but could I know... where you are from?”

“Bukhara. I came to Chang’an to trade.”

“And what year are you in?”

“In China they called it the first year of Empress Wu Zetian...?”

Bouncing on the balls of his feet, his eyes crinkled up with a wide, uncontrollable grin.

“Ohh! Now, it’s best if no one finds... we’ll go to the office, I’ll explain on the way. Call me Michael.” He beckoned with restless hands for me to follow. Seeing as I had no other choice, I traipsed timidly along. He pushed open two sheets of clear glass into the polished, ivory hall. An unsourced gush of refreshing air suddenly washed over me, completely eliminating the heat outside. Confused, I listened to Michael’s voice instead, which had risen again above the reverberating “click–click” of his leather shoes.

“I know this sounds unbelievable, but we’re in 2013 now. This city is no longer called Chang’an, but Xi’an instead. The year you just said was 620 AD...nearly 1400 years before... meaning you time–traveled.”

Turning around a corner, we stepped onto a staircase that quite literally moved.

“An escalator,” he explained, “Powered by electricity... Technology has improved very significantly.”

Nodding, I tried not to look overly flabbergasted as there were others drifting down the opposite escalator. They goggled at me anyway, mostly at my long, beige ramie cloak, embroidered, wide–brimmed hat, and heavy travelling boots. We entered a wide, bare room with neat white walls. He sat me down, and headed to a mahogany desk. A thin, rectangular box was planted there, connected to floppy white stalks that rooted into the wall.

“Sorry I didn’t properly introduce myself before. I am a historian working here, the Tang West Market Museum, which houses artifacts from the Tang dynasty and Silk Road. You should tell me how you got here... I’ll see how to get you back.”

I quickly explained how the world somehow spun me more than 1000 years forward in time, while his eyes blazed with curiosity.

“So you picked up one of our pamphlets...some time portal must have opened unexpectedly. Perhaps I should take you to a freight train terminal... something related to transportation, to the Silk Road, to see if the portal would open again. You see, the ancient Silk Road disappeared in the mid–1400s, but it was revived this September. China launched the ‘Belt and Road Initiative’, the biggest international trade project in world history, with 150 countries involved, aiming to develop trade networks, infrastructure and promote economic growth...”

His frenetic gaze drifted to my sack.

“Could I please see what’s in there? Do forgive me, I’m quite an obsessed historian.”

At my approval he eagerly pulled out my compass, abacus and scales.

“Magnificent...” He whispered in awe, gently stroking the worn wood. “No one uses these anymore. We use GPS to navigate, a system based on satellites—”

“Satellites?”

“Machines we built that circle the Earth in outer space...or you can say the cosmos. Signals are sent to multiple satellites and the time they take to receive shows us the location of the sender. For payment, these days we don’t even use physical cash. E-payment is ubiquitous: money represented by digits, stored on phones, which are basically devices that can hold and access a lot of information, displaying them on a screen...”

Sensing my bafflement, he pulled out a flat rectangular tablet that fit in his palm, which lit up at a touch of his thumb. Pictures and characters appeared, clear as a painting. They shuffled and changed instantly at another tap.

This was the future...transactions, information, entertainment all at the tip of your finger, somehow compressed into one little “phone”. Inconceivably convenient, yet slightly unnerving...wouldn’t life seem surreal then? An abstraction, when you no longer feel the tingling excitement of touching the coarse surface of a precious gold coin, or smelling the fresh parchment of a new map...

“Right! We should get going; I’ll take you to the freight train terminal as promised.” He eyed my clothes, grimacing slightly. “Should be fine...you’ll just be a particularly outgoing tourist. But take off the hat”.

We strolled down a street that ran by one of the coal-black vehicle roads. Like the Chang’an I came from, it teemed with activity; however, pedestrians rarely stopped to converse, striding on purposefully, most of them looking at a “phone” just like Michael’s. Parked in a tidy line along the side were block after block of shops, each on an elevated platform. Colorful protruding letters of its name were hammered across the top; uniform shelves and bright lights lined its interiors. Flamboyant images pranced playfully within large rectangular frames adhered onto a high wall. It was magical.

Only when I looked back at the heaps of goods did I notice something appalling: a lot of them were identical. Boxes and bottles of the exact same color, size and label; racks of fine fabric, each eye-catching graphic, skillfully-shaped design cloned perfectly in increasing proportions. Even meticulously-layered local treats had astoundingly similar dripping sauce and flaky pastry wraps, packaged in indistinguishable bags.

At my inquiry Michael explained, “Almost everything nowadays is mass-produced. They’re made in factories by machines, so that numerous batches of the same product are built simultaneously.”

So far everything about this future took my breath away. The convenience of life was unbelievable. Mindlessly, my thoughts drifted back to the little vendors crowding haphazardly around Chang’an, set up temporarily by merchants, strewn with pots and parcels assembled by hand. How inadequate they seemed compared to this machine of a market, churning on undeviating cogs. Yet, nagging memories surfaced: A weaver pouring all his soul into an arabesque shawl in the enchanted twilight, to gently graze the shoulders of the purchaser, a young Islamic lady. An artisan perfecting every painstaking detail of a ceramic; every curve of the miniscule rearing horse, so vividly sculpted its cries could nearly be heard to emerge.

“Goods used to be crafted by hand. I know it took longer, but each piece had its own character, spirit and soul.” My quiet voice was unexpectedly laced with nostalgia.

“To be honest, most people now choose convenience over connection or quality. We need to prioritize accessibility, since we have such a massive population.” Michael shrugged. “Handcrafts would be fiendishly expensive anyway, with the existence of mass production, *and* on top of all the tariffs...”

“Tariffs?”

“Put it this way... The government makes foreign products more expensive: to protect local industries, to raise money for themselves, and as a tool to pressure other countries. This is more regulated and strategic than before. I would admit, sometimes it harms international trade.”

Enthralled as I was by the advancements of this world, its surfacing complexities badgered me to ponder, for a first few times, if I would ever return to the past. A sharp pang of reminiscence and unease momentarily dashed through my veins.

“Hypothetically if I stayed here...” I grappled with slipping panic, “Wouldn’t small traders like me really struggle with all this?”

“Sometimes it would be harder to compete on the market...but if you learn and adapt to these rules, you can also discover new benefits and opportunities!” Michael tried to encourage me.

Lost amidst my thoughts, we arrived at the freight train terminal of Xi’an. Numbly, I followed Michael into another grand, lustrous hall, up a dozen interleaving “escalators”, through towering entrances, and waited as he spoke animatedly to some workers. Then we exited into the dimming light, as time took a turn into late afternoon. The scene in front, at last, drew my mind from its turmoil.

Slung across a sky muted with puffs of dust were machine arms of a fading red. A dozen of these lined up methodically, wheeling large, identical navy boxes one after another. They stacked up beside protruding iron bars on the gravel-littered ground. These “bars” winded left and right in pairs, neither start nor end visible.

“Those are the train tracks. One should be arriving soon...”

Gradually, I was aware of a faint hum, followed by a distant glint of a dark metal — in another blink, the hum escalated into a deafening roar. A long shadow whipped past at such speed that all I observed was a burst of color, my hair thrown abruptly in my face, and clouds of dirt stirring out of the gravel. Just as suddenly, it slowed into a distinct form: a striking dragon. Carriage after carriage of uniform iron boxes skimmed by incessantly, glistening like the dragon’s scales on its never-ending body.

“These cargo trains can reach nearly any port in several days. The Belt and Road Initiative includes the construction and expansion of railways.”

“That really is a huge leap from camel travel...”

“Certainly. We enjoy the privileges of globalisation. Many hold such easy access to products, and cultures, from all over the world.”

The beast came to a graceful halt, breathing mouthfuls of cloudy steam. Workers boarded and dismounted amidst shouts and whistles, surveilling the exchange of cargo boxes as some arrived at their destination and others left for theirs, an eternal cycle of free flowing trade guarded most loyally by these beasts of insurmountable power.

“However, there are quite a few consequences.” Micheal said as we left the bustling station. “I believe the BRI aims to improve this, but one main issue is environmental damage.

“You see, to reach such speed, vehicles run by burning oil, which release harmful gases that pollute our air and trap heat in the atmosphere, rendering urban environments quite unpleasant; not to mention the natural habitats destroyed to build railways and all that...”

I recalled the smoky odour that stood out when I first saw the vehicle roads; the grey, dusty haze constantly enveloping the train station.

“I really want to experience your time, actually; when every breath was cleansing, and stars would be clear as diamonds in solidly black twilight...” Micheal dreamed on. I was suddenly too preoccupied to join in, for I realised: the time portal had not reopened in the freight train terminal, a location supposedly symbolic to trading. I doubted it ever would.

In a dejected daze we returned to the museum. Michael made a makeshift bed for me in his office and wished me luck in finding the portal, before leaving in a rush of black wheels. Restless, I wandered down a stopped elevator. My footsteps echoed off the steps and bounced back from cold marble walls, mocking me of my solidarity. Blindly, I entered an exhibition hall, its name obscured by the darkness crowding under extinguished lamps, and headed towards the only source of dim yellow light from a broken exhibition torch.

Illuminated from an awkward angle behind a thick sheet of glass was a chipped porcelain figurine of a camel, rode upon by a traveller hunched under a stack of carpet bags, depicting the tedious, exhausting daily life of a merchant; I laughed quietly to myself. But how far we’d come! From compasses to GPS, hard manual labour to mass production, camels to trains, individual merchants to a standardised international trade network.

What was more, suddenly, the ground beneath me creaked—!

So the portal was here at the museum all along. Relief numbed my senses as the world spun, while a greater sense of duty somehow gripped me. Perhaps I was the chosen traveller, the diplomat sent to the future. What would I share with my fellows on return? Deep appreciation and anticipation of futuristic advancement for sure; the globe empowered through technology. Cultures would always crave to bond with each other, which has invariably proved infinitely rewarding. Nevertheless, I think we must keep some warnings in mind: Assimilated products, a lack of uniqueness and soul in the art of trade; countries' policies prioritising strategy over a friendly, unimpeded flow of trade; damages to the environment; and much much more.

These are all entwined in the complexly layered and developed evolution of trade, which, I have now seen with my own eyes, will flourish and bloom into a worldwide connection; a global sharing. Still imperfect, but nonetheless, extraordinary.

The Silk Road Myth

ESF Renaissance College, Blackman, Ellie – 15

The sound of crunchy pebbles crackled under her feet; it was like clockwork to Isabella. As she approached her Mum's grave, she heaved a heavy sigh, though it wasn't of the upset yet overwhelming feeling she normally heaved. It was with anger. Weeds and mud were scattered over the tombstone, and the ground above where her Mum lay was upturned and rough. Isabella melted to the ground, emotions getting the better of her. Someone was out to get her, and it was probably the same person who killed her Mum. She had been killed, trying to get through the Silk Road to China; luckily (though not really), her husband William had witnessed the murder and hidden in the back of their chariot to keep safe. He had hauled her body back from the road and kept her means of death a secret from Isabella, but eventually, Isabella found out.

As Isabella walked home, the pace at which she moved was a bit more vigorous than usual, and she had an unusual air of anger and authority compared to others who walked by. Just as she was rounding the bend, the bend she hated, the creepy bend with the musty smell, a potato-like sack was yanked over her head. Only just processing what was happening, Isabella screamed and screamed, but a child's scream in the bend wasn't unusual, more a sound the residents grew to ignore. Poor Isabella was waving her arms and legs around, trying to kick whoever had targeted her, but it didn't work; she was too weak, the other person too strong, and the more she kicked, the tighter he would bind a tie around Isabella's neck, securing the bag, but causing her to scream out in more excruciating pain. She was chucked onto what felt like a hard wooden floor, tears streaming down her face, and the sound of a horse whinnying in distress, combined with Isabella shooting to the back of whatever crate she was in, made her realise she was in a carriage.

Isabella's dad had never had a carriage; they occasionally travelled in one if her Father had a work event or Isabella had been invited to a ball, but these were rare occasions. There was a small jar in the crate where Isabella lay, a hard jar with what felt like a design on the outside. Isabella tried to trace the lines, but with her vision obscured by the huge bag, could not figure out what the lines were about. Eventually, she felt her eyes drop and fell into a deep slumber, unaware of what was going on, too tired to care anymore.

When the carriage came to a stop, a man came and untied whatever was around Isabella's neck and removed the brown sack from her head. Immediately, Isabella had no idea where she was. Vast, colourful mountains made up the picturesque landscape that she was eager to take in, and it only then struck to her how unaware she was

of how long they had been travelling. She looked to her right, where she could hear voices, when she realised she had no idea what they were saying. These kidnappers, or whoever they were, didn't even speak English; their voices were all deep and talking in a dialect Isabella couldn't understand. They were all wearing dark robes with long material belts around the waist and appeared to have their hair in buns or ponytails. What was going on? There was no sign of civilisation around. Would the men jump scare her, attack her, kill her like someone did her Mother? How was she to know? She was only a middle-class English girl; her education didn't prepare her for this. One of the men began walking towards her, and Isabella became conscious of her surroundings. She picked up the jar from earlier, in hope of a decent weapon and stared at the man until he came up to her and said, in perfect English, "We are taking you to China."

What was going on? Isabella knew she was in the middle of nowhere; abandoning this now rapidly moving carriage wouldn't work; they'd catch up to her, and she'd be done for. Her brief conversation with one of the men was gnawing at her; she didn't get it. She thought they were speaking in Chinese, based on what the man said, but why did this man now speak in a perfect English accent? She didn't get it. Then it struck her, the accent, the long journey; they were on The Silk Road.

The Silk Road was only a prophecy at this time, something that might not exist, a trade route most people deemed too dangerous or too long. How could Asia connect to Europe via land? Isabella's parents had tried to test this route, having worked with the local government in the village, informing them of their journey to test possible trade. But with what had happened with Isabella's parents, the attack had left England unhappy with that route, scared at what terrors may await them if they were to go. All through this time though, Isabella's family was

forgotten about, the money they were promised every year was slowly cut off, and Isabella's Dad had to quit his job as a geographer and historian and take a tiring job as a farmer at the farm down the road.

As they headed into a town known as Xi'an, Isabella was put at slight ease; the people here seemed to be living a normal life, one she would give anything to have right now. She thought of her Father, her dear loving Father, who would die if he had to deal with 2 grievances in his life, she had to contact him, let him know she was safe, something. She was forced to get out of the carriage, luckily moving on her own this time and was instructed to go into one of the houses up ahead. Inside awaited a small family who were expecting a child to adopt, as she was later told. When they saw Isabella, an older-looking lady came up to her and kindly said, "Hello child, please don't worry, we are going to adopt you, you can live with us now, we have lots of food, and you will go to a nice little school down the road, please don't be angry."

Isabella was in shock. What would she do? She desperately needed to talk to her father, but sending a letter would take weeks. These people didn't seem to mean any harm, but she wanted her Father back, her old life. A hot tear rolled down her face; it was significantly warmer in China than it was in the UK. In a quiet whisper, she asked, "But what about my father?" Her eyes showed sadness, her expression downcast, and the lady took pity on her, embracing her for a warm hug and said, "Don't worry, child, we will send him a letter, postage is faster than you think, so we hope it will arrive in a few days."

As Isabella sat down with this new family to eat dinner, they asked about Isabella's life in England, her friends and family. The food was delicious, and for dessert, Isabella was given a special mooncake just for her. Mooncakes were apparently not in season, but symbolised family and unity, so the family were more than happy to give one to Isabella. About an hour after eating, Isabella developed a rash along her legs. Her new Grandma brushed this off as heat rash, but Isabella could feel herself burning up. She wanted to throw up, and as she rushed to the toilet, her head went all fuzzy, bright colours and pictures all flashing round her head. Before she knew it, Isabella was flat on the ground, her breathing slowing, her lips turning blue, foam bubbling out of her mouth, and all the Grandma could do was laugh. Laugh, laugh her head off.

Of Letters Past, Sent or Unreceived

ESF Renaissance College, Cheng, Bernice – 15

Dear Rokhshan,

They say our homeland lies at the centre of all roads, but tonight it feels like the farthest place in the world. This place is a wasteland of sand—smothered nothingness. You don't have to say it back, but of course, I miss you. I do, truly. How's Maman doing?

We camped in a dry riverbed that sat between a gorge, three days east of Samarkand by a good caravan's pace. The camels kneel in a ring around the fire, their shadows long as tired giants. Master called this the first step towards China, yet the air already smells so different. I think it's the strange odour of dust and the cold stone, and the scent of dead animals that did the trick.

Anyways, I am writing by the light of a brazier, my hand clumsy with the Sogdian script. Master says a merchant's pen must be as quick as his tongue. Kamal lent me some scraggly paper that he bought from the market in Bukhara to write on. There's a boy my age here as well—indentured like me. He's called Anwar. I think we are friends.

The camel-master here swears in three languages when the animals baulk, and there's this man from Khwarezm who would sing drinking songs in a tongue I do not know, but the rhythm. It reminds me of the songs Baba would sing in the taverns at home. Back when you were still well, and Baba could still walk fine. They say on these roads everyone borrows everyone else's words. It's truly bizarre, but Master says I should be learning some Chinese. I guess we'll see about that. You know what Baba says about me. Not the brightest of the bunch.

In many ways, I see this letter as an apology. If I had it my way, I would've never done all that. That night, when I saw Baba step towards you, it was not you that I saw flinch, but my scrawnier, fearful self. The same young boy who would beg naively for their father to show a sparkle of love, only to be met with the meanest silence and then a loud, reverberating sting on the cheek. If I have learnt anything over the years, it is that if I am bad enough, if I am loud enough, Father's fury stays on me. It is a small thing, but it is all I have to give you. I may not be clever, but I am stubborn. I'm sorry for leaving you, willingly or not.

The people with me, their bodies are marked with wrinkles and scars, tongues wrapped with stories of adventure, and yet they speak of me only as the one who must walk where Baba's bones cannot. Don't blame yourself, though. I can imagine you reading this, thinking that, but don't.

What I'm trying to say is that this won't be the only letter. Master says we might not see Sogdiana again for many upcoming seasons. The plan is to push farther east, onwards to where the gods shift their names and camels are kings. Find a town, settle down and handle the goods from one town to the next. That would mean being away for a very long time. Anwar says time makes memories golden, but I'd argue that time heals nothing; it merely makes your memories fade away. Words to think about...

Don't be an idiot,

Your brother

Dear Rokhshan, D-381

I hope you have received my previous letter. If so, I'm afraid your reply has been lost, if you've sent one at all. Anwar tells me not to worry, says I'm a pessimist. I hope he's right.

Anyways, all is well. For the most part. It has been almost a year and a bit, but we're still on the road. Master has his eyes set on Khotan. The city, he says, is rich with merchants from faraway lands and buyers from wealthy

empires beyond our penurious reach. Crossing the high passes of the Pamirs is, in theory, the shorter and quicker route. However, the journey itself is the hardest part – the weather has been the biggest nightmare. As if regular winters aren't bad enough, the air up here is thin and fragile, and the mountains seem to scrape the sky. The view is just an

endless vacuum. The mountains stretch on and on, the only thing you can see is the horizon and the bones of dead men pointing the way. We usually travel at night, but tonight we are setting up camp under this huge escarpment. Kamal has predicted a huge blizzard. He is quite good at this sort of stuff. Says he studied it at maritime navigation school down south or something.

On the hard nights, it's like even nature isn't on our side. The camels would plod on, their hooves crunching on the snow carpeted gravel, and I could feel the weight of every step in my bones. Hunger is a constant companion. We've lost a few men and almost one-third of our livestock in the higher parts of the Pamirs; we don't ever talk about it, though. Master says it's bad karma – the mountain gods apparently had rapacious minds of their own. So we keep our heads low and continue onwards. We follow the caravan master, who uses the stars to guide us at night and plants a stick in the ground before we sleep so we know which way to go in the morning. It's a trick, he says, inherited from the ones who've travelled before us. It is times like these, when I'm huddling with Anwar for warmth, when the silence gets too deafening, that I think of home most often.

On the good nights, however, the moon would hang quite like a polished Sogdian pearl in the velvet sky. It's a calming notion knowing that the moon will always be there, looking after me, looking after you.

Anwar and I have grown closer. He's the only reason I've been able to make it this far. He's quick – quicker in the head and heart than any merchant's son has a right to be. Now I can definitely say he's a friend – a brother, even. He reminds me so much of you it hurts. He tells me about Ferghana with this light in his eyes. He tells me about his family: his deceased parents, his sick grandma and his sweet little sister. In return, I tell him about you and Maman, the annoying clicks our chickens made when we chased around the plains, even Corin with her honeyed smile. Then Baba – it always ends up being about Baba. Anwar understands. He's great like that. Together, we try to guess how far we've come – across a couple of small towns, each with its own caravanserai and stories engraved on its walls. Each is a node in the sprawling net of strangers who pass as family for a night or a month. Crazy to think I'm part of that net now.

He asked me yesterday why I bother writing to you, knowing I may never get a reply. I don't have an answer. Not a good one anyway. Nice, cheap paper is hard to scrape for. Yet I am still writing this from the lacklustre campfire, my hands growing numb from the cold. I might hand this letter off on the next messenger post down the mountains. But for now, I'll just continue writing. To keep you close. Just so I don't lose you in my head as well.

Next time I write, I will be in Khotan.

Forever stepping further from home,

Your brother

Dear Rokhshan, D-1125

Happy birthday, brother. Seventeen years of being alive – finally, a man you are! I wish I could be there to celebrate in person. But it's been two years since I last wrote, three years since I left. Too much has changed; it's almost unfair.

We've finally settled in Khotan. This town is filled with riots of colour, men with nimble hands and most importantly, the buzziest market. Anwar and I are bunking upstairs above a smithy. It's not very luxurious: splintered floor, straw mattress, desert mice and air heavy with charcoal and sweat. At this point, though, I'm grateful for any roof.

Anyway, the market here is insane – carts stacked with carpets, loads of grapes, copper mirrors, and leather pouches. They traded in everything here and the people! I've met men from Turk, from China, from Persia; Indians, fellow Sogdians and even a wild-eyed man who claimed to come from the salt cities near the sea. You were right, Rokhshan. The trade really is a river.

Master has me learning fast– more than I ever did from Baba. I take the bids now. Last year, my voice would shake, but now it is sharper and more confident when a deal feels right. I must say, I'm getting rather good. I sold a handful of old bronze weights yesterday for a good price on my own. And Rokhshan, I could have taken on the whole world

because I had the silver pieces in my pocket from my own share of the bid. I will never get over it– having money that was truly mine.

After that, I was walking around the market alone, looking at dried this, canned that, silver from the Mediterranean... and then I saw some peaches. I don't believe in heavenly beings, not anymore, but I could have sworn I was blessed by the saints above when I saw those peaches. They were ripe to the core, their skin juicy and plump-looking, so I haggled for fifteen minutes straight for a single peach at a price low enough for me. It was the best feeling ever. The peach so tart on my tongue, and the way the juice rolled down my arm and got sticky all over my fingers... I had not tasted such flavourful goodness in a while, and the one bite of the world's most ordinary pink fruit was like a whole summer feast laid out in my eyes. Maybe one day, I'll bring you a peach like that, so bright you'll have to squint to look at it.

You must think I'm off my rocker right now, and maybe I am. But at that moment, I couldn't help thinking how you would have loved it here. I guess that's why I'm finally writing, after two years. You've always fancied sweets. Remember when we stole those dried apricots from our sweet old neighbour during that miserable winter? Maman got so mad at us that she locked us in our room for hours. That didn't do anything to stop us, though. I remember us sharing a bed and snickering until we could no longer feel the cold. That was until Baba came home, and all the giggling was snatched from our throats like a bandit does with gold.

In many ways, I fear I will never be free from the grip of old, controlling men. Master's grip on me has tightened. And if I'm honest, it has been consuming me. He's harsher now; Anwar reckons greed has devoured him. Right now, we're loaded with turquoise, silk and paper– the thin, delicate kind, worth more than gold in Samarkand, so I guess it makes sense. Don't worry, though, he doesn't hit and yell like Baba. But I could feel his discontent with me growing by the day, the minute, the second. I hate being bound by some stupid indenture.

Some days, I imagine my 10 years being up. Me travelling wherever I please and making just enough so you and Maman won't ever have to worry for grain again. On other days, I am raw with a longing for home. I try to look for scraps of home everywhere: in the colour of apricots, in the stories Sogdians abroad tell, in the twinkle in Anwar's eyes when he laughs, and especially in the hooting of boys running wild in the city alleys.

With all the sweets in the world,

Your brother

Dear Rokhshan, D-2490 I don't know if you're out there. I'm still writing, though, as

I've always done.

We lost him. Anwar. He's gone. Forever.

You might not have known him, but you would have loved him. Anwar was funny, kind, selfless, and a damn great trader. In a twisted way, I saw him as a replacement for you. He had a way of making even the harshest days seem lighter, a handful of dust into a story. I don't know how to say it less bluntly, but I miss him more

than life. Anwar

got sick last spring. He had a fever, contracted it from some Mongol travellers, then dark nodes appeared on his skin—swollen, ugly, like ink beneath his flesh. I thought it was just another fever, but then I saw the fear in his eyes through the faint glow of the oil lamp one night, and I knew it was real. It wasn't fair. I tried to help him, but it was like leaving you all over again. I couldn't save you from Baba's wrath when I was sent away, and I couldn't save Anwar from this curse. I wish the sickness had taken me instead.

I don't believe in a god. I haven't in a long time, even with the many monks and missionaries that come and go on the road. But one thing I do believe in is ghosts, Rokhshan. The road is full of them. They walk with us, and I see

them everywhere. Even inside me, they exist. Sometimes they take the form of strangers, sometimes of Baba, sometimes of you and even the traders we left behind in the mountains. I feel their presence. Now, I'd like to think Anwar is one of them, watching and guiding me forward.

How is Maman? Or even Baba? I never thought I'd be asking, but time is strange here—it stretches and shrinks, much like the desert. So does love, I think. I remember the first letter I wrote to you. I said I didn't think time would make memories golden. I was wrong. I remember the day I left as if it were yesterday. He didn't even say goodbye. You know how Baba is. He checked the tally of bales twice and just turned away, coughing into his sleeve. It's pathetic, really. I've realised that now—miles away. Time didn't heal the pain of leaving, but it did nurture the flower of acceptance.

Four more years till I'm free, and the trading here is still relentless. That's what it's like here—a constant ebb and flow of goods and people. I don't think I can do this anymore. I feel lonely in this room so bare and foreign.

Should Maman or anyone ask for a song on cold nights, sing them one of mine, if only for me.

Hope you are well,

Your brother

My dearest Rokhshan, D-3175 I've met a girl. Her name is Liyan, and she's an artist.

We talk about everything. I tell her of Master and his endless ledgers, of Anwar and how he used to laugh so carelessly, of the trades I make. But mostly, of you and home. Sometimes when she laughs, she reminds me of Anwar: warm, glowing, unreachable. Sometimes when she cries, she reminds me of you: misty-eyed, soft, strong. But when she whispers sweet nothings into my ears, she reminds me of the person I used to be, and I will feel ever at peace with her body pressed tight against mine.

We speak often of escaping together. Two more years, I tell her, then I'm free from my indenture. I will work hard to please Master. Endure his heated, disapproving gaze and grovel at whatever silver pence I can find. Then perhaps, we would follow the trade winds eastward to the ports where Chinese sails bloom like a lotus flower. Or perhaps, she would counter with a smile, we would go westward, where horses had wings, sweated blood, and were born out of the water. (I told her it's not true, but she doesn't believe me.)

In this plan, however, there will always be Liyan, painting what she sees. Whether it be the terracotta roofs of Chang'an, the red stones of Dunhuang or the gilded faces of strangers we would never see again. I would sell her art to all those who crave beauty they can never hold, and we would live on what knowledge, exploration and colour can earn. And in this plan, know that you will always be my measure of home, my final stop, after I've succeeded the Sogdian mission to build connections that outlive us.

Liyan says that art is memory. 'Every brushstroke is a story' is what she says as I watch her grind her pigments —

cinnabar, jade dust, azurite. I like to think of my letters as my brushstrokes, my way of keeping home close. Even as the world stretches between us like silk drawn too thin.

I'm not sure, Rokhshan, but I think this will be my final letter. If these letters find you, keep them close. Read them when the desert winds rise, or when things get hard. But if they never reach you, let those reading this—twenty years from now, five thousand years from now—know that they were written with all my devotion.

So I end this, my last of my letters sent and unreceived, with my love. Because of all the trade lessons I have learnt throughout my three thousand one hundred and seventy-five days on the road, one that has stayed closest to my heart is that sincerity is carved into every word we say, and confident silence is what we should embrace as we wait for a reply.

Love,

Your brother

The Promised Market

ESF Sha Tin College, Lee, Nicholas – 15

Hong Kong – Present Day

“The Belt and Road Initiative”

The phrase was inescapable. It was broadcast on every channel, glowed from every screen and fluttered on every street banner outside the MTR station.

“...a new era of global connectivity...”

“...a network to unite...”

“...the Silk Road reborn...”

Lynn sat on the edge of her couch, the television casting a flickering light over the tea tray beside her. After retiring as an FBI agent, she moved to Hong Kong in the hope that a change of scenery might bring her solace, but the words on the screen triggered unpleasant flashbacks. The media coverage showed President Xi Jinping standing before a podium as he announced his promises to China and the world. The screen hummed with applause, but her chest tightened.

She’s heard those words before.

She’s seen where that road leads.

* * *

San Quentin Prison, San Francisco – 2014

Sitting across from the man she had spent years pursuing, Lynn felt an unexpected rush. It was not triumph, but something far more intoxicating. There he was, Ross Ulbricht, the mind behind Silk Road, the digital bazaar of illegal goods and services. The name had once symbolised China’s ancient trade routes, where camels carried silk, spice, and beliefs across continents. But Ross had built a new Silk Road, one stitched not from silk and merchants, but from code and anonymity.

“Look at what you’ve built,” she murmured, her voice steady, her eyes burning into his. “You became the very thing you swore to defeat.” She paused. “...and it devoured you.”

“It was supposed to be perfect,” Ross insisted in defiance. “A free market, just like the original Silk Roads.”

“The original Silk Roads ended too,” Lynn interrupted. “If your system was truly perfect, wouldn’t it have endured?”

Ross was speechless. His gaze dropped to his trembling hands, finally understanding the weight of his choices.

Lynn leaned forward, her tone softening. “Tell me,” she pressed quietly. “How did it all begin?”

* * *

San Francisco – 2011

The sounds of clattering keys echoed from the far corner of the library. A student in a black hoodie sat alone at the grand table, his figure camouflaged in the library’s bleak backdrop, his face lit by a screen so bright it made the moon seem dull.

“Finally,” he murmured to himself. “A free market utopia without restrictions.”

The school’s servers ‘flared’ to life, their lights flickering like desert lanterns guiding travellers across endless dunes.

The Silk Road was back.

* * *

Chang'an – 120 BCE

“Huang Shang,” said Zhang Qian, bowing low until his forehead and knees touched the intricately woven carpet. He was Emperor Wu’s envoy, tasked with acting as the Emperor’s voice across distant provinces.

“Rise,” ordered Emperor Wu, his tone commanding but sceptical. “What brings you before me today?”

Zhang Qian lifted his head and began to speak. “As you commanded, my men and I journeyed north to Gansu, a frontier province of China, to forge an alliance with the Yuezhi tribe. Our mission was successful, and they have arranged for ten thousand foot soldiers to aid us in securing the borders against the Xiongnu tribes, who are situated east of here, in Manchuria.”

“Very well,” replied the Emperor. However, as he regarded Zhang Qian more closely, he noticed a gleam of excitement in the envoy’s eyes.

“What stirs your mind, General?” Emperor Wu interrogated.

“Huang Shang,” Zhang Qian said, his voice brimming with wonder. “During our travels, we passed through several kingdoms that all welcomed us with open arms. These lands are prosperous and rich in goods unknown to us, such as powerful steeds that can gallop for leagues without rest and textiles of extraordinary delicacy and beauty. One of my soldiers traded a single bottle of his wine for a piece of this beautiful, floral-patterned cotton cloth, which they called ‘*Chintz*’. Its embroidery is thicker, and its texture is unlike any fabric I have ever seen.”

As he spoke, Zhang Qian lifted both his hands to present the piece of cloth before the Emperor.

“Trade?” the Emperor echoed, his brows furrowing. “Why would they desire our wines instead of our Wuzhu coins?”

“Our currency bears no worth in their land,” Zhang Qian said. “Instead, we offered what they found rare. Our wine tastes different from theirs, just as their silks differ from ours. They value novelty, not coins. That is the essence of trade.”

Hearing this, Emperor Wu fell silent, his mind enraptured in a vision of bringing greater economic prosperity to his land. In his vision rose a network of roads and markets, where goods and culture would flow like rivers across the mountains and deserts.

“Zhang Qian,” he declared at last. “You will journey farther still, beyond Gansu. Take ten of my finest generals and their soldiers, and bring our finest silks, horses and foods. Use them as instruments of exchange, and remember to map every kingdom you encounter so that we may establish lasting trade with them. Through this, we will retrieve goods that will benefit our land greatly.”

Zhang Qian bowed deeply. “Understood, Huang Shang. The road we lay today shall one day bring great prosperity to the Middle Kingdom.”

And so the first Silk Road began, a network of commerce that would outlive empires.

* * *

San Francisco – 2012

The servers’ clicking sounds became more frequent as time passed, until it was impossible to go a minute without hearing the sharp, mechanical tick. Yet despite the noise and the faint irritation it caused, there was a sense of unmistakable delight in Ross’s expression. After all, every click marked one transaction that was made on his marketplace, showing him that his vision had been made real.

To Ross, his Silk Road marketplace was no ordinary invention. Until now, only the ancient Silk Roads of China had ever earned the title of a marketplace free from the state’s control. Through his intricate use of

privacy techniques such as cryptocurrency transactions, he was able to build a system where people could trade in drugs, stolen data, hacked passwords, and every form of contraband imaginable.

It was the very idea that had first stirred in his mind back in an economics lecture — a place where the price of products was purely determined by buyers and sellers, something his professor had called an economic utopia. Illegal or not, Ross believed he had achieved something far nobler than profit.

* * *

Almaty, Kazakhstan – 1630

“Master Liu, perhaps we shall stay here for the night before we continue our journey to Turkmenistan again,” Ming started, his breath restless from the continual walking and his feet in agony from the coarse paths of the Silk Roads. Long after Zhang Qian’s embassies had vanished into legend, merchants like Liu and his apprentice Ming still trod the same dusty paths. The two now stood before a small *caravanseraï*, its walls the colour of an earthy red rock. These were small inns scattered across the Silk Roads, offering humble lodgings for travellers from all lands. Inside, a warm glow of light seemed to welcome the Master and his apprentice.

“Yes, let us rest here,” replied Master Liu.

The two promptly arrived at their lodgings and set down their heavy ceramic-filled bags. With their meagre savings, they could only afford a single room between them.

As the two lay on their respective beds, staring up at the clay ceiling of the *caravanseraï*, a burning thought grew inside Ming.

“How did these roads come to bind so many lands together?” Ming wondered aloud. “Your teachings told me that the ancient people of Turkmenistan, the Oghuz Turks, were hostile to the Chinese and often pressed their borders.”

“That is a very good question, my dear boy. You must give me some time to ponder your question.” Master Liu responded. After a few minutes of silence in the lodging, Master Liu finally came up with a response.

“The Silk Road is a connection of pathways that allow merchants like us to trade our goods for other items, and it was first mapped out by the great Zhang Qian thousands of years ago. But in my eyes, there is something deeper than trade that holds us together. I think it stems from the idea of freedom. More specifically, freedom of trade,” Master Liu said.

“What do you mean? Freedom does not automatically make countries agree with each other.”

“That is true. However, you must think deeper. Through freedom, people may buy and sell without chains or decrees. It is that exchange, this giving and taking, that binds us, even when our nations do not.”

Ming turned his head slightly towards his Master. “So you mean that trade is the language of peace?”

Master Liu chuckled to himself. “The concept of peace is too noble a word for men’s dealings. Trade is the language of need. A man may despise walking, but he will hike across mountains to have a sip of water.”

“So the Silk Road is just a chain of needs?” asked Ming.

“Not merely a chain,” the Master answered, clasping his hands together. “Think of it as a river. Each caravan, each merchant, each small coin that changes hands is like a drop in the current. The river flows because each person adds something of his own and takes something in return, leaving it always full. Even Emperors cannot command its course. The flow of trade belongs to the people.”

“And what happens if they do?” questioned Ming. “What happens if the Emperor takes away the freedom of the people?”

“The river would turn violent, causing harm and destruction. The forces of nature do not like to be tampered with. Still, I trust our current Emperor, Emperor Jingtai, possesses the wisdom to refrain from such a deed,” Master Liu said calmly.

There was a brief silence in the conversation as Ming absorbed what his Master had said. Finally, he asked one last burning question.

“Would the river last forever...?”

However, Master Liu could not muster a response for this question.

The night went on in silence, and the two quickly hit the hay as the stars shone upon the *caravanserai*. Beyond its clay walls, the faint whisper of hooves and merchants’ murmurs drifted along the endless road.

The Master and apprentice left the inn the following morning and recommenced their journey towards Turkmenistan, their minds filled with renewed energy as they entered a small forest. The gilded rays of the midday sun made the grassy ground around them glimmer as they traversed across it.

In the background, the leaves seemed to produce a faint rustle, but there were no animals or wind to have triggered it. A stillness fell thick upon the air. Ming turned toward the sound, his breath catching.

“Master...?”

Master Liu’s eyes widened as realisation flashed across his face.

“Run!” he shouted.

But the warning came too late. A sudden darkness surged over them, and all that followed was black.

* * *

San Francisco – 2013

“The Silk Road website has now caught the attention of federal authorities. Media reports suggest that surges of cyber activity, ranging from large-scale data breaches to black market transactions, have placed the site directly on the government’s radar. Law enforcement agencies say they are working to uncover the individual or group responsible for operating the network, which officials describe as a ‘growing hub for illicit digital tra—’”

The TV screen flickered before cutting to black, leaving Ross Ulbricht’s reflection staring back at him. A pale, uncertain, and half-swallowed shadow of his former self. His creation had made the news for all the wrong reasons. Hackers were running wild on his network, drawing attention from the public and the press alike.

Nothing ever stays perfect forever. Nor had it done so centuries before.

His cover was slipping. The more visible his marketplace became, the easier it was to track him down. Paranoia constantly crept at the edges of his thoughts. He knew he had to regain control of the Silk Road. *No*, he reminded himself — he wasn’t taking back *the* Silk Road. He was taking back *his* Silk Road.

Ross was reluctant at first. Control meant interference, and interference meant death. The free market was dying. He had to act. He had no choice.

“It’s just maintenance,” he muttered to himself. “A few small adjustments here and there. Freedom needs to be protected, even if that means walls.”

The computer’s glow filled the dark room as the login prompt appeared. He exhaled a tired breath and logged in under his alias: *Dread Pirate Roberts*. He had never wished for this. But it was necessary.

His first victim went by the name “PurityFirst.” He was a troublemaker who had attracted unwanted attention with disputes spilling into the real world. Ross could not risk another one of his stunts. Without hesitation, his cursor drifted towards the search bar, and he typed one word: *Hitman*. It was done. Yet, to Ulbricht, there was a faint slither of a smile that curled around his lips; he enjoyed it.

Days turned into weeks, and those “adjustments” accumulated. Ross, enjoying the power, slowly began to act like a ruler — managing disputes, vetting vendors, and quietly eliminating threats. Each decision was justified as a measure to protect the system. Each action pulled him further away from his founding vision. The

psychology of his free market began to warp. Ross, once the architect of digital anarchy, had become its Emperor. The irony stung bitterly. To preserve freedom, he had to become the central authority himself.

* * *

Imperial Palace, Beijing – 1631

As Emperor Jingtai of the Ming dynasty paraded proudly through the palace courtyard on the day of his son's coronation, he was not met with the expected roar of applause and celebration. Instead, the air hung heavy with silence while the golden banners barely fluttered. Faces in the crowd reflected a sense of sorrow and contempt. The Emperor's heart sank under the weight of their disapproval.

Then, a lone voice pierced through the deafening silence. "Emperor Jingtai! You will pay for the death of my Master and best friend!"

Immediately, the imperial guards rushed towards the man, their staffs raised menacingly.

"Bring him here," Emperor Jingtai demanded, stepping down from his golden carriage to face the man eye to eye. The man was short and plump, with calloused hands covered in clay, and instantly indicated to the Emperor that he was a ceramic worker.

"What is this talk of your Master and best friend?" the Emperor asked, his tone restrained but sharp.

"Huang Shang," the man said, bowing deeply. "Many of us in my villages mourn for our lost companions whom we sent west along the Silk Road. My Master Liu, and dearest friend, Ming, left for Turkmenistan over a year ago. However, they never returned. We believe the bandits murdered them!" His voice broke, tears streaming down his dusty face. "You must avenge them, Emperor. Please..."

"Bandits?" Jingtai repeated, his eyes narrowing.

"They roam the trade routes freely," the man continued. "They steal our goods, slaughter our men, and ruin the lives of honest folk. You must act before we lose more!"

The Emperor fell silent. He was well aware of the bandits' raids, but hearing the anguish firsthand struck deeper than any report could. He felt a sting of shame, for it was his inaction that caused his people to suffer.

Straightening his posture, he lifted his head high and declared, "To counter these bandits, I will send a fleet of one thousand soldiers to secure the Silk Roads. They will find these bandits and restore peace. Furthermore, I will tighten the borders to ensure no intruder threatens our homeland again!"

This time, thunderous applause rose from the crowd. The Emperor exhaled a sigh of relief, glad that he had reclaimed their trust. However, the cost of that decision would soon reveal itself.

In the months that followed, the Silk Road seemed to lose its spirit; the 'river' now flowed under watchful eyes. Rumours spread across the western lands of China's increasing control, and foreign merchants, wary and resentful, began closing their gates in return. This, combined with the rise of faster and safer means of travel such as wooden ships, caused trades to dwindle and relationships to fracture. The Silk Roads, which had once been known as a vibrant market of exchange, slowly withered under the weight of Emperor Jingtai's regulations.

* * *

San Quentin Prison, San Francisco – 2014

"And later that year, you were arrested in a library," Lynn began, her voice calm. "The FBI was able to track you down from tiny digital clues, such as your avid micromanagement over sellers and your numerous requests for hitmen."

A quietness filled the room. The fluorescent light above them flickered once, then steadied.

Lynn leaned forward slightly. “Your story is fascinating. It reminds me of how the ancient Silk Road fell to its demise as Emperor Jingtai scrambled for control. It’s ironic, isn’t it? The death of the Silk Road reflects the death of *your* Silk Road.”

Ross’s expression remained unreadable. His gaze drifted elsewhere, as if beyond the prison walls.

“The people were promised freedom,” Lynn said quietly, “a world without chains and rulers. But someone always tries to hold the reins, don’t they?”

Then, almost to herself, she whispered, “The Silk Road never truly died. It just changed forms.”

* * *

Hong Kong – Present Day

The news programme ended, and the room fell into silence. Lynn looked at her faint reflection in the dark glass of the television, her visage dim and uncertain. She pictured the ancient merchants who once traversed the Silk Road, now buried beneath drifting sand, and the black servers arranged in endless rows, their glow fading into silence. Could the Belt and Road Initiative, this new Silk Road, endure what the old had not?

The Silk Road's Golden Age

ESF West Island School, Tan, Clyth – 15

China's Silk Road flourishes, bringing a new golden age of prosperity to the world. Caravan paths and maritime routes stretch from Xi'an through Central Asia to the Mediterranean. Besides carrying silk, spices and metals, merchants, scholars, and travelers also exchange culture, ideas, and religion. Through the Silk Road, communities are brought together and new relationships are formed between powers on opposite sides of the Earth, creating one big, global community.

During the Silk Road's Golden Age, rumours spread like wildfire that the monks of the Mogao Caves in Dunhuang possess a mysterious box. Rulers and scholars from distant lands covet its contents, for they are said to contain the "Secret to Immortality". Caravans from Persia, India, and China converge upon the desert's edge, drawn not by silk or spice, but by the promise of eternal life. In this flourishing age of trade, the box becomes the most sought-after treasure of all.

Zhengyi and Liji at Dunhuang, China (563 CE)

The dazzling sun rises, illuminating the sandy ravines. A harsh breeze sweeps through the desert, stirring up swathes of dust that blanket the long-treaded paths of camels and merchants.

"Are you sure the Mogao monks truly have the Box of Immortality?" asks Zhengyi, his hand tapping his chin. Everything about him radiates discipline. His short, straight hair and neatly trimmed stubble that never had the chance to grow wild. He stretches his tanned, muscular arms before sliding off his camel with practiced ease. His eyes narrow as he casts a skeptical glance at the caves below. His fingers absently trace the sash that marks him as a trader escort — a badge of duty earned through years of guarding merchants and their goods from bandits and desert raiders. His gaze sweeps the horizon, measuring threats before they strike.

"I'm sure, friend. All the rumours point us here," Liji reassures, his voice carrying a note of stubborn conviction. His belly wobbles as he dismounts, but his hands are quick to adjust the heavy rings on his fingers — tokens of past deals struck in Samarkand and Kashgar. The scent of spice clings to his robes, and the jingling of coin pouches betrays his trade. He joins Zhengyi, his merchant's eyes gleaming not with suspicion but with hunger for opportunity. To him, the Mogao Caves are not seen as a threat, but as a promise for immense wealth.

Zhengyi leans back into the carriage, his tone gentle, his gaze soft. "Darya, Liji and I will head down to the caves to search for the box. Take care of our son while I'm gone."

"Don't worry, I will," Darya replies, her dark eyes locking with his. The unspoken message is clear: rest assured, our son will be safe with me. She cradles the child, no older than two, who stirs from slumber and fixes his father with a baleful stare — as if even he senses the weight of the journey ahead.

Zhengyi and Liji at Mogao Caves, China

Chimes and chanting fill the air as monks pray, their voices echoing against painted walls. Outside, traders shout bargains for incense sticks — aloeswood, sandalwood, frankincense — and carved sutras that glint in the desert sun. The marketplace hums with life, yet Zhengyi's eyes catch on a group of burly men in purple robes. "Byzantines," he muses, his jaw tightening. More than one party seeks the box...

As Zhengyi and Liji enter the Mogao Caves, a hushed reverence fills the air, only interrupted by the soft echoes of their footsteps against stone. The intricate murals and statues come to life, showcasing stunning depictions of Buddhist teachings and Bodhisattvas bathed in warm, golden light. The serenity of the cave contrasts with the vibrant colors of the artworks, creating a serene sanctuary that whispers tales of devotion and artistry from centuries past.

“Zhengyi!” Liji’s voice cuts through his thoughts. “This place is huge. Let’s split up to locate the box. You go left, and I go right.”

Zhengyi nods, his steps brisk and purposeful as he heads toward the place that first comes to mind: the Library Cave, Cave 17. He pushes past the heavy curtain and enters a dim chamber. The air is thick with wax and dust, candles flickering against shelves of neatly stacked scrolls.

“You seem lost, my child,” a voice resonates from the shadows, calm yet commanding. “Tell me what you seek.”

Zhengyi steadies his breath. “I seek the Box of Immortality.”

The figure steps forward, robes whispering across the stone floor. His face is half-lit by candlelight, eyes gleaming with ancient wisdom.

“Ah, the Box,” the elderly monk says, his voice low and deliberate. “Many have come searching, but few understand. Immortality does not belong to those who chase it. It chooses who it will reveal itself to.”

Zhengyi bows his head, his hand resting on the sash that marks him as an escort. “I am no king, no scholar. I guard traders and walk the long roads, and I fight so that others may live. I do not seek immortality for greed, but for the chance to protect my family, and the people who trust me with their lives and their goods.”

The monk studies him in silence, with a penetrating stare. Finally, he raises his hand, and the candles flicker as if bowing to unseen winds. “If you want to claim the Box, you must pass the trial,” he intones. With a grunt, he pushes away a bookshelf, revealing an antechamber, and gestures for Zhengyi to enter.

After progressing down a dark passageway, Zhengyi finds himself in a large, circular chamber. Like clockwork, torches hoisted around the room’s pillars flare up one by one, illuminating the room.

Zhengyi gasps. Staring around him, he is transfixed by heaps of gold bars and precious jewellery, glinting attractively at him. He falls to his knees, scooping up a handful of treasure. Sapphires and rubies wink seductively, seemingly calling out to him.

“Take us,” they beckon. For a fleeting moment, Zhengyi is tempted. Imagine all the money he could make if he pockets just a little of these treasures. He needn’t have to work for the rest of his life! More importantly, he would be able to give his wife and son a comfortable and stable life. Suddenly, Zhengyi snaps back to his senses. How could he ever think of taking things that do not belong to him. Isn’t that stealing?! Shaking his head at his moment of folly, he continues navigating his way around the room.

“Focus, Zhengyi.” he reprimands himself. Suddenly, a blaze of hot wind rushes down the passageway, stinging his eyes and making them water. Just as he is about to step into the second room, a blaze of fire cuts across the air, illuminating the room around him. After squinting closely, he sees small holes embedded in the walls where the fire spew from. After observing the process repeat, he recognises a pattern and memorises the intervals between each burst of flame. Zhengyi inhales, then sprints across the chamber, feeling a whoosh of hot flame as he barely makes it across into the third room. The last chamber contains a peach, laid out on the table.

“Is this the secret to immortality?” Zhengyi wonders, holding the fruit in his hands, failing to see the trail of pink smoke emitting from it. “Eat me,” it seems to whisper. “Eat me, and immortality shall be yours.” Zhengyi holds the fruit, momentarily tempted at the prospect of immortality.

A hazy image forms at the back of Zhengyi’s mind, of a woman and a small boy. “Who are they?” Zhengyi wonders. They seem so familiar, so close to him. With a jolt, he realises that they are his wife and son! How could he have thought of abandoning his family for a promise of eternal life? Horrified, he tosses the fruit onto

the ground, in shock that its potent power and lure to immortality could make him forget those he treasures the most.

Just as he throws the fruit away, a door opens, revealing the elderly monk once more, nodding in approval.

“You do not seek material wealth, nor do you show signs of weakness, even under the threat of death. Most importantly, you hold steadfast to your purpose and values. These are rarer treasures than gold or silk. The Box does not yield to ambition, but to those who would use its gift to serve others.”

From the shadows, a faint glow emerges — a small chest, carved with dragons and lotus petals, resting upon a stone pedestal. The monk gestures toward it. “You may have it, Zhengyi. The Box has chosen you.”

Zhengyi steps forward, his breath caught in awe. As his fingers brush the lid, he feels not triumph, but responsibility. The Box is his — not as a prize, but as a duty.

Zhengyi and Liji Attacked At Dunhuang Outskirts, China

Zhengyi trudges forward, the Box of Immortality heavy under his arm, his eyelids drooping as fatigue gnaws at him. The desert air feels thicker than usual, each breath dragging, each step heavier. He rubs his eyes, suddenly weary of the long journey, and tired from keeping watch.

“Here, friend. Have another swig,” Liji says, pressing the bottle to Zhengyi’s lips. “A trader swore it replenishes energy.” Zhengyi nods, too weary to question, and tilts the bottle gratefully. The cool liquid soothes his parched throat, though a strange haze starts to cloud his mind.

“Zhengyi! Look out!” Liji’s voice rings sharp, urgent. Zhengyi reacts instinctively, unsheathing his sword and crouching into a defensive stance. But before he can strike, a cry from the carriage pierces him — Darya’s voice, cut short. His heart lurches.

He drops his weapon and runs, stumbling toward the sound. His knees buckle as he sees her body crumpled in the sand, limp and lifeless. “Liji! Take Tong Le and run!” he shouts, desperation cracking his voice.

A cold blade slides into his side, and Zhengyi gasps, the world tilting. He clutches the Box tighter, his final thoughts flickering. Darya... forgive me. Tong Le...live well...

Darkness closes in, his vision blurs and his grip loosens.

From the shadows, unseen hands reach forward. The Box is pried from Zhengyi’s loose grasp. Its glow dims as it is taken away.

Liji and Tong Le

After Zhengyi’s death on the outskirts of Dunhuang, the story told to his son, Tong Le is simple: bandits had struck, and in his final breath, Zhengyi entrusted Tong Le to his sworn brother, Liji.

Liji raises Tong Le like his own. Together they travel the Silk Road — from the painted caves of Dunhuang to the bustling markets of Samarkand, from Kashgar’s caravanserais to Byzantium’s gilded halls. Like his father, Tong Le becomes an escort, protecting Liji from bandits and rogues, ensuring his safe passage along the Silk Road. Years pass, and the boy grows into a man, his knowledge and values shaped by the road itself.

The Truth Revealed (590 CE, Samarkand)

However, whispers travel faster than caravans. During a trip to Samarkand, Liji and Tong Le stop at an inn for the night. The tables adjacent to them are surrounded by traders and escorts, all drinking and laughing. Suddenly a voice calls out, “Wait. Are you Zhengyi’s kid? You look a lot like him!”

Tong Le nods, smiling in response. The voice comes from an escort seated at an adjacent table. “Your father was a good man. He was the best of us, you know. Always managed to win battles unscathed. He also helped me out when I first started being an Escort.” He beckons for Tong Le to go closer. “Rumour has it that on that night he was attacked, he was betrayed by his closest friend. It seems impossible that your father lost a fight to some bandits.”

Disturbed by this revelation, Tong Le decides to confront Liji. Although he does not let it show, Tong Le harbors a lot of pent-up frustration that no details had been given about his father’s death.

“Shu Shu... tell me the truth. What happened years ago? How did my parents die? Were they murdered by ruthless bandits? Why did an escort say that Father was betrayed?” Tong Le let loose a flurry of questions, desperate for answers.

Liji crumples to the ground and starts to sob uncontrollably, releasing the guilt and remorse that have been buried deep in the recesses of his heart for years. “Yes. I was the one. I... I am the traitor. I was blinded by greed. I wanted the Box of Immortality for myself, so I drugged your father, thinking that I could steal the Box from him when he was knocked out. But my plan spun out of control when we were ambushed by the Byzantines. Normally, your father could have fought them off easily, but he couldn’t as he was weakened by the sedatives I fed him. I...I caused his death!” Tong Le stares at Liji, stunned by the revelation. Liji continues in between sobs, “I raised you not only out of duty, but to ease the guilt that has consumed me every day since. Please forgive me, Tongle, I beg you. My love for you is real.”

Tong Le’s heart surges with rage — his hand grips his sword, his breath ragged. This man murdered my father. Lied to me. Made me an orphan. Yet as he looks at Liji — the man who had fed him, taught him, shielded him from raiders, and walked beside him across deserts and mountains — sorrow rises. His anger falters, replaced by grief. Tears blur his vision.

“You betrayed your sworn brother,” Tong Le whispers, his voice hoarse. “But you gave me everything else. I forgive you, Shu Shu.”

Liji lets out a huge sob, lunges forward and embraces Tong Le tightly in his arms.

The Box Awakens

At that moment, the Box of Immortality, long dormant, begins to glow. Its carvings shimmered like threads of silk, weaving light across the chamber. The lid opens, revealing not jewels or elixirs, but a scroll inscribed with words:

“Immortality is not an endless life. It is discipline carried across generations, courage shared among strangers, sacrifice remembered by kin. It is forgiveness that heals wounds, and unity that binds cultures. It is the legacy of values that outlive flesh, woven across the Silk Road like threads of silk, eternally.”

Tong Le is enlightened. His father’s loyalty, his mother’s love, his uncle’s repentance, and his own mercy has awakened the Box. Immortality is not about eternal life, but the endurance of values transmitted across generations.

Tong Le’s Legacy

Tong Le and Liji carry the Box's message along the Silk Road. Wherever caravans gather, Tong Le speaks of discipline, courage, sacrifice, and forgiveness. Merchants listen, and the teachings spread.

Tong Le becomes known not only as an escort but as a guardian of the road itself. Traders vouch, "Tong Le's sword keeps us safe, but his wisdom keeps us together."

At Kashgar, he mediates rival merchants, urging cooperation. In Samarkand, he spares bandits who surrender. In Dunhuang, monks record his deeds, painting him as a man who carries the spirit of the Silk Road in his words and deeds. The monks believe that like his father, Tong Le is the chosen one by the Box.

Tong Le grows old, but his teachings live on. Generations of escorts and traders remember his words: "Immortality is not in the body, but in the values we carry along the road." His story became part of the Silk Road legends, passed down by merchants and pilgrims from generation to generation.

From Silk Road to Belt and Road

The ancient Silk Road's legacy of connection, exchange, and shared values lives on today through China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which seeks to revive those same pathways of trade and culture across continents.

Tong Le's story reveals that immortality lies not in endless life but in values carried across generations. The Silk Road itself endures as a symbol of unity and exchange. Its caravan paths and maritime routes once bound Xi'an to Rome, Persia to India, and Dunhuang to Byzantium, weaving cultures together through silk, spices, and ideas. Today, the BRI echoes that vision on a global scale. With over 200 cooperation agreements signed with more than 150 countries and 30 international organizations, the BRI builds modern infrastructure, trade corridors, and cultural bridges across Asia, Europe, and Africa. Where camels once carried silk and scrolls, now railways, ports, and digital networks carry goods and knowledge. The spirit remains the same: immortality is found in the enduring values of cooperation, trust, and unity — values that Tong Le embodies, and that the Belt and Road continues to weave into the fabric of our modern world, helping all prosper together.

Mr Chekhov

ESF West Island School, Yang, Simon – 14

Mr Chekhov sat at his window.

Not *that* Chekhov, who

'Had Medicine for his wife,

And Literature his mistress.'

He was just plain Mr Chekhov.

He was a doctor. A '*Medicinae Doctor*', it says on the gilded piece of paper that hang in a dull corner of his room; it shined with a subdued gold.

He was well-travelled and well-lettered in his younger years, having sat in the frigate of Dickinson and the brig-sloop of Darwin.

'Nonsense,' the old man corrected me, 'it was the barges that brought sacraments to remote brethren.'

So it was. There was no doubt to that.

As to Dickinson, his opinion was, 'Pahom needed six feet. All I desire are 12 inches.' Shakespeare's Folio was 12 by 8, gold-edged, and leatherbound.

Another of Mr Chekhov's treasures, among that gold which shone with leaden hue, the frigate and the brig-sloop, was a window. Two feet by three feet, I measured.

Sometimes he would lean out of the window, his head craning eagerly, his wrinkled hands, much like his leatherbound Folio, clenched on the cold steel frame; his slippers fell from his bare feet, and his nightcap slipped off his bald head.

I fear he would fall.

He saw the world in his window.

'My window,' he said, 'does not look into, like the professor's wardrobe, some obscure corners of Narnia. Through my window, I command a view of the world.'

Sometimes I think he commanded the world through his window, like the Emperor of China, on his terraces, commanded his army. Puddles that gather on rainy days were his Venice, I told him, the broken pavement, his Athens, the rusted pipes, his Babel, and the other two mean little windows that look into the courtyard, the Heavens and Basement of his Globe.

He didn't agree. He chided me like an apprentice, 'it is said that Michelangelo saw his heroes in the marble, and he chiselled only to liberate them.'

So, he was a writer.

Other times, the window was his Muses. His eyes would find there a million stories, like the million chimeric shapes that rise from the misty English morning.

His writing desk was thrust at the wall under the window, as if he would have bulldozed the wall altogether and run into the world of his window. The desk was an old-fashioned quirk, decked with heavy oaken boards, folding, stacking for a myriad of minute purposes, a literary counterpart of the steel monsters that roamed the battlefields, smashing into pieces every foe that came in its way. This is where he delivered his Philippics to his critics, each encased in a white envelope. He would have as well delivered them aloud; but in truth, his once-boisterous voice has failed him since his cold from last winter.

This is also where he does his Michelangelo chiselling.

Today, a bleak December morning, some one-thousand nine-hundred years since another December took the life of Cicero:

We sat at a table set up next to his writing desk, one of a meeker stature for the purpose of ‘congenial discussion,’ as he put it. There was a Chinese-porcelain vase that sat on the table, and a flower sat pitifully in the vase, like a head mounted on the wall.

The lights cast a mottled yellow on the room. Momentarily, I saw the place through the dimmed eyes of an old man.

An old man did sit before me.

‘Let me tell you a story,’ he said.

I made no sound. It was a tired old voice, already numb to the pain of Nature’s weathering. It didn’t even sound confident of the story it is about to tell; it gives itself a last try.

‘I am afraid it will be all myself in my story,’ he added, quietly, ‘for men can naught but imagine themselves; their dreams, illusions, perception—they are merely reflections of themselves.’

‘Now, I imagine a man, a mediocre man; like me,’ his fingers silently followed the grains of the wooden table, caressed it, as if the wood was in some quiet sense reminiscent of himself—wrinkled, a rugged landscape that had seen wind, rain, snow, and hail.

‘He was, of course, not a very old man; otherwise, it would be unseemly to send him on an adventure,’ at this he chuckled, ‘he was in his forties, lived in a house, perhaps he had children.’

The weak sunlight, cold as the December drizzle, cast across his face. It was more than ever like a rugged moonscape.

‘I know not him very well.’

‘I don’t even think he knew himself very well either,’ his brow twisted in consternation, his uncertainty evident on his face, ‘he lived in Rome, this I know not why.’

‘He lived in my literature.’

‘Literature today is but the petrified remains of what men then lived.’

‘He was a *civis Romana, PQR* of *SPQR*; not especially prosperous, a plebian who lived at the feet of the seven great hills of Rome. He shared with his brethren the Roman nose, Etruscan hair, Italian stature. He never thought himself anything else than his brethren. He knew himself as Roman, like I know that I am Russian; rather, Russian diaspora.’

Mr Chekhov fled his country, where there was no place for him. This idea was quietly drowned.

‘It isn’t until he finds a window, does he see something.’

‘For the eyes sees not itself’

‘But by reflection, by some other things.’

He chanted the lines, stopping at each of the iambic syllables; in his sound was an aged man flipping through the faded-yellow photographs of his youth, stopping at each one, replaying the scene in his memory. If that could take sound, this it would be.

Snow rattled the windowpanes, but the room was quiet. The flower nodded mournfully in its vase. The man did not stir. The embroidered rim of his nightcap weighed a heavy dark on his brow. The brow no longer twisted. I doubt it has lost the will to.

The clouds churned, the shadows turned. His face took a desperate turn.

He suddenly stood, knocked over the vase, spilled the water, knocked out the flower, opened his window. 'Only slightly,' he looked back at me. He sat down. The cold slowly creeps up under my woollen jacket.

'Now! An opportunity has come upon him, a window,' he briefly nodded at our window, the pen, quill, lettered man momentarily returned to his carriage.

'A Roman morning. The sun was rising. The Romans have already risen. The bakeries were open, the baker kneads his dough; the blacksmith strikes metal, the silversmith bakes silver, the cobbler,' he smiled, 'cobbled.'

'But our character has come to an opportune moment; he knows not. Nature does not allow her characters to break the fourth wall.'

He stands up, agitated.

One moment. Hesitation.

He throws the windows open.

Cold whelms in, like floods breaching dams. It bellowed through my coat and funnelled through my collars. A naval battle raged in my stomach; my face twisted like a chestnut tortured in the nutbreaker.

The old man only said, 'we shall see the beginning of all dreams.'

Come with me; climb we together the winding path up the Collis Quirinalis.

We pass, through a discreet door, hidden in some secret alcove in the winding white walls; there, to meet us serendipitously, and invite us into her garden.

Whoever's garden it is—be it that of Maecenas, Sallustius Crispus, or Atticus. These many fair gardens make their graceful descent down the gentle slopes of the Hill—a luxuriant roll of silk descending into the rugged terracotta landscape. The shades, balconies, fountains, here and there, little marble shapes, denting the fine skin of the greenery, like pairs of earrings on the fair lobes of a young girl.

At the time they were public parks. On a day prime for picnic, each man was eager to secure his place under the trees, but this man was in another place.

'Why was he there, I cannot tell,' the author stopped.

'Call it a work of fate.'

'It was a special place; a place with a window.'

Our window—panels, now loose, rattled along the wind.

'A promenade, its columns ambitious to frame the world in.'

A promenade among the richest arts of Nature and Man. It raises its head, erect, from the drowsy cluster of oriental canopies, the fair heads of the noble laurels, the almond, chestnut, and peach, favourites of Herod, under whose shade lie the sleeping dryad, among whom the many Heroes stride, in their perpetual march of marble. The nymphs, their frolicking forms splashing in the streams.

Among those whose heads bend forever in their pleasure ground, eyes never lifting from their games—even the great house, whose heavy terracotta eyebrows are forever meekly lowered, to shade the master from the evening sun and morning star alike—the promenade is a special one. He casts his eyes afar.

Not to the unnamed hills that rise from the plain, but the unnamed plain that extends into perpetuity, who, folding back at the edges of the horizon, becomes the sky.

A plain that changes its colour by the hours of day. In the morning enamelled with ultramarine, crested with gold, at noon a field of blooming grape hyacinths, at dawn assuming the fiery red of the legions, and at night shedding all colours, turning to the black of Juno.

As the skies toss a tempest, it boils. As the heavens cast a gracious glance, it becomes the gods' looking glass.

'It is the sea.'

The sea is the little romance left in the man's life; he first met his wife on Dover's white beaches. For her, the emigre chose England as his place of exile.

'Come with me,' he hastily grabbed my wrist.

We left the fire to burn to ambers, the tea to cool and freeze, and the candles to be snuffed out by the wind.

We stood on the roof.

The Russian man, erect on the edges, like the mast of a glorious vessel. I, shivering in the corners, a mortal sailor.

Our man follows the eyes of the promenade.

As the morning sun rises on its chariot, Rome starts to awake. The first is the Tiber, always alert—shedding its Prussian-blue gown—of-night, and revealing itself in silvery splendour, its ripples glazed with divine gold. It greets Apollo.

Rome, a child awoken by its mother's caress, starts to rise from oblivion. Imagine the million men of Rome, heads raising from slumber, the hundred bakeries of Rome, ovens just started baking, the thousand thermopolia of Rome, stoves just ignited, the temples, their eternal fires looking down at the ephemeral flames with scorn—these multitudes making their yawns, curses, their beds.

Imagine the sound!

The vision seemed to embolden him, but his voice still weighed with wary. The streets of cities were his enemies, first filled with implacable conservatives; then, radicals.

A city rising to the morning. A thousand chimneys ushering out their smoke, ten-thousand windows, screeching on their hinges, turning their shades to greet the day, a hundred-thousand feet walking down the many squeaking stairs of the apartments of Rome—a machine starting its engine, a bellow blowing its furnace, a Gargantuan rising from his bed!

'Our man gazes. Fate has intervened again. His gaze rests not on the masses of Rome.'

'Does he see something beyond Rome? What can there be beyond the precincts of civilisation, their lands and seas well charted, and the dust on whose roads are trod into concrete?'

He stops; haze again gathered over the steep ridge of his brow.

Maybe he bethought his homeland. Russia was his birthplace, but it also took the life of his English wife, never destined to the Slavic winters.

Wind bellowed. A snowstorm brewed. Snow, emboldened by the prospect of coming reinforcement, doubled down its artillery.

'Myth,' he answered himself. 'Legends and fantasies; stories of lands beyond.'

'A citadel in the clouds,' he whispers on, 'the evening sun setting a thousand splendid shades of gold and crimson on its myriad columns, capitals, domes, so familiar to the tirelessly searching eyes, yet forever shrouded in mystery, a distance of the heavens and earth.'

'China.'

He startled me.

The name of my native country.

'Come, this place is unsuitable for my story.'

The man frowned; he was uncustomed to those strange thoughts. Romans never loved the sea; they feared it. They were no explorers. His brows furrowed. He has tread upon an unorthodox soil of thought—never the talks of the great, nor the concerns of the common—yet his mind dwelled on it.

Odd.

He recalls things. When has he occasioned upon tales of a distant land? He felt within his mind, where was the leak in the reservoir?

Our car sped, slipped, stumbled; I heard the chauffeur curse under his breath. Mr Chekhov was in deep reverie.

London bowed to the summit of St Paul's. Low-rise buildings burrowed under the immaculate dome, a capricious multitude wriggled through the pandemonium. Some squat, some long and narrow; the Bankside Power-Plant, an anteater with three snouts; the spires of the churches, shoots of spring, sprinting towards the heavens; and Parliament, its aristocratic countenance crested with snow.

Mr Chekhov hastily thrust the toll into the hands of the astonished keeper. Foreigners, he supposed, who do not know the ferocious English winter.

We paid him no attention.

We approached the Whispering Galleries; we climbed.

'The man doubts. He wavers...' Yet the Russian man strode on.

We took a steep turn.

Behind his back, I felt the heavy masonry suddenly retreating into the winter air. An immensity unfurls before us; sprawling London beneath us, but a confused scrap of umber, the treeline beneath the pristine, snowy cap of the firmament. All that was between us and the heavens was a flimsy steel handrail, seemingly wavering along the wind.

'The man surrenders! Finally, he sees the distant land.'

'The distant land whose stories are told in the alleys, whose wares are auctioned in the greatest markets... foreign accents; those unfamiliar dresses, faces, traditions—a fantasy living, breathing, tangible, acted out before their eyes; so true and so close, yet so distant and out of reach!'

'For the first time, the man realized a window.'

I felt if I couldn't respond properly, he would throw me out of the precarious Golden Gallery.

'The Silk Road.'

'His eyes gaze far.'

The lofty promenade cast its eyes over the multitude.

Afar is the sea.

Indeed, one could fancy here, as a breeze passes now and then, gently bidding them greetings, and playfully holding the edges of their togas, that they can sense the salty breath of the sea.

We may allow our eyes to gently sweep over the eternal city, following the curves of the Tiber. Though our eyes cannot see, imagination still can perceive, at the far end of this silvery ribbon, Ostia Antica; the harbour of Trajan, its thousands of masts with their sails, much like a medieval army with their thousand banners; and a colossus among the masts, the Pharos Portis, the lighthouse of Claudius.

My eyes quietly traced the Thames, its mournful ripples shuddering under the cold.

'Here are the ships—from the worlds.'

'Description fails the wonder a man of that age would feel. For today things but arrive in many great metal coffins, carried by great metal pallbearers—one can never know the elephant if it arrived only in slices.'

I wonder if he thought of that night at Odessa, where he was the last to board, as the gangway hovered over the uncertainty of motherland, or exile.

But Man, then, knew the elephant apiece. It was a Wonder. Grains of Egypt, incense of India, tigers, lions, leathers of deep Germanic forests; the tributes of a hundred and twelve provinces. They all arrived, freighted, sealed, wrapped, only to be poured into that great cauldron in where civilisations mix.

Pass with me through the wide streets, now narrow with the Egyptian, Parthian, Italian, and dense with myriad voices, Latin, Greek, Persian, all indecipherable. Down to the harbour. Through the narrow gangways, between squat corbitae and slender actuari, swine heads and oars. Beyond this, density suddenly disappears, like forests giving way to plains; the sea lays out its vast extent into immeasurable distances.

'Then?' the old man asks, 'the Silk Road.'

'The thread that ties the heels of giants

Run over hills

'Over mountains

'Over lands man know not.'

'Scrolls of fabric, pieces of jade, fragmented stories—they tell nothing.

'They make the mind wonder,

And set the feet to wander'

'Our man is drawn at this thought; he leans out from the promenade, his head craning, and his mind already in the Orient. When the opportunity comes, he will fall out of his window.'

'No, the Silk Road isn't a path; it's the feet trotting on the path, it's the dreams that drive the weary feet on the path—a dream of another world of people, breathing, thinking, and dreaming as well.'

We may imagine in the Chang'an markets, lit with so many lanterns and fires as to the assume the rowdy face of a tavern, rang the Chinese, Indian, Kushan voice, the Parthian voice mingled with Latin, full of surprises and joy. The joy of being, of knowing, of fulfilling of dreams, and of fulfilling others.

'As for *my* window,' the writer continued, 'is but the petrified remains of what men then lived.'

'One thing I was wrong,' he confessed, 'you see not yourself; you see people like yourself. They surprise you in a way shadows never do.'

'There's a difference.'

Mr Chekhov fell sick soon after.

'So,' I said, half-jokingly, 'after all, you fell out of your window.'

'No,' was the quiet reply, 'I am merely crossing the bar.'

An exclamation of Lord Tennyson, on the Dover beaches, when he feels one world behind him, and another approaching.

Oh, Mr Chekhov!

And may there be no moaning of the bar,

When you put out to sea.

Zhang Qian, the Father of the Silk Road

Good Hope School, Wong, Kwan Ting Katie – 15

THE CALL TO ADVENTURE

In the year 138BC, amidst the Minyue conflict, in a city called Chenggu, a sense of adventure lingered. The market was filled with citizens trying to get enough food for dinner. The merchants' shouts could be heard miles away trying to sell their new and rare imported products — silk, spices, exotic goods and more. Somewhere far away from this chaos, inside the palace, a young man called Zhang Qian was being assigned a mission that is life changing.

Zhang Qian, a man filled with exceptional knowledge, flourished under his father's care and teachings. As a child, he would sit with the neighbourhood kids surrounding a notorious general, listening to his stories with utmost concentration. Stories about sandstorms, cliff-hanging villages, glaciers filled his dreams and imaginations, building toward his mission.

When Emperor Wu ascended to his throne, he declared quests which shocked millions and billions. He sought not only to strengthen his power over Chenggu but also the whole country and later the entire world. He wanted, no needed to forge connections from the west to the east, create alliances that could be unstoppable. In this impossible pursuit, he sent for the one and only Zhang Qian, recognizing his potential in both exploration and negotiation.

As Zhang Qian stood in front of the Emperor, a subtle frigid air and weighty atmosphere enveloped the chambers. Emperor Wu wasted no time to get to the point, "You are to head west." His voice bounced off the walls. "You are to create alliances, pitch the idea to anyone and everyone, seek lands where only the myths say. We must forge a path for trade and unity, and you are the key."

Zhang Qian felt a mix of pride and nervousness pumping through his blood, knowing the lives of many are relying on him. Despite his fears, he felt a profound determination swell within him knowing this was his chance to make history. Looking at his biggest supporter, his father standing next to him with "PROUD" written on his face, boosted his ambition by 100. However, the encouragement of the Emperor ignited a fire in his heart, compelling him to prove his worth and loyalty to the Emperor and the kingdom.

With the Emperor's blessing and command, he set forth his journey, not knowing when it would end, only the Emperor's command and expectation echoed in his mind, nothing more nothing less. He knew the dangers of this challenge, but he was eager to uncover the secrets behind the silk road.

THE JOURNEY BEGINS

Zhang Qian started his journey surrounded by a group of the most loyal men of the Emperor, with goods such as silk, stone tools and rice. As they left the safety of their city with their loved ones sending them off, the scenery changes dramatically from a sea of grass into rocky terraces where one wrong move can send men into their death.

Days turned into weeks; Zhang Qian watched firsthand how the harshness of the terrace affected the men. Although even after so many days, the early morning sun still managed to surprise Zhang Qian with its beauty. During these mornings, Zhang Qian finds himself thinking about his family at home and how everything would be different if the Emperor didn't choose him. Even when the scenery was dreamlike, the supplies dwindled, the morale dipped. Zhang Qian trying with all his might to cheer the rest up had started to become a common sight, recounting all the stories his father used to tell him, urging them to push forward with all his might.

Then one fateful day, while everyone was just trying to survive, they were ambushed by a group of Xiongnu soldiers. The attackers were relentless and had never ending energy, as Zhang Qian's men started to fall one by one, Zhang Qian didn't back down. He felt the pressure of his job on him as he fought fiercely with all

his might, knowing it is not only his life at stake but also countless others and the expectation of the Emperor. He remembered all the lessons his father taught him when he was just a little boy, feeling the adrenaline gushing through his veins every time he held up his sword. However, no matter how much effort he put into the fight, he was outnumbered and overwhelmed. That night, the mighty Zhang Qian was captured.

DECADE IN CAPTIVITY

In the heart of the Xiongnu, Zhang Qian spent years in their mercy. His days were filled with labour and never-ending hardships, but his determination and belief were unwavering. Every day the sun came out and ever the optimist, Zhang Qian was determined to preserve the spirits and ambition of his fellow men. As time passed, he learnt more of their customs, secrets and weak spots, which he absorbed it all in his keen mind, transforming his lack of freedom into a classroom.

Zhang Qian befriended some of the Xiongnu warriors with his easy-going personality. They exchanged war stories, all while Zhang Qian was planning an elaborate escape plan in the back of his mind. Between them, their trust blossomed every day, which also helped Zhang Qian climb the status ladder.

Zhang Qian soon found out that building these relationships weren't just for his survival, but for gathering insights for future reference. These years were not for nothing, every free time Zhang Qian had he reflected on the past, his time with his children and wife, each memory a bittersweet reminder of the life he left behind. Despite all this, he still held on to the last string of hope, never giving up. Everyday his escape plan became increasingly bulletproof, at the same time he had gathered an increasing amount of vital information about the western tribes, significantly helping his later journey. By the time he was able to escape the Xiongnu tribe, he had transformed into a seasonal traveller. Unfortunately for Zhang Qian, his fellow soldiers weren't so lucky.

A NEW BORDER

After a daring escape, Zhang Qian reached the sprawling grassland and approached cities he had only heard in legends. The vastness of Central Asia was daunting and exhilarating at the same time, filling his with a renewed sense of purpose. The grand Central Asia surprised Zhang Qian to no end. There he met the Dawan people, known for their majestic horses. Their strength and grace were mesmerizing, the symbol of the untamed spirit of the region. At first sight, the horses were unremarkable, but the more you look at it, it looks like a Pegasus, making it hard to look away.

Eager to establish new relationships, Zhang Qian presented gifts of Chinese silk, and embroidered garments and stories of the prosperous Han dynasty. They in return offered myths and information about what they know of the west.

Zhang Qian couldn't help but feel a sense of wonder at the new friendships blooming around him and with him. During his time among them, he learnt how neighbouring countries traded for what they needed – textiles, spices and metals. The Dawans shared their own hope of the silk road and its potential, gifting him a lion skin as a sign of support. This gesture filled Zhang Qian with a sense of belonging; it was as if they have accepted him as one of their own. With the unexpected encouragement, Zhang Qian's confidence and optimism skyrocketed, promising his success to the Dawans.

THE EXCHANGE OF CULTURES

Zhang Qian continued his shadow westward, passing mountains, valleys and more, wandering without a specific destination led him to Delhi, an area thrived by trades. Merchants from around the world gathered there to contribute to the share of cultures.

In Marakanda, the city was filled with never ending possibilities causing Zhang Qian's heart to flutter of pure adrenaline. The city stretched into a dreamlike landscape with markets full of a light-hearted atmosphere. Every corner held history, every scent held a meaning, every sound had a purpose, telling a tale of their own.

Strolling through the market, their culture shocking Zhang Qian with every passing second. A kind merchant sensing Zhang Qian's wonder and purpose welcomed him eagerly. The merchant named Antiochos

with kind blue eyes carrying the world's secret captivated Zhang Qian's attention. He carried a confident aura, making everyone look. It was clear this man understood the value of exchanging stories.

"What goods have you carried from the east?" Antiochos asked with curiosity, feeling the softness of the silk.

"Will you trade information as well?" Zhang Qian asked, already taking the dozen more silks in his basket. Zhang Qian took this as a wonderful opportunity to build friendship and learn more about the local customs.

After hours of nonstop conversation, Zhang Qian discovered the power the Greco-Bactrian Kingdom held on to trade. He also discovered the interest in Chinese silk, which dazzled and captivated the hearts of the passerby. In that moment, Zhang Qian realized the incredible potential the silk road held, collaboration, innovation, the possibilities were endless. Ever the politician, his mind raced with millions of ideas of how to use this knowledge to his advantage.

THE FABRIC OF ALLIANCES

With Antiochos's guidance, Zhang Qian established relationships with different tribes and kingdoms, sharing the goal of a trade network. At the same time also discovering the magic of negotiation, learning when to give up and when to continue pushing forward.

Zhang Qian recognized the potential of the trade network will not just limit to goods but also skills, information, and philosophies and with profound confidence he continues his journey with more bravery than he ever had. He organized gatherings – markets where traders share their secrets behind their success, temples where dancers share their experiences travelling to perform, inns where storytellers share myths passed down generations. The gatherings turned into vibrant festivals, casting light on the shared goal among the diverse cultures. Each gathering grew increasingly vibrant, transforming it into celebrations of cultures, captivating all attending and passersby. For Zhang Qian, these moments were life-changing, he felt his pulse hammering in his ear out of pure excitement.

Despite his growing connections and friendships, Zhang Qian understood that to create a unity among all would take more than trades and commerce, it demanded a deeper mutual understanding and appreciation for distinct cultures' unique identity. He learned what questions to ask, what to answer, slowly but effectively creating a bridge between unfamiliar cultures, his own ones and those he encountered. Gradually, his effort paid off. The marketplace transformed into a melting pot of ideas and dreams, highlighting the capability of the collaboration of cultures. Tribes began collaborating, exchanging goods that had once been seen as foreign and impossible. The market also blossomed into a place for shared stories to occur.

THE RETURN JOURNEY

After several years, Zhang Qian prepared for his return journey back to Chenggu, excited to share his knowledge and to see his family. Riding on a horse gifted by the people of Dawan, he carried proof of his journey to the west: invaluable knowledge and stories that would shock the people.

Before leaving, now one of his closest friends Antiochos offered a colorful handkerchief woven with their adventures together and the colors representing the cultures of their country. "May this remind you of our friendship." he said, clasping Zhang Qian's wrist firmly.

The journey back was filled with reflection and the reluctance to leave this nonblood family. Zhang Qian saw the view he once thought was daunting, but now he felt a sense of belonging to both worlds, his birth home and his adoptive home.

As he reached the eastern mountains, with the smell of home, he couldn't feel more nervous and prouder of himself. When he left, he was only a rookie with a dream, returning he matured into a seasoned soldier who later changed the world's perspective. Zhang Qian's heart swelled with anticipation, eager to please and to share his vast knowledge of the outside world.

THE LEGACY OF THE SILK ROAD

Upon his arrival to Chenggu, Zhang Qian was treated like a celebrity and was met with astonishment. The tales of journey, filled with knowledge and opportunities, had been heard from all and captivated the common folks.

The Emperor soon summoned him. Zhang Qian recounted his adventure, the alliances formed, the friendship blossomed, the trade opportunities discovered, the culture exchange fostered, his words painted a vivid picture of the western China and the undiscovered rest of the world.

“Your journey not only uncovered the rich, but also the undiscovered world of our shared humanity.” the Emperor commented, widely surprised with what Zhang Qian had done which opened a whole new perspective and road.

Inspired by Zhang Qian’s voyage, the Emperor encouraged merchants to follow Zhang Qian’s path and travel the silk road. Chariots filled with merchants and travellers followed the footsteps of Zhang Qian and ventured into the new world, promising connections, further understanding and cooperation.

Zhang Qian’s legacy not only laid out the trade route, but also a silent understanding in trade between diverse cultures, allowing them to exchange ideas filled with wisdom and knowledge.

THE SILK ROAD UNFOLDS

As years passed the silk road evolved into one of the most significant historical networks that not only connects goods from Asia, but also most importantly the hearts and minds of the people spread over the continent. Zhang Qian also became a figure of inspiration, a wonderful reminder that true wealth lay in collaboration and connection.

From the east to the west, chariots filled with silk, spices and stories from across the country travelled through deserts and mountains, building a rich relationship between civilizations. The tales exchanged at marketplaces rang like music, reminding people of their first goal.

Back at Chenggu, Zhang Qian stayed and continued sharing the knowledge he accumulated during his decade-long journey. He later became a mentor to the new generations of explorers, reminding them to never forget the reason they started in the first place, the only reason behind Zhang Qian’s success.

A LEGACY OF DISCOVERY

In later years, the story of Zhang Qian's heroic journey transcended through time, resonating for generations as the silk road continued being one of the most iconic trade routes and continued to evolve with every passing day. His legacy laid a foundation for culture exchanges that would help shape the world to how it is today.

Today, his tales are never failing to be the stories passed on during campfires, echoing through the ages, reminding us that each breakthrough that happened and each thread woven into fabric will not be possible without Zhang Qian.

The Treasure of the Future

Harrow International School Hong Kong, Liang, Catherine – 16

The bazaar, the center of trading — with its lanterns dimly lighting the road ahead; with all the goods from faraway lands one could possibly ever imagine; with the people chattering, moving from stall to stall in their pursuit of foreign products — people tend to notice certain features more than others.

Here's what people often notice: Golden framed mirrors and delicate porcelain teacups arranged neatly on shelves. Handwoven baskets with intricate designs hung along the walls. Mountains of spices and teas up on display. Crowds of people hurrying back and forth, carefully inspecting each and every item on sale. Heated arguments between customers and stall-keepers over the sale prices of silk scarves.

Here's what people often don't notice: A small stall, just like any other, tucked away in a quiet corner of the bazaar. The merchant leaning back on his chair, one hand loosely holding onto a bamboo fan, eyes shut tight, barely asleep.

A traveller approaches the stall. He was just another ordinary traveller, blended in among thousands of others like him, coming for one moment and leaving the next, easily forgettable.

"Such interesting goods you have. I've never seen anything quite like it," he says after a while.

The merchant hummed in approval, opening one eye slightly as if to judge the new customer, but otherwise made no other comment.

The traveller stared at the merchant for a while. He was neither tall nor short; neither fat nor skinny; neither young nor old. The merchant's face was not obscured in any way, and there was something about him that looked out of the ordinary, which would have made it easy to identify him in a crowd, yet the traveller failed to narrow it down to a specific description. The clothes he wore were... unique to say the least, a mix and match of items the traveller had never seen before, each clashing in a way that made his eyes hurt.

"How long have you been out selling things for?" The traveller asked.

An uncomfortable stretch of silence followed.

"What is your name?" The traveller tried again.

Another stretch of silence. He decided against pressing further.

"Well anyway," the merchant said, changing the topic quickly, "Anything caught your interest?"

The traveller pretended to examine a length of silk. It was embroidered with the pattern of a twisting serpent, scales shining under sunlight, partially hidden by the soft petals of vibrant flowers, a striking contrast against the plain white material. He could have sworn he saw the serpent shift its head to look at him with its beady little eyes. As he ran his fingers through the design, he felt a sharp pain as his fingers brushed across the serpent's mouth. He winced and dropped the length of silk immediately, setting down at its original position.

"Anything wrong?" The merchant asked. The traveller forced a smile on his face and quickly shook his head no.

Startled, he turned his attention towards a small silver cage, where a small cat sat. Was that a third eye fluttering open? Four, six, eight, twelve eyes stared at him unblinkingly, each deep and dark as the void. Its tail flicked rapidly and irritably behind it. The cat hissed, the sound choral and distorted as if it did not belong in this universe, which it probably didn't. Its teeth were borne, too sharp, too many, each one spotlessly white.

“Gershekh, stop scaring the poor man, we’ve talked about this.” The merchant scolded at the cat.

The cat looked up at the merchant, its eyes (now a normal amount) wide and innocent as if saying, “What did I do wrong?” Which would have been convincing if it didn’t look as though it was plotting to devour existence itself five seconds ago. It licked its paws, joints bending at impossible angles.

“Sorry about that, Gershekh is really sweet, but he does that a lot, he means no harm, mostly.” The merchant smiled apologetically. “How about you take a look at this instead? I picked it up a while back, still have no idea what it does, but I figured I could sell it for a decent amount.”

From a trunk in the back of the stall, the merchant produced a slim silver device with a smooth black surface on top. A single crack running through the smooth black surface, which lit up upon contact, changing colours withing matter of seconds. The traveller examined the surface, which was inscribed with characters like those he had seen the occasional westerners who visit the bazaar use. He had picked up some of the language from his interactions with them yet could not identify some of the words. He stared at one particular line written under the word “iMessenger”: “im gonna die my eng lang hw is due tmr and i didnt start im literally so cooked bro :(sent 11:56 pm” and made a mental note of the fatalness of these so called “eng lang hw”.

“What is a ‘eng lang H-W’?” The traveller asked.

“Ah, you have seen the prophecy sent by the gods’ messenger. My best guess is that it is a curse brought to cause the apocalypse, which would bring the fiery depths of hell and burn us all alive,” The merchant said, then upon seeing the traveller’s terrified face, added, “Of course, there is no need to worry much about it. It probably wouldn’t come around until ‘tmr’, whenever that is. I’ve got more goods if you are not interested in apocalyptic prophesies.”

“Well, I’ll just go tell my companions to come and look at your goods. I’ll be right back.” With that, the traveller disappeared into the crowds.

When the traveller came back, a group of officers was with him.

“By the order of the imperial courts, you are under arrest for unauthorised possession and sale of supernatural artefacts,” The officer standing next to the traveller pulled out a stack of documents stamped by the imperial symbol “Please do not resist.”

The merchant simply smiled, then, both him and his stall vanished as if it was never really there, leaving behind only small dips in the sand where the shelves and his chair had been.

“Huh, where’d he go? Find him!” The officers behind him scrambled off at his command, in search of the merchant. But it was too late, the merchant was gone.

“Oh, well, we’ll get him next time.” The officer hastily shoved the document back into his bag with a dismissive shrug as if it were a daily occurrence. He turned to the traveller, who was clearly still shaken up. “You did good for someone on their first undercover mission. Keep it up.”

Somewhere in a night market — with the sidewalk dimly lit by flickering streetlamps; with all kinds of products imaginable neatly arranged on display racks for sale; with people chattering as they moved from stall to stall — a stall, unnoticed by most, appears out of nowhere. The stall keeper leaning back on his chair, one hand loosely holding onto a bamboo fan, eyes shut tight, barely asleep.

Bon Voyage

HKUGA College, Chan, Sze Chai Jessica – 16

Hepu, the city that I've been living in for decades of my life. Hepu, a small and humble city. I grew up in a minor scholarly family and am a pious believer of Confucianism. I've never been far away from my homeland, not even once; this was not only me though, this was also for others as we don't travel far from home, for it is unfilial of anyone to leave the family behind. Our city started thriving under the wise rule of Emperor Wu, and now our land flourished with prosperity and peace. One day, there was a post in town about recruiting men for the first trip to start business with people outside of our country. I intentionally joined as I knew I would never have such a chance again to leave my city.

We got many boats, carrying tons of valuables. I got sea sick. Some of us died, not because of the sickness, nor because of being homesick, but because they stole things that weren't meant for them. My roommate died. His place remained empty for a while and then the narrow bed space was again filled with things from others. The ships travelled north, along the coast line of our country. Shifting tides were once a great thing to see, but not anymore.

Days passed by and our ship smelled like the water, old water. Stale and fishy. Another one of my roommates died. He was sick, but he had no money to buy medicine. He asked me before but I didn't lend him the money as my money was only for urgent use. Another narrow space was emptied, and again the space was filled with things from me and my roommates.

Sending letters was nearly impossible – we were in the middle of the ocean, no one would be able to reach us, nor could we reach anyone. I often thought about my decision of venturing outside my beloved homeland. There had been many days that passed when I wondered how my family was doing.

Finally, one day, a loud noise woke everyone up. "We have arrived!" We cheered in excitement, not knowing what was ahead of us.

A vanguard was sent to explore the land first, then they vanished and were never seen in our sight. Another vanguard was sent, then vanished again. Is this place so vast that they lost their way? I believed not.

Then the leader went down the ship, surrounded by guards and followed by others. We were confident in our number, neglecting the fact that we had just got down the ship and had been floating in the ocean and getting limited nutrients along with seasickness. Unsurprisingly, we got captured by the barbarians, and were placed alongside the two vanguards we sent beforehand. Everything was terrifying. The barbarians spoke a language I'd never heard of before, wearing clothes I'd never seen before and they had eyes that reminded me of snakes.

The barbarians then placed us in enclosed spaces. We were all terrified, except for lord Zhang Qian, our leader. He was calm and composed in any moment, even in such a situation.

Under his lead, the tables turned, we eventually became friends with the barbarians, taught them our language and developed trade relations with them.

We returned home with pride. Back to Hepu. Back to my home city.

Journey of Silk Connection

HKUGA College, Gu, David – 15

One day, a silk thread floated through the streets of Chang'an, the ancient capital of the Tang Dynasty. This piece of silk wasn't just any ordinary silk; it could tell the story of another and communicate with others. The silk had some church illustrations on it, a perfect example of where the East meets the West, and there were two children, named Julius and Zhang who got the silk. Zhang was curious about the illustration on the silk while Julius was curious about the texture of the fabric.

Julius' dad was a very wealthy trade merchant; when Julius gave the fabric to his dad, he immediately recognised that it was silk. His dad said, "Whoa, where did you get it?" Julius said that it was from the sky. His dad immediately thought it was a gift from god, so he asked his son to keep it. On the other hand, Zhang had a poor family and was brought up by her grandma. She decided to keep the silk herself as a towel.

They both carried the piece of silk to dive into their dreams, where something magical blossomed. They saw each other in the dreams; it was absolutely surreal. Neither of them knew what the other was saying; they, in fact, used sign language to communicate. Even though they had language barriers, it didn't matter to them to have the greatest night of their life. They exchanged where they were from, what their hobbies were, and their family situations with each other.

After night after night of deep talking, not only did they learn each other's language, but they also built a strong bond with each other, and discovered that one of the edges of the silk was gone. They immediately realised that this kind of communication would not be held for long. Not to let this friendship simply fade away like this, Julius decided to embark on a journey towards Chang'an along with his dad, and to find Zhang.

Julius started his journey with his silk and a journey towards the bond that he had never ever experienced. On the other hand, due to her family situation, Zhang unfortunately needed to continue working with her grandma and not go anywhere, and because of this, she was depressed.

What was even worse was that her grandma had become sicker and sicker every day, and she at last faded into ashes. This hurt Zhang a lot – she thought that there was nothing to lose, and with some silver and gold in her hands, she decided to also embark on an adventure to find Julius by working with a merchant. That was the story of how these two souls who are closely connected with each other but physically

Both of them started the route towards each other, and every night they would still talk to each other through the silk, about where they were at on the Silk Road. They encountered different challenges during the trip but they still didn't give up on finding each other.

Julius and his dad arrived at Persia at first. They saw lots of different products that they seldom saw: silk, tea, and even Chinese food! But when they tried to approach the merchants, they got scammed. They saw some beautiful silk and approached the Arabian merchant, who immediately took two horses from them without saying a word. They tried to fight it back but unfortunately their ability was not enough. They were optimistic and his dad said, "At least we still got one." They treated as a lesson for not buying stuff without knowing the price.

Zhang on the other hand had a problem from the start. She needed to find a merchant team that was willing to let her go along. There were many merchants team in Chang'an so it was not hard to approach them. But it was surely a challenge to persuade them allowing her to follow. She first approached a merchant team with lots of wealth, that team found her useless as she could write nor speak Arabic or Persian. Another merchant team with lots of horses also found her useless as she could not tame a horse. She at last found a merchant team with lots of strong people as she could cook them food and her ability to cook was recognised by all of the members on the team.

Both of them shared their challenges on the way, they confronted each other and gave valid suggestions which allow them to see each other quicker and quicker. But not only the challenges and difficulties along the way, they would also share joy with each other.

Julius found himself in another country, where he had experienced lots of different new sceneries, buildings and delicacies along the way. He tried lots of Arabian food such as couscous, chickpeas, kebabs. He even brought to the silk and let Zhang have a try! Not only the cuisines, but also the buildings, and that was when Julius first knew that there wasn't only Catholic but also there was Muslim as a religion. He shared this information to Zhang where Zhang didn't even knew what is a religion but she still found it fascinating.

Zhang was still in Tang, perhaps because of the size of Tang is really huge. But what she saw was completely different than in Chang'an, she saw different types of houses and buldings, that wasn't as aesthetically appealing than those in Chang'an. She described them to Julius but Julius found it normal as he never saw the buldings with Chinese aesthetics.

Both of them shared more and more details of the trip every night and they gradually became more familiar with each other. Just when everything began to be more and more smooth, they realised that the silk had become a single bit. In a night or two, they would never have the chance to talk again. What was even worse was that they had experienced road blockage because of snow and sand, which meant their route was harder to walk than ever before.

Julius came up with a plan. He asked Zhang to meet him in the middle of the Silk Road. Julius would be arriving there even sooner than Zhang would do. All they had to do was to trust each other, trust that they were walking on the same route, trust they would keep walking on the route and trust each other that they will meet. This was not hard for a bond that had been built for such a long time, so Zhang decided to trust him and follow his instructions.

The silk faded away the next morning, Julius had arrived to the point where he told Zhang the night before. While Zhang still got thousand miles away, Julius was scared. He was scared that Zhang didn't follow or even forgot his instructions, but there was no going back. He gave up his home back in Rome, he gave up two horses, he gave up his time. Zhang had nothing to lose either – she didn't have a family, she didn't buy horses, her life was already worthless. The despair, the hardship he felt, the pressure, she was feeling that every single day.

Zhang was excited, so she didn't think that much. She was so excited to meet a friend that she never met in real life. Especially when she didn't have any connections anymore with others. She was so grateful that there was someone willing to connect with her. She remembered every single instruction that Julius had given to her and she followed.

The day had come, Zhang arrived in the same city in Persia. Zhang left the merchant with lots of pre-made dumplings and sandwiches to them so that the merchants could still have scrumptious food. They saw each other with the eyes that was so familiar in their mind. They knew that it couldn't be wrong. At that moment, they were like stars in the sky, sparkling with joy.

Julius was relieved, he knew that he had trusted the correct ones. His effort, no matter from time or money-wise was correct. But not only from the side of commitments, but also he felt grateful for finally meeting a friend that was thousand miles away. It felt like a mission impossible at the start. But they achieved it, they achieved the mission perfectly. Joy turned into tears of joy, and they both sobbed with tons of emotions in hand. The expression was worth thousands of word that they could not express.

They had their first talk after the silk faded and they talked about their future plans, since Zhang didn't have any connections back in Tang. They decided to go to Rome together, where they would live together at Julius' house. Along the way, Zhang also experienced other parts of Silk Road, where foreign languages that she could not understand were the main languages there. They relied on translation so that they could survive.

After months of travelling, Julius went a round trip from Rome to Persia while Zhang travelled the whole Silk Road and never came back to Tang. They decided to live along for the rest of their lives. They went to school together, enjoying every single bit of life together just like the time they had when the two pieces of silk existed. Zhang saw scenes that were described by Julius and it was absolutely surreal. Even though Julius never had a chance to look at the scenes that Zhang described, which for him certainly was a regret, he didn't really care, for having a good partner for the rest of the life was already enough.

After years of education, Zhang officially became a citizen of Rome and when both of them became adults, they opened a shop for merchants of the Silk Road. They also did trading there! Even though they didn't travel long as they wanted to keep their memories of Silk Road just like that when they were young, they lived happily ever after.

Back to the Silk Road

HKUGA College, Kwok, Hiu Ching – 15

Here it comes again...

When I opened my eyes, when I “woke” up from my sleep, I just knew it.

I was neither travelling on the shuttle bus towards Xi'an, nor talking to my friend that should be sitting by my side. I was standing in the middle of a sandy road, with tons of people walking past me, but no one seemed to notice me. Along the two sides of the road, there were countless stalls and displayed items, and people behind the stalls were shouting something I did not understand. *It must be a foreign language...*

Clink!

I heard sounds of metal colliding with each other behind my back, I turned around, and saw a man giving out some metal coins in exchange for some items that were being displayed. *Is he trading?*

Then, a small thought came to my mind, I looked around and started running. Everyone on the road was doing the same thing as the man, trading, selling, buying, and haggling. Even though I could not understand their language, I could still tell it from their gestures. All of these had proven my thought, *this place is a bazaar.*

Suddenly, a woman wearing a long gown next to me took a step towards my direction, and before I could do anything, the woman's body penetrated mine and walked away like nothing happened. In just a moment, I could see my body turn transparent and turn back to normal just in a blink of an eye, like an illusion.

Sure enough...

But sadly, I clearly knew that this was neither an illusion nor a dream. If you asked me why, then I could answer you confidently: BECAUSE THIS IS NOT MY FIRST TIME!

I had a special inborn “gift”, every time when I travel to a new place, I could go back in time and experience the past events of that place. However, this only happened randomly under one condition – once I was asleep or became unconscious.

Some of you may think, this is really cool, for I can change the past! Sorry to make you disappointed, but I existed in the past as the form of a ghost. No one could see me, no one could hear me, and I could not understand the people there, except for the ones who also had special abilities like me. The worst part was, I could still feel the physiological reaction of my body and it sustained even after I truly “woke” up; exhaustion and dizziness were my friends already.

Trust me, you definitely do not want to experience this.

Just when I was thinking when I could leave this place, I felt a sense of strangeness around me, *the clothing of that woman*. I quickly turned around to look for her, I could not find her but I found out that the clothing of the people around was not modern like jeans and t-shirts, but ancient like gowns and dresses with fancy patterns. They were definitely the kind that only appeared in movies with a 14th-century background...

Wait! I remember that I should be on a shuttle bus to Xi'an...

Xi'an, bazaar, 14th century...

An unbelievable hypothesis flashed through my mind, as well as the knowledge taught in history lessons, everything was matched and well explained now.

No, it can't be. You gotta be kidding me...

“What are you doing here standing in the middle of the road? You will get hit by carriages, the Silk Road is busier than you think.” A voice sounded from behind.

“You're right, how could it possibly be the Silk Road...” Then, I realised that someone had noticed my

presence.

“Did you just mention the Silk Road? Wait, you can see me?” I turned around immediately and saw a young boy standing in front of me, staring at me like looking at a stranger. Well... I was really a stranger to him.

“Of course I can see you, you’re not a ghost.”

... But I am similar to a ghost here.

“Do you know where we are now? I think I got lost on my way.”

“...”

He struggled for a moment and stared at me straight, giving me the same look as studying a rare creature.

“We’re at the bazaar just outside the Lanzhou city wall, and Lanzhou is the closest big city to Chang’an on the Silk Road. How can you not know that?”

Yes! Chang’an was the former name of Xi’an!

“Does it mean that there are a lot of ways to go back to Xi... I mean Chang’an, right?”

According to my disastrous experiences, my final goal was always going to the destination that I planned in my “real” life schedule, so my target this time should be going back to Xi’an, hopefully.

“Huh... so your original destination is Chang’an, same as us.”

“Us?”

“Feng, where are you? It’s time to go!” A woman called from the other side of the bazaar, where the sun was going down.

“Sorry, my mom’s calling, I gotta go.” He turned and slipped through the crowd nimbly.

“Wait!”

He is the only one who can see me, I can’t lose him!

Even though I hated my “special ability”, I still used it to pass through the crowd with the shortest distance to reach the boy, just to clutch at straws.

The boy was very fast, using the advantage of his short height, squeezing into the gaps between people; I could only follow his track to chase him.

After around 5 minutes of “playing tag”, I was exhausted and panting. Luckily my effort was not useless, for I could finally see him entering a building with a woman and a man. *They must be his parents.* I followed up immediately, and saw they went up some stairs by passing the restaurant on the first floor, then walking into a room with a bed and some tables. Therefore, I decided to wait outside of the room until the boy was alone.

Fortunately, I did not need to wait for a long time. The parents that I assumed both went out again, seeming to be on the mission to find food for tonight’s dinner.

I went into the room and found the boy playing on a small burr puzzle. He was so focused that he did not even notice my appearance next to him.

“Is that fun?”

“Wow! You scared me, how did you come in? And why do you come after me?”

“You’re my only hope to go back to Chang’an, so I can’t give up on you.” I decided to ignore the first question.

“What do you mean by I’m your only hope? Also, don’t ignore my first question.”

“Feng, talking to air again?” The same voice with the woman at the bazaar appeared again, this time coming from the door of the room. A woman then pushed the door open and walked in with a tray of food. *Does that come from the restaurant underneath?*

The boy gave me a strange look, and answered the woman, “You know that my friends lived in the wind.”

“Now you know how I came in.” The truth will come to light sooner or later, or maybe now?

“Your dad and I need to discuss with the other merchants about tomorrow’s return. Don’t sleep too late after eating your dinner.” The women reminded him and left the room again.

“You’re not surprised about my existence...” Seeing the calm and unperturbed reaction on Feng’s face, not like any “normal” reaction when seeing a ghost, made me confused.

“I usually see something else similar, but it’s my first time seeing a human form.”

“Huh...?” It seemed like he misunderstood something.

“So... what do you want?”

I finally remembered my purpose here. “I just want you to lead me back to Chang’an, that’s all.”

“Well... if that’s all, I think you can just follow our carriage along the road.”

“Really? Thank you, I will return this kindness for sure.”

“I don’t think this is important enough for you to repay me though.”

I just smiled without saying anything. *He won’t understand how important this matters to me.*

The boy stared at me (or should I say my clothing to be exact) and said, “... you’re not the people from ‘here’, right?”

He was confident enough to say this as a statement but not as a question.

I was surprised, not knowing that he could figure this out in such a short time. However, I just used a question to answer him, without any comment on it.

“How can you tell that?” I smiled and asked.

“I have never seen anyone wear clothes like that, neither the people in the west nor the people in our country.”

“Also, your behaviour and speech are different from any other culture. Even though we are speaking the same language, your accent is different from any dialect I have heard.”

“So I think that maybe you’re coming from a place I don’t know.”

The smile on my face trembled, I felt like my body was shot by four arrows, his reasons were hitting the nail on the head. I signed and answered, “You’re totally correct, meaning that I really need a culture tutorial class...”

“Tutorial class? What is that?”

“Uh... you don’t need to know, it’s something you don’t want to have.”

“Fine... but if you want to know more about the Silk Road, I don’t mind teaching you what I know.”

In a blink of an eye, my eyes were filled with stars, looking at Feng like I encountered a miracle.

He was shocked by my reaction and passion, and moved back a few steps.

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The Silk Road originated from Xi'an, which was called Chang'an in the past, going towards the West until Rome, extending to the other side of the Mediterranean Sea by shipping. Many middlemen came from the countries along the Silk Road, trading and handling goods to earn money. They were the merchants that connected the whole Silk Road. For example, silks, porcelain and tea leaves from China were traded towards the west, while woolen, spices, and glassware from central Asia and the west were imported to China. In addition, religious belief was also another main beneficiary of the Silk Road – Taoism, Confucianism, Buddhism, Islam and Christianity were spread around the world because of the Silk Road. However, everything in this world has two sides. Other than benefits, it also had drawbacks. As I remembered...

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Why do I feel like I have forgotten something important?

"Hellllo? Are you listening to me?" Feng's voice had pulled my attention back to reality.

We were sitting on the carriage towards Chang'an, with Feng's family and other merchants. As usual, only Feng could see me, but other people on the carriage were not surprised by Feng's act of speaking to no one.

Curiosity motivated me to ask him about my confusion, and he answered, "They are my parents' friends and working partners, so they have known me since I was small, therefore they have already gotten used to my behavior. Also, I think they just conclude that my actions are just that of an 8-year-old boy with too much imagination."

Well... to be honest, I feel sorry for him. Well, just for a second.

Throughout the whole journey, Feng had shared a lot of things about the Silk Road to me, including the goods or people we passed by. Even though he was only eight years old, he knew a lot of things, about the market, about the goods, about the people, causing me to always forget he was just eight. Perhaps it was because his parents brought him to travel to different countries since he was small.

I could feel his passion and curiosity when he shared the facts with me, his shining and shimmering face reflected in my eyes. The face could fully show how much he loved to explore the world. His brightness made me reflect, *what was I doing when I was eight?*

After three days of traveling, we could finally see the city gate of Chang'an. There were many carriages and people queuing at the entrance. When we reached the end of the queue, I heard some merchants in front of us chatting worriedly.

Just when I was astonished by the enormous city wall and the ancient building style, Feng gave me a hesitant look. "So... you'll leave once you enter the city?"

"I think so..."

The exact timing of going back to the modern world was different each time, so I couldn't give him an accurate answer.

However, this short journey of only a few days was already enough to make a new friendship. Therefore, I suggested, like every time I did, "Do you want to exchange accessories, symbolizing our short friendship?"

"Can we?" The pure smile on his face was just like how that of an 8-year-old's should be.

"Of course!" I looked at my wrist, took off one of the bracelets I had, then tied it on his wrist. Although it was just a plastic bracelet made by my poor crafting skills using tiny blocks, with three letters on it, he still treated it as a rare and precious treasure.

"H", "U", "I"

"Is that your name? The one on the sides of the blocks?"

"How do you know that?"

"Just a guess."

After that, he searched his pockets and found a handkerchief with a pattern of colorful flowers, next to it was a Chinese character of “Feng”, meaning “wind” in Chinese. “Sorry I don’t have anything fancy...”

“That’s fine, this handkerchief is pretty enough, thank you!”

When I took a closer look at the handkerchief, I finally recognized which flower it was, “Are those zinnias?”

“Yes, if I remember correctly.”

Is this a coincidence?

I laughed out and asked, “Do you know the meaning of this flower?”

“No, what is it?”

“You can ask a flower shop owner if you have a chance.”

“Hey, don’t stop something in the middle!”

As time passed by, we were only a few meters away from the entrance. Suddenly, a mature male voice went into my ears. “Have you heard about the serious outbreak of the plague in Hebei? Is it safe to stay in Chang’an?”

Plague!

I finally remembered what was the drawback of the Silk Road, it was believed that the Silk Road was the medium to bring the Black Death from China to Europe. One of the biggest enemies in the past of human history, where medical technologies were not advanced.

Even though I couldn’t change the past, I still wanted to help my friend as much as I could. Just as the same time I wanted to warn Feng about the plague, I felt a strange but familiar feeling, the feeling when I was going to teleport back to the modern world.

Time’s ticking!

“Feng, be careful of the plague, the Silk Road is one of the more dangerous places where you could...”

At the same moment when we just entered the city gate, everything went back to where it should be.

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She just disappeared in front of Feng in a blink of an eye; this was not a simile but really in just milliseconds when he closed his eyes.

“Hui?” He called her name, reading the words on the bracelet, but no one replied.

“Hui? What are you talking about?” Feng’s mother asked.

“Er... nothing, just wondering what is the meaning of this word?”

“That depends on which character you’re referring to, it can be ‘going back’, ‘intelligence’ or other definitions.” She replied patiently.

“Why do you have this question so sudden?”

“Just... curious.” He looked down with a gloomy face, somehow he knew the reason behind her disappearance.

Suddenly, the image of Hui holding the handkerchief he gave her ran through his mind. “I once saw you reading a book about the underlying meaning of flowers, so do you know the one for zinnia?”

“Zinnia? I think it means...”

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“...of propagation!” This time, Hui truly woke up from a sleep.

“...What are you talking about? Also, what kind of dream can cause such soliloquy?” Her friend sat next to her on the shuttle bus and complained.

“Just a strange adventure again.” It took her a few seconds to clarify where she was.

“Where are we now?”

“We just entered Xi’an, heading to our hotel now.”

“By the way, where did this handkerchief in your hands come from?”

If you asked me why I was so sure my adventures were not dreams but “reality”, it was because every item I exchanged followed me back to present, including this handkerchief.

“Just a small gift from the dream.”

“I think you have slept too much and the sleep has driven you crazy.”

“Maybe.”

She grabbed the handkerchief, and looked at the pattern, “Are these flowers of zinnia? A friend gave it to you?”

“How do you know that?”

“Who do you think I am? After all, I’m a daughter of a flower shop owner.” She replied proudly.

“This kind of basic knowledge can’t confound me, the meaning of zinnia is...”

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The thoughts of an absent friend and symbolizing the long lasting friendship.

Yet to Come

HKUGA College, Lam, Ching Yin – 15

“Fresh figs for sale! The sweetest you can find!”

“Highest quality silk perfect for your summer robes!”

A girl wandered around the trade market, jotting down notes of various stalls as she went. As she walked around with her head buried in her notes, she suddenly collided with something — someone.

“Hey! Watch it!” A deep voice sounded as pieces of delicately carved woodcrafts spilled onto the ground. The girl hurriedly bent down to gather the pieces of crafts. As she handed the neatly stacked pieces back, the boy spoke up, “You don’t look like you belong here. What business does a school girl have to do in this busy market?”

“I’ve been working on a project on the Silk Roads, and happened to come across a poster for this trade market. It seemed like a good learning opportunity, so here I am!”

“What a coincidence! I’m travelling to different stops on the Silk Roads to sell my woodcrafts. This is my first stop actually.”

“Oh! Would you like a tour of this place? I could show you around if you’d like.”

“I’d love to! I was just closing up my stall anyway. By the way, I just realised I never caught your name.”

“I’m Yun Xi!” The girl grinned, “and you?”

“I’m Haru, pleasure to meet you!” The boy gave a soft smile in return.

After tidying up the stall, the pair set off for the tour Yun Xi kindly offered.

She took Haru through the Bell Tower of Xi’an, The Stele Forest, the Ancient City Wall, and finally the South Gate, introducing him to different unique features of Xi’an.

At the end of the day, Haru insisted on walking Yun Xi back to her apartment.

Their steps slowed to a stop as they neared her building. They turned to each other, ready to bid farewell when Yun Xi all of a sudden took a small box wrapped delicately with a piece of ribbon out of her back pocket.

“Here, it’s a little souvenir to commemorate your trip,” she said, handing it to Haru.

He untied the ribbon and lifted the cover of the box, revealing a neatly folded piece of cloth.

“When did you get this?” he asked, taking the cloth out and admiring it.

“I bought it from a small shop in the museum when you were still looking at the displays. It’s a silk scarf. I thought it would come in handy during your travels.”

“That’s very considerate of you, thank you.” He gave her a shy smile as he wrapped the silk around his neck.

“Thanks for the tour as well,” he said after a small pause, “I had a lot of fun and got to know Xi’an thanks to you.”

“You’re welcome! I wasn’t sure if you’d be interested in the places I showed you to, but I’m glad you liked it.”

“I did.” Haru nodded slowly.

An awkward silence followed, both of them not being able to meet each other’s eyes.

“I... It’s getting late. You should leave before you miss the last bus.” Yun Xi spoke up.

“Yeah. Goodbye. It was nice meeting you!”

Haru turned around to leave.

“Wait!” Yun Xi suddenly called out. “We’ll meet again right?”

“We’ll meet again, I promise.” Haru looked around his shoulder and gave her a reassuring smile.

“Then it’s not goodbye yet,” Yun Xi said, “see you next time?”

“See you next time!” Haru waved as he walked backwards, his gaze not leaving hers.

That night, they both went to bed with something warm blooming in their hearts.

A few weeks later, Yun Xi walked home from her university lecture when the building’s security called out, “Yun Xi! There’s a package addressed to you.”

Yun Xi looked at the small brown package, “But I didn’t order anything.”

“It says it’s from Haru. Do you know this person?”

Yun Xi froze at the name, her heartbeat rising and colour rushing to her cheeks.

“So you do know this person then.” the security guard smiled knowingly.

“I do. Thanks for informing me.” She took the package into her trembling hands.

The second the apartment door closed behind her, Yun Xi tore the package open, revealing a scroll and an envelope. Unrolling the scroll, she discovered a stunning painting of a pink rose. She put down the painting and turned towards the small white envelope next to it and unfolded the paper inside. It was a letter written with elegant handwriting:

Dear Yun Xi,

How are you doing?

I’ve already arrived at my second destination, Lanzhou. I visited a few tourist attractions and have attached some pictures of them along with the letter. I hope it helps with your project. I heard Lanzhou is incredibly famous for their beef noodles, but sadly I haven’t had the time to try them. I also came across this beautiful painting in a local market and instantly thought of you. Hope you like it.

Love,

Haru

Looking into the envelope, she found the pictures Haru was talking about. She flipped through the pictures he took, smiling at the crooked photography.

She put the pictures into a small folder and kept the others carefully in a small cupboard.

The next few weeks, letters and packages kept coming, each letter written with heartfelt words:

Dear Yun Xi,

How’s your project going?

I'm currently at Zhangye. The geopark here is amazing. I've never seen anything like it. I think these are the places where those geographic wallpapers are taken from. I hope you can feel my amazement through this letter. It is absolutely breathtaking. You should really visit one day.

I found this magnet in a souvenir shop. If your fridge is looking a little empty, you can stick it there to add a little colour. I've attached some pictures just like last time. I'm not sure if it helps, but I hope it does.

Good luck with your project!

*Love,
Haru*

Dear Yun Xi,

How are you doing? It's been quite a while since we last saw each other.

I'm currently in Turpan. There's a place called the Ancient City of Jiaohe here. Not sure what it is but it reminds me of an old desert. It looks really cool. I've heard there's an actual desert with camels there too, but sand in my shoes isn't really my style. Feel free to search it up on the Internet though.

I bought this plate in a stall in the trade market I was selling at. I think it's locally produced. The patterns are really pretty too. I know it's not a good idea to mail something this fragile so I hope it hasn't broken by the time it reaches you. Hope you like it!

*Love,
Haru*

Dear Yun Xi,

How's your project going? I'm starting to miss you, just a little.

I'm writing this to you in the middle of a lake in Xinjiang. It's humongous, with absolutely spectacular scenery. It's really quiet here too, so I'm peacefully writing this letter to you. I haven't chosen a souvenir yet, but I'll probably get it from a shop nearby. Whatever it is, I hope you like it.

The weather is getting cold these days, make sure to wear a lot of layers and don't get sick.

*Love,
Haru*

Dear Yun Xi,

How have you been? I was missing you a little extra today.

I've just arrived at Kashgar. I visited the old city just yesterday. The buildings here are very unique, like something you would see in a movie.

This time, I picked out a carpet I found in a bazaar. It's really nicely made. I hope it keeps your feet warm in this cold weather.

This is my last stop for the trip, so I'll be staying here for a while longer. I'm not ready to let go of this trip yet. I've sold almost all my woodcrafts and gained quite a profit, so I'm really satisfied with my trip.

Even though this trip is coming to an end, I won't stop writing to you, so this won't be my last letter. Hope we'll be able to meet again soon!

Love,
Haru

Yun Xi opened the cupboard filled with letters and souvenirs from Haru and placed the latest envelope inside. Then, she walked back to her desk. She picked up a small card lying on the center of the table.

It was an invitation to the final presentation for her project. She had been debating on whether or not to send the invitation to Haru. But after reading his letter and learning that his trip was coming to an end, she decided that she was going to invite him to her presentation.

She put the invitation inside a small blue envelope and mailed it away.

On the day of the presentation, Yun Xi felt as nervous as ever. This was the project she had spent late nights working on. She did not want to mess it up and make a fool of herself in front of hundreds of people. Classmates, professors, special guests, and most importantly, Haru could be watching. So lost in her thoughts, she almost missed the starting announcement.

She went over the script one last time, smoothed her dress, took a deep breath, and stepped into the spotlight.

“Good morning everyone. Today, I will share with you all my research on the Silk Roads...”

As she presented, she scanned through the crowds of unfamiliar faces, her eyes finally landing on one she could never forget. *He’s really here.* She thought, a smile creeping up her face.

Haru was wearing a neat suit, his hair a little more grown out and now dyed a chestnut brown. He was looking proudly at the girl speaking confidently on the stage, grinning at her as their eyes met.

The presentation passed by in a blur as Yun Xi laid out all of her hard work.

At the end of the presentation, everyone in the room gave a standing ovation, but she was only focusing on the boy in the front applauding and flashing a toothy smile at her.

As she was walking down the stairs to the auditorium, Yun Xi spotted a familiar figure at the bottom. She rushed down the stairs and leaped into his arms. Haru stumbled backward, slightly taken aback by her sudden action.

“I missed you.” Yun Xi muttered into the crook of his neck.

“I missed you too, scholar girl,” Haru chuckled.

“Thanks for coming, and for providing the pictures. You were a great help.”

“I couldn’t miss your presentation. You worked hard on it. You did really well too!”

“Thanks. I couldn’t have done it without you.” She beamed.

“On another note, I’ve decided to stay and start a small business here,” Haru said, nervously rocking back and forth on his heels. “I want to spend more time with you and get to know you better.”

Yun Xi’s eyes widened at his words.

“Wow! I’m glad you’re staying. And... I’d love to get to know more about you too.” She admitted with a shy smile.

“Then to start us off, would you like to have lunch with me?” Haru offered his hand.

“I’d love to.” Yun Xi took his hand and met his gaze.

The pair walked off into the streets, catching up with each other's lives.

Between rosy cheeks and shy gazes, something small and delicate bloomed. They both knew their journey was far from over. But for now, the unspoken connection between them was enough, with a beautiful future yet to come.

The Echoes of the Silk Road

HKUGA College, Lee, Jeannie On Kiu – 15

“Try to keep up, son.”

The arid, but inviting gust of brisk air gently carried the words from Father, a silhouette of pale, dusty fabric draped over a scrawny figure on horseback, shrinking slightly ever in size as Marinus frantically kicked at the side of the horse in a desperate attempt to match the ordered hoofsteps imprinted on the sandy pathway.

Kick, kick. “Come on, it’s not like you have a lot of load on you!”

The horse resumed its leisurely gait.

Kick, kick. Marinus was growing increasingly impatient at the horse’s impertinence and was beginning to resort to booting the animal at full strength until he spat with unbridled annoyance, “I’m telling you, quit moseying around!”

Just like that, as if a key was turned that unlocked all of the pent-up energy the stallion was hiding, Marinus was thrust into the speed of light as the stubborn hooves carried him upon an unpredictable, winding path, trampling the patches of dry bushes dotted around the cleared, designated dirt path of merchants. Of course, in a similar, arbitrary manner, the horse skidded to a halt, and Marinus, alongside his baggage, was thrown into the welcoming embrace of sharp sand and microscopic pebbles, on the ground approximately five feet ahead.

By the time Marinus had steadied himself and lifted his head from the dirt, Father was already kneeling next to the disheveled mess of cotton wrapping and boxes, dusting off a paper parcel. “Keep up, not let your horse run amok, I said,” he muttered with an impressive lack of zest without batting an eye. “Can’t risk our load being squashed, pick it up, quick.”

Marinus reluctantly mumbled an agreement and pushed his two arms and one leg down the ground to support his one unscathed foot. Once he was balancing on two legs, he slowly staggered towards the scattered cargo. Father took no notice.

Picking up and brushing the closest parcel he could spot, Marinus tried to make sense of the now uncovered symbols printed on the wrapping. Father had taught him the essential Chinese characters “any merchant should know” years ago, thus Marinus was determined to pull out any memory of the pronunciations from the depths of his mind.

“Si-l-k...” the word stuttered in his mouth as the realisation that the goods they were carrying were worth a good amount of money dawned on him. The duo had carried the usual spices and silk to and from middlemen ever since Marinus was able to walk, and yet they have never tried, or dreamed of, actually using the goods in their hands; the savings they earn from transporting and safeguarding these “exotic gems” were simply enough to make ends meet, and to fund their next trip.

Another thing Marinus had grown accustomed to, besides handling items ironically far beyond his reach, was the ever-flowing stream of men on their camels and horses on the path, doing the exact same. There was not a day where a single corner of sand was undisturbed by the thousands of hooves and feet that would thunder through the usual route between the two metropolitan cities, where merchants did not exchange warnings on war, weather, and whereabouts.

Which was why as he rebalanced the piles of cargo onto the back of his insolent, slow-blinking horse, Marinus could not help but shiver at the familiar, yet eerily desolate pathway. Only two other caravans had passed by the section, of which Marinus and his father had been wallowing in from midday to near sunset. It was as if the very people who were the vein of the trading route had vanished off the face of the Earth, maybe having to do with the “Ottomans” Marinus had heard what was left of the passers-by say.

Marinus was beginning to miss the greetings, the clamour, when a deep, grating voice, almost as if responding to the cue of his reminiscence, sliced through the crisp air.

“The Venetians at it again I see? Can’t even keep their precious, privileged load to themselves!”

Both father and son snapped their heads to the source of the provocation, a hunched figure standing not far ahead, dressed in a similar fashion, holding the reins of his horse, which strangely did not carry any load, in one hand. Drawing his gaze onto the other hand, Marinus spotted the singular package he had neglected to pick up. The man, though weary, seemed to have concentrated most of his energy on staring daggers into Marinus and Father, his tight frown slowly morphing into a wide, provoking grin before opening once again.

“You *swines* already have exclusive privileges from the wretched Ottomans!” he croaked with impressive strength, waving the parcel in his hand wildly “Can’t even keep your cargo dirt-free?”

“Here we go again,” Father grumbled as he stepped towards Marinus’s side with the most rageful vigor he had displayed in the day. “Another whining Genoese, bitter about the consequences of their actions.”

“Constantinople was being unlawfully invaded, you Venetians were slothful enough to do nothing about it!” the man spat as he pointed an accusing finger at Father.

“Knowing that the Ottomans would have plenty to do about the people who opposed them, your people brought this upon themselves.” Father rolled his eyes to the back of his head in response.

“Shame on you Venetians!”

“Likewise to you, having resorted to stealing what little you can get your hands on, it seems like.” Father eyed the parcel, firmly gripped by the Genoese man’s fingers, almost digging holes in the wrapping.

The man froze for a heartbeat, before bursting into thunderous, contemptuous laughter for what felt like an eternity.

“Oh, it’s not like we’d earn anything from selling this loot with all those taxes! You wouldn’t have known this, would you?” the man wheezed out between his fits. Once he could cool himself down, the man raised the package high above his head, before flinging it strenuously towards the ground in front of Father, landing in a *thud* that awakened the entire pathway.

“So long, Venetians, enjoy your monopoly! You’ve killed the Silk Road,” the Genoese man hollered at last as he climbed onto his horse, turning to leave.

“Let’s go, son.” Father muttered tiredly as he picked up the parcel on the ground, Marinus was caught off guard by how quickly he reverted back to his worn-out self. Despite Father’s orders, the boy could not help but steal a glance at the man, departing on horseback. But as he squinted at the shrinking outline, he noticed a smaller figure sitting behind the man. Almost instantaneously, the figure turned towards Marinus as well, revealing the face of a boy around the same age as himself. Encouraged by the sight of a peer, Marinus waved in an effort to obtain one friendly exchange from the short scuffle, only to be met with what seemed like a huff and a turned head.

Disappointed, and slightly humiliated, Marinus turned to his horse and hurriedly began to climb, with Father already galloping away on the road ahead, towards the direction of the descending sun.

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Quivering and taking one difficult step at a time, Marinus felt his feet shuffle against the sandy soil, while his gaze desperately darted around the barren vicinity of the abandoned caravanserai, occasionally fogged by the breaths of mist. The sun had submerged completely below the horizon, and with the limited light and warmth from the moon, what was once the comfortable breeze of the desert became a source of bleak, chilly frustration.

“Haven’t you gotten used to the temperature difference by now? If you’re cold just go look for sticks yourself,” Father scoffed by the miserable ember he had started next to their camels.

“The caravanserais were much warmer before!”

“That was because there were people, they stopped running this one when nobody came. Now stop complaining and make yourself useful.” Father’s scathing tone indicated he did not want to talk anymore. Heeding this sign, Marinus left to begin his search.

However, after what felt like an eternity, Marinus still only had around a handful of twigs clutched in his palm. The wind blew harder, the ground glowed darker, the blades of grass borderline visible, and Marinus was beginning to consider bowing to fate and sleep through the cold without a proper fire.

“I’ve walked this far though, might as well... one last patch...” he muttered to himself through cheeks numb from the cold, slowly limping onwards while wearily scanning the ground. For a split second, he caught a shadow of a small branch on the sand by his feet and, relieved to have found something, he bent his knee and stretched his arms forwards, grasping at...

Nothing.

As Marinus felt his centre of gravity topple forwards, he began to desperately flail his arms by reflex, in the hopes of grasping or brushing against something, anything that could indicate that there was ground ahead of him in the surrounding abyss.

There was still nothing, as his heart felt like it was going to drop out of his ribcage into whatever was ahead, Marinus was certain he’d never see the light of day until his chest, then his forehead, thumped against a rough, rocky surface, a clear, painful indicator that he did not fall off the edge of the earth.

“Oh great...” murmuring against chattering teeth, his first thought was to curse the pathetic excuse for a fire back at the camp, get up, and get back. But almost immediately as he pushed his arms in an effort to rise, a throb of sharp, blistering pain almost sent him down towards the ground again, but stirring up every ounce of determination in his bones, he persevered. *The only thing that’ll hurt more is my skin if I stay in this cold any longer*, he told himself. With that in mind, and gritting his teeth against his aching, scorching ribcage, he heaved himself back to a sitting position.

Now, where am I? Straining his eyes and squinting, he could still only make out the blurred outlines of possibly imaginary bushes. *Well I wouldn’t know for sure if those were real, right?* Marinus rolled his eyes, being slightly exasperated at his own thought, and focused his strength onto one of his legs, supporting the other as he staggered onto his two feet, limping forwards and making his way towards what looked like a silhouette of a shrub, only to hump against a wall once again. One thing was clear as he recovered from the new sting on his forehead: there was no way he could locate himself, or find his way back, on his own, there being no pointers out of this hole, or ravine, or valley that would be visible at this hour if he didn’t have the vision of an owl. With the one of the five incapacitated, Marinus resorted to the only other method he knew to get help from any unlikely pedestrians in the dead of night of the Silk Road. Sucking in as much air as humanly possible, Marinus braced himself, then hollered at the highest volume and frequency.

“HELP! Anybody, hello?”

The proceeding ambient screech of insects was enough of an answer. Even after Marinus had screeched the same words over and over until his throat pricked with thorns and gave way, the night responded the same. No longer expecting anything more, and with the lingering ache in his legs crying for rest, he plopped himself back onto the ground and huddled his knees, grasping at any trace of warmth that was beginning to slip from his bones, even beginning to nerve himself for a night out in the cold. After all, his chance of rescue was getting more minute by the second, and all Marinus could do was glare contemptuously at big black ink ahead, and berate everything and everyone that dragged him into this scenario.

But only after a few minutes of scornful meditation, the sound of shuffling, barely audible, began to quiver through the sand. Too depleted to pay it any heed, Marinus dismissed it as a cruel joke of the wind, until the shaking became too loud to ignore. He strained his ears once more, and finally, echoing in the distance, was the faint semblance of a voice, accompanied by two specks of warm, golden light, slowly marching forwards.

The slight sharpness in the vowels and consonants declared that the speaker was not of the same descent as him. Nevertheless, filled with an ounce more of hope, Marinus called out once more, only to hear the slight crescendo of the voice, though still distant, as it scoffed and remarked, “I’d recognise that horrid accent anywhere. Good riddance if one more Venetian dies on this route.”

His heart sank. His panic set in. If there was anything worse than nobody hearing, it was somebody hearing, and consciously choosing not to help. Frozen by the bruises and the chill of the desert, Marinus stared, wide-eyed and helplessly as the pair of glowing dots proceeded onwards in front of his very eyes, eventually burying his head behind his knees when he couldn’t bear to watch any longer, until a trace of a warm blaze behind his head slightly radiated, and a finger tapped lightly on his shoulder.

Startled by the touch, Marinus immediately lifted and flicked his head to the back, and met the gaze of a boy around his age, his eyes empty, reflecting nothing but the light of the torch in his hand. Marinus thought he had

seen this person somewhere before.

“You’re Venetian.” The boy observed with the strange accent, identical to the one the voice in the distance had spoken with. Too bewildered to open his mouth, Marinus nodded cautiously. “Dad said Venetians are the scum of the earth,” the boy continued. Immediately, the switch to the lightbulb at the back of Marinus’s mind was flicked on by this very sentence.

The boy was Genoese.

Baffled by this revelation, and by the boy’s comments, Marinus could only stare back at his vacant gaze. This did not seem to deter the boy, as he began to rummage something from his pouch with his free hand.

“Dad said we shouldn’t help.” He continued to rifle through the burrow of bottles and paper until he fished out a dusty, crumpled cloth. “It’s cold tonight,” he noted, before stretching out his hand, offering the cloth. Marinus murmured his thanks and quickly nabbed the fabric, wrapping it snug around his neck. He spent a few moments soaking up the warmth of fabric, before looking up to see the boy beginning to step away.

Instantly electrocuted by the panic of losing his only lifeboat, Marinus wasted no time staggering back up. “H—hey! Where are you going? How do I get back?” Only when he began tottering forwards did the boy jerked his head back.

“The main road’s this way, Venetian,” replied the boy, stopping to wait for Marinus with his torch in his outstretched hand, the light painting half of his blank face a fickle shade of orange. “Try to keep up.”

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Marinus wondered if the moon truly dipped down an inch, or if it was his mind playing tricks on him again, but after a lengthy and laborious session of the boy waiting, Marinus stumbling to match his footsteps, the boy continuing onwards, and repeat, the pair had finally reached a part of the area with a dusted, trampled out path, free of bushes and vegetation.

“Do you know where to go now?” The boy asked, eerily without impatience nor concern, and breaking the prolonged silence. Marinus lifted his head to the specks of light around the moon that made up the map of the sky, and traced the matrix of shapes and dots slightly towards his right. One more essential skill Marinus had learnt from shadowing his father was using the sky as his compass, and the importance of tracking his footsteps with it on every route he took.

“I think I’ll be able to get back,” Marinus replied, staring at the direction of the camp, and making an effort not to show any trace of uncertainty or anxiety. “Oh, and you should have this back.” Marinus immediately snapped his head back towards the boy, and started to unravel the cloth from his neck. Pulling the fabric straight and folding it twice into a neat bundle, he extended the cloth to the boy with both arms and tried to lift the ends of his mouth, attempting a sincere smile.

After a long, awkward silence, Marinus, diffidently, decided to add one last word.

“Thanks.”

“Okay.”

Something seemed to waver in the boy’s consistent blank glare, but before Marinus could catch it, the boy turned and stepped in the opposite direction, carrying the luminance of the desert floor with him.

Alright, perhaps this route is less dead than I originally thought. Marinus let his gaze linger on the shrinking silhouette of the boy for a heartbeat longer before turning to limp back to the caravansera.

Hopefully, half a night’s rest is enough for my bones to feel better.

I do want to finish this route.

Beyond the measure

HKUGA College, Ng, Tsz Yau – 15

As if touching a long-healed scar, my fingers are tracing the faint line stretching north on the map. This map is a valuable property from past generations. It holds my ancestors' spirit, including their aspirations and struggles. This map, is an intricate chattel that connects three generations.

To begin with, my grandfather was a camel driver, and I am the last descendant in our family to follow the western routes. My grandfather had a treasured possession, which was a remarkable map for merchants traveling the western regions. The map was drawn during the Guangxu era and is steeped in the stains of sweat and blood. At this moment, the map curls slightly in my hands. Not only reverberating the time, but also the memory. Outside the window, a China–Europe freight train suddenly whistles. The silence of the desert is shattered. The steel body is so foreign. It has replaced the silent camel trains, and its trajectory symbolizes the rebirth. The rebirth of that faint line on the map. A history reimagined, yet undeniably linked.

My grandfather was among the last keepers. He often reflected on the essence of the Silk Road. Before he passed away, he whispered to me, “Remember, the Silk Road isn't a road, but a scent.” His words haven't left me; they have been wandering, lingering around my mind like a fragrance till this day. He was right. It was the unmistakable fragrance of fresh tea and raw silk piling in the carts leaving Chang'an. It was the cloying sweetness of melons and fruits mingling with the dry winds of Hexi. It was the passionate heat of exotic spices rising with the dust stirred in Kucha. Yet, when the snowy wind from the Pamir Mountains struck his face, that scent faded. It was replaced by the camels' heavy panting in a vastness that felt close to nothingness.

The true road, he explained, was the one laid before his eyes, where camel bells shattered the stars, and the wilderness held only the whispers of wind and sand. He measured civilization with his bones and blood. Every transaction was not just an exchange of “goods”, but a brief mingling of two life breaths, met in the expanse of the desert. What my grandfather guarded was this “human world”. It wasn't perceived through maps but through senses. The sights, the sounds, the scent that formed life along the Silk Road.

In my father's generation, however, the road “died”. My father witnessed the steam whistle drown out the camel bells, where established shipping routes replaced adventurous trails. The trails my grandfather cherished. My father became a curator at the museum. He spent his days sitting opposite unearthed Roman gold coins and Persian glass bowls. For him, the Silk Road was reduced to an “object” – it was something viewed under the sterile glass case, something that was lit by harsh white lights until it lost all warmth. It was the precise dates and data in archaeological reports.

He tried to approach the Silk Road as a scholar. He attempted to use rulers and documents to reassemble an essence of a lifeblood he had never dared to touch. What he guarded was this “civilization”. The “civilization” that was desiccated by time. An invisible pane of glass stood between us. My father saw my grandfather's legends as “unscientific memories”. What I felt, however, was that his meticulous research served as a betrayal of the warm and living road my grandfather navigated and knew about.

Until that one fateful afternoon came, while I was sorting through my family's historical materials, I stumbled upon his treasured collection of old magazines. Inside hid a 1978 issue of “Geographical Knowledge”, and there I found a page filled with my father's handwritten notes. The paper was yellowed and brittle, but full of depth. There were no academic terms at all, but bore a few brief lines:

“My father once said, ‘Beyond the old lands of Da Yuezhi, there is a forest of poplars, where spring lies within, its water sweet. By the stones at its edge, the camels would kneel to drink, their posture was an act of worship.’”

I was stunned, shocked even. My breath caught in my throat. My father had never mentioned, had never spoken of this forest to me before. It existed somewhere between silence and memory. Below the note, in even smaller script, as if talking to himself, he had added:

“I have researched everything, but I cannot find that forest. Perhaps it was never on a map, but on the ‘Road’ itself.”

The window frame of his office cut the new railway outside into geometric shapes, yet I could clearly smell it. The damp and earthy scent of the poplar forest after rain that my grandfather described. It was mixed with the faint metallic tang of the copper bells hanging from the camels' necks. Suddenly, my perception shifted. I realized that my father had not spent his entire life negating my grandfather's road; he had been using his own method. He was not trying to erase my grandfather's road, but rather, he was seeking the sacred truth hidden within it. He was desperately searching for that legendary spring. We were not each other's betrayers nor enemies, instead believers lost on different stretches of the same thousand year—pilgrimage.

Last year, I was working on a cross-border project. It aimed to develop a new chapter in our shared legacy. I was trying to utilize scanning technology to create permanent archives for the ancient city ruins scattered along the Silk Road. I wanted to preserve what remained. On one particular mission, I piloted a drone over the sea from my father's notes.

As the drone took off, the camera transmitted images that revealed nothing but endless sand dunes in golden light. Just as hopeless as it was, however, as I overlaid my grandfather's meticulously hand-drawn map with the satellite imagery, in an astonishing moment, a point miraculously lit up on the screen. It was the forest my father had been looking for, a tiny but undeniable area of anomalous vegetation. Its shape was uncanny, like a kneeling camel.

This discovery might have been dismissed as nothing, or it might have been everything.

As I stood before the massive screen in the control center, I watched the macro data flow of the Silk Road Economic Belt shimmered like a galaxy in operation. I clutched that yellowed slip of paper in my palm. Time itself rested there. The steel camel trains of the new century raced along their very ancient genetic code my grandfather once traversed. They were transporting not only microchips and new energy vehicles, while creating new miracles, but also the myths of our past. And yet, I recognize that in some unseen dimension of data, I had just archived a kneeling camel, a stubborn longing for home. It was an echo of our shared legacy.

The great Road never truly died. It simply transformed. It morphed from the sand under hooves to the ink on my father's paper, and now, ultimately into the light at my fingertips. What we have traded, worshipped, and safeguarded was never limited to the silk, nor the code; it was the unceasing life impulse of the civilization itself. When a noblewoman in distant Rome caressed the gorgeous fabric from the East, she was unknowingly touching a nation's entire imagination and dreams of faraway lands. And tonight, when a train departing from Yiwu arrives in Madrid, it will carry with it not just goods but the twenty-two centuries later, the very same, undiminished human yearning for connection. A connection that transcends beyond space and time themselves.

The old paths, the western winds, the iron rails, and their metallic ring... All of these elements are but different movements of the same enduring song. Pioneers and keepers alike are all on this shared journey.

The luminous screen in the control center glowed with constellations of data points. Each of them represented a container, a transaction, a connection being made in real time across continents. Yet, within that sterile light, I saw something beyond the digits and graphs. The ghost of a camel train moving through the same digital space. Their paths overlapped not in geography, but in purpose. The "why" had not changed in twenty-two centuries, only the "how".

My grandfather's road was made of patience. It was the embodiment of a slow accumulation of the footsteps in the sand. It was the gradual wearing down of mountain passes. It was the patient negotiation conducted in a dozen tongues under the stars. His wealth was not just found solely in the bales of silk, but in the profound knowledge of where the next waterhole lay, of which tribal chief respected a well-made bow, and of how to read the coming of a sandstorm in the shift of the light. His road was a living, breathing entity, and he was an essential part of its ecosystem.

In contrast, my father's road was made of preservation. Faced with the silence of the old trails, he sought to build a different kind of bridge. His museum became a sanctuary for memories, a place where objects, stripped of their original utility, were asked to tell their stories instead. A Roman Coin transformed was no longer a currency, but rather proof, a testament of a handshake that spanned continents. My father was tending to the roots of a tree whose branches he could no longer use.

And my road? It is made of simultaneity. It exists in the cloud, and is accessible from a handheld screens of individuals in Chan'an or Rome. It is capable of simulating the erosion of a thousand years on a mud-brick wall or calculating the most efficient route for a shipment of smartphones in a mere millisecond. It is a road without dust, without fatigue, without the immediate peril of bandits or storms.

And yet, it is on this new, invisible road that I finally discovered the space to unite my understanding. I found the common ground with my father, and through him, a bridge to my grandfather. We are all cartographers. My grandfather drew his map with his life experiences. The map was shaped by thirst and discovery. My father drew his with scholarship. He tried to fix the fading contours of a world that felt increasingly distant onto paper with the precision of ink. And I? I draw mine with light and code. I create a limitless, weightless atlas that can hold all versions of the road at once.

The kneeling camel captured within the data was the representation of a profound moment where the three maps aligned. It was the point my grandfather's lived experiences, my father's desperate search for its truth, and my own capacity to see what remains unseen, all converged. It was not merely a location, it was a profound revelation and realization. The soul of the Silk Road does not reside in any particular path, but in the unwavering human intent to reach out, to trade and to understand.

The Silk Road will continue to create its own miracles. It will weave economies together with fiber optics, power cities together with shared green energy. Perhaps, one day, it will see the first trade caravan depart for Mars. Its scale is unimaginable to a lone camel driver resting under the stars.

The Tree of Life

HKUGA College, Ng, Yan Kiu Corinne – 17

Legend has it, a tree grows in the Karakum desert. Its fruits bear seeds of gold, and the god Tengri resides in the clouds above its canopy.

Far away from the desert, all the way in China, the legend spread like wildfire. Storytellers in the Tang night markets spoke of the tree vividly. Merchants sold silk to the desert towns, then brought back morsels of gold and pots of spices. Travellers recounted seeing faraway trees while traversing the desert.

Ming's stall in the market was next to a storyteller's stall. Every night, during night market hours, he would overhear the legend. Every day, while he counted taels of silver in his father's shop, he would dream about leaving China, about a great adventure, about great wealth, about great honour and prestige.

Ming set off to the markets. He bought a horse from the East Market, a saddle from the West Market, a bridle from the South Market, a whip from the North Market. With each purchase, his pouch of silver taels grew lighter, and his dreams of the desert's wealth grew stronger.

The following morning, Ming bid his parents goodbye, then mounted his horse. Throughout the day, he passed through towns, heading westward, towards the Karakum desert. At dusk, he set up camp on the bank of the Yellow River. He woke up earlier than sunrise, mounting his horse again, continuing his journey westward. At dusk, he set up camp at the base of the Black Mountains, next to a Mongol settlement.

For days and nights, Ming rode his horse through passes and through plains.

The plains grew more barren, the ground under his horse grew more sandy, until he reached the heart of the Karakum desert.

In the air that seemed to waver under the desert's heat, he saw a large pillar, a pillar that reached beyond the sky.

His dream of riches, glory, prosperity and honour was close enough that he could practically touch it.

He rode towards the pillar. The pillar's base was in a cave, which had a large opening on top.

He dismounted the horse, then scaled his way down to the cave's floor, with a thick rope he had bought back in Chang An.

On the floor of the cave, lay a single fruit. It was red as corals from the Eastern Sea, and shimmered like a pearl from the Southern Sea.

He picked the fruit up, and split it into two halves.

It was rotten inside. There were no golden seeds to be found in the fruit.

"Man from the East, what do you seek from the Tree of Life?" A voice rang from behind him, yet when he turned around, there was no one there. He was alone in the cave, holding a rotten fruit, a rotten fruit that seemed like a delicacy from the outside.

"I seek glory, I seek honour, I seek prosperity."

"Lies! Now, man from the East, what do you truly seek from the Tree of Life? What do you seek from Tengri?"

“I seek wealth.”

“Foolish man! Greedy man! You walk the path of honour, yet you have no heart for true glory. The path you walked here was the same path brave warriors tread upon. They sought refuge in my cave, they sought food and water from my branches. They sought me on their path to defend their country, to protect their people. I gave them food, I gave them water, and they have returned to their homes with glory. Yet you seek wealth, and you seek it more than you seek honour.”

“What about the gold? My countrymen have returned to Chang An with seeds of gold.”

“They have been rewarded with something of true value, something rarer than gold. The gold seeds are gifts from people they saved. The gold seeds are fruits of their honour. Now return to the East, foolish man, return to the East without gold seeds, for you do not have honour.”

The Golden Bract

HKUGA College, Pun, Kin Pong – 16

The winds of the Taklaman desert howled as the sand blasted onto Elias' face. The continuous, grit-filled roar of fury that gradually stripped the paint from the wagons provided a strange comfort among the merchant's restless minds. For Elias, the leader of the merchant group "The Golden Bract", this trip was his lifeline – an escape from debt collectors, and a way to keep his one promise. The Chinese silk rocking about within the carriages was his egress, to a better life and better dreams.

The camels the merchants rode on have been accustomed to this hellish route since centuries ago, being in a long line of successors to travel the silk road, their entire body seemed perfectly made for this one mission. With each step from the camels, they engaged in a tiring battle against the vigorous tempest. Angling themselves forward, the merchants used their body weight to counteract the severe forces as if they were able to lean on an invisible support, an unexplainable power, hindering their conquest of silver and profit.

As the day continued on, the relentless sandy gales faded, and stars that shimmered like crystal dust began to paint the night sky. Elias held onto his robes tightly as an icy breeze swept across his face. The nights in this unforgiving desert were unimaginably cold, with Elias imagining the snowy peaks to be the only equivalent for this chilling air. Despite the harsh conditions, the group of merchants never once stopped in their journey, for each stride brought them closer to cosmic yields and extensive returns. Elias patted his cloak as cloudy dust flew out from his clothes. He extended his numb hands into his pockets, providing comfort from the unfaltering cold for a slight moment, before pulling out again, his hand now holding onto a dusty compass. A picture of a middle-aged woman embracing a young child was plastered onto the top of the compass, as the needle at the bottom spun about randomly.

Elias lightly caressed the picture until his merchant comrade Margo, sitting beside him on another camel, spoke up. "Still looking at that picture? These inexorable dunes don't befit a family man like you" His raspy voice covered the quiet breeze

"Oh, I'm not married." Elias corrected him "This is my mom." he said with a light smile, wiping off some sand from the picture .

"A mama's boy eh?" Margo chuckled. "She must be ecstatic from all the money you make." Elias' eyes widened for an instant as his face turned sorrowful

"Yeah she would be" he focused on the picture. Margo opened his mouth as if to say something but instead turned his head forwards, concentrating on the journey in front.

These secluded lands bore no sense of life or hope, its days being ever so grueling and its nights being all the more quiet. Apart from the rare small talk between the merchants, most of them were left with their own thoughts. Perhaps a vibrant dream filled with the silver they were about to obtain, or a nightmare reminding them of why they are even on this trip in the first place. Nevertheless, an endless quiet stretched across the entire stream of wagons and carriages, a mere grain of sand in a vast, boundless desert. "How much longer?" Margo asked. "About a week, if the weather holds." Elias scanned the perpetual horizon – The Taklamakan or "The Place of No Return". This place offered no cover or protection. "If the gods are merciful" Elias corrected himself.

The gods, as it turns out, were not merciful.

The attack came from within the ground itself. In an instant, arrows flew by with a small buzz in the air. From the sand, dozens of figures arose, covered in loose clothing that camouflaged them amongst the golden dust. They were silent, perfectly coordinated, almost to a terrifying degree.

“It’s an ambush!” Elias shouted with all his might, pulling out his bow. Margo followed as they jumped off the camels, using the wagons as protection. They fired their arrows in retaliation as the other merchants charged with their scimitars. “Never bring a sword to a bow battle” Margo scoffed. “It’s not like they have any other choice, we only have 3 archers,” Elias responded. The sound of clashing iron and the screams of rabid warriors filled the dry, dusty air.

The raiders formed a semi-circle, inching closer and closer to the merchants. “We can’t just stay here” Margo hurried with a panic. Elias clicked his tongue in return, disconnecting the camels from the wagons and jumping on. From his side, he pulled out a long scimitar, his camel galloping with determination towards the raiders.

He dragged his sword along the sand, flicking it towards the raiders. With a pained grunt, Elias struck his weapon, he watched as Margo engaged the others, cutting them down until an axe flew by, embedding itself into the camel’s leg. “Margo!” Elias called out, spurring his camel towards him, but as the raiders closed in, he saw them carry some of the silk away. A vengeful rage burned within his heart, his dream, his life, being stripped away before his eyes. He fought with a newfound desperation, until a crushing blow to the back of his head sent his mind to a daze. He fell to the ground, and his view shifted to a black darkness.

He woke to a horrible smell of blood, and the terrible cries of dying camels. The sun was up, and so was the heat. He squinted his eyes as he tried to make sense of his surroundings. In the distance, he saw Margo, lying down on the ground unconscious. He painfully limped towards him, a comrade amidst this awful encounter.

“Margo! Can you hear me?” He shook his shoulders. Immediately, Margo jumped up, as if awaking from a horrifying nightmare. “Where are the others?” he asked, flustered. Elias didn’t respond, but the silence explained all that needed to be said.

They rummaged through the carnage, checking for survivors and their precious cargo. “They took everything,” Elias cried. “Not everything” Margo said, crouching under one of the wrecked wagons. Margo pulled out a single long package. It was the sample Bale, the one Elias kept separately on purpose – as it was one of the finest silk samples he had ever seen. It’s midnight blue adorned with a celestial white pattern. This silk was meant to be the contractor’s masterpiece.

Hope, though cold and fragile – like a miniature flame in Elias’ heart, flickered in his chest.

“The nearest sign of civilization is a trading village six days away on foot.” Elias told Margo. “If we’re lucky, we’ll make it.” They took their remaining water, food and the silk, and set off, facing the harsh environment head on. “Hold onto the silk well, it’ll be our ticket out of here” He reminded Margo.

The violent rays seemed unusually intense to these experienced travellers, with them being used to the constant rocking by the camels, the sudden physical burden that was cursed onto them was almost unbearable to the merchants.

Be that as it may, they carried on despite the aching pain in their legs, and the sunburnt skin flaking off their arms. This much was needed for survival, being a regular visitor of this ruthless environment, they knew that any sign of weakness would spell imminent danger. As such, they continued kicking on the sand.

The two decided on shifts for their luggage. With the water and food being too heavy for their weakened bodies, they took turns holding the silk and the food, each change in position making the person in charge sigh in relief, and the other, sigh in despair.

While trudging along the gritty ground, Elias shouted without warning. He had lost his compass. Margo looked around and saw a sharp glint in the sand. Picking it up, he asked if Elias was talking about this.

Elias immediately rushed towards Margo, as if all strength returned to his body. “No! I mean yes, but the picture is gone.”

“That’s what you’re worried about?” Margo’s unamused face stared at Elias.

“Yes.” Elias seemed to take offense to his question.

For hours, Elias searched around, his hands covered in hot sand. Margo simply sat watching him, clearly disapproving of the time that they were losing. But Margo needed Elias, in this barren, desolate wilderness, having a companion for the journey was comforting. He knew that without him, he might’ve given up already.

“Oh my god! Finally!” Elias erupted in cheers.

Margo let out a small smile, and stood up, patting off the sand on his robes.

“Ok let’s go.” He told Elias.

Elias looked back with a disappointed stare, and as if all the fatigue from searching for hours on end suddenly surged into his body at once, his enthusiasm disappeared, and he returned to reality, facing the desert once again.

“How much water do we have left?” Elias looked to Margo, who was now painfully dragging a pile of waterskins along the ground.

“Around 6 to 7 left.” He tugged along the rope that wrapped around the leather flasks. “I know you’re thirsty but we need to conserve our resources.”

“I know, I know.” Elias scratched the edges of his dry lips, his annoyed voice sounding raspy and weak.

A worried look appeared onto Margo’s face, he frowned, staring at the sand below, and watched as his footprints left a trail behind, only to be blown away by the wind.

“Margo! Look!” Elias spoke with an alarmed voice. Margo raised his head as his eyes rounded, looking at the giant dust cloud flying towards them.

They scrambled about, looking for any cover that could help shield them from the entourage of dust hurling towards them, before settling on a small bump in the sand.

The earth shook beneath them as streams of sand and dust flew by. They wrapped around their belongings tightly, trying to fit into the small space of safety that the bump provided. Then all of a sudden, the compass in Elias’ robes slipped out. “No!” Elias’ muffled voice broke through the storm as he left the hill to chase after it. “Wait!” Margo shouted out, glancing at their pile of food and water, before also standing up to chase after the Elias.

The dust gnawed at the limited parts of Margo that weren’t covered up. He mustered all his strength to push forwards, but with the poor visibility, he wasn’t sure if his direction was even correct. Before long, he finally pushed through, but an Elias celebrating with his lost item wasn’t seen, instead, he was greeted with the devastating view of an endless vast desert.

Night dawned, as the sky shimmered with dust once more. Marco waited endlessly for the storm to pass. With the occasional sand in the eye, Marco watched as the stampede of dust ravaged the area in front of him. He occasionally scanned the surroundings for any glimpse of Elias, perhaps a faint figure amidst the chaos, but to no avail. Standing behind the ultimate might of nature, all Marco could do was pray.

And as if his prayer was answered, the storm began to fade.

Marco, with his salvation finally arriving, scoured the battered warzone for any signs of life. He wanted to scream out, for help, for his supplies, or just for his companion, but his parched, papery dry throat with the texture of sandpaper held him back, preventing his cries of desperation.

As the dust settled, hope began to fade within Marco's heart. Was this the end of the journey? The promises of riches and luxury evaporating along with the sunbaked sand? But all of a sudden, Marco heard a faint cough, barely reaching his ear drums. Instantly, he mustered all of his remaining strength, rummaging through the burning sand towards his ray of light. His hand hit a soft material, as relief overtook his body. The pain from the heat didn't matter, nor did the dry withering tissue of his pharynx, in this particular moment, all Marco focused on was digging.

He thought of multiple ways to scold Elias, the stupidity of running out in a sand storm, or the thoughtlessness of his actions. But when his body began emerging from the sand, Marco shoved all of the imaginary berating into the back of his mind, and instead asked "You okay?"

After walking around for a bit more, the two reunited with their silk and belongings, and lit a small fire, its smoke flying about in the air.

"I know it's probably not my place to pry into but, why go such lengths for a regular compass?" Marco gave in to his curiosity.

Elias spun the compass around in his hand, taking comfort in its circular shape, and opened the lid, staring at the picture stuck to it with a warm smile.

"My mom gave it to me" Elias continued

"I drew it when I was younger. My parents didn't have the money for my childish wants, but one day, I found a chalk piece in an alley at the marketplace. Without really thinking about it, I just drew my mom onto a piece of paper I found and showed it to her. She was so happy that she kept it for herself, not even letting me see a glimpse of my masterpiece when I asked for it." Elias chuckled

"After her sickness took over her body and on the day she died—" Elias stopped for a moment "On her last words, she gave me this compass, with the drawing stuck to its lid, crying about being sorry for not giving me the luxuries that I deserved and not having enough money to support me. It was then that she told me to 'Be happy', to live a fulfilling life with the riches I once longed for, and to be able to be proud of the life I made" Elias stared at the blue sky, where not a single cloud was in sight.

"And then I made a promise to her, that I'll live grateful of the life she gave me, and obtain all the things we once wanted" He put the compass to his chest and caressed the metal lid

"That's why I leaped out into the storm. The road, the silk, it's everything to me, but without this — no, without her, none of this even matters" Elias looked out with determination

Many traverse the silk road, all with different reasons and different philosophies. Marco stood next to Elias, holding the silk. "Let's go then, you need to fulfill your promise" he told Elias.

They continued their journey, as the night fell again, and dawn broke once more. The once unbearable pain is now a mere stepping stone in their conquest. Each stride, each step, bringing them ever closer to the end. Elias looked at the compass, the guiding north star of his voyage, and a comforting hum of home.

Before long, they crawled up a sand hill, dust flying off its peak, and looked out into the distance – a bustling city, merchants galore. They gripped the silk tightly as they reached the end, no – their new beginnings.

The Legacy of Silk

HKUGA College, San, Yan Yuet – 16

“Find anything you fancy?”

Amidst the vibrant cacophony of vendors hawking their wares, historian Li Huan found himself in the bustling atmosphere of the local flea market, which was a stark contrast to the serene silence of his library. As he was about to navigate the thronging crowd back to the quiet of his residence, a quaint stall selling ancient artifacts and relics caught his eye. Noticing Li Huan’s curiosity, the stall owner promptly rose from her low wooden stool, gesturing towards all the myriad treasures displayed on the table. “Feel free to take a look around!” She exclaimed, brimming with almost too much enthusiasm as she eagerly anticipated her first sale of the day. However, as she stood up, she accidentally knocked over a box resting by her feet, causing all of its contents to tumble out. Bending down to help the stall owner tidy up, Li Huan’s attention was drawn to something peculiar within the scattered mess.

Nestled in the overflowing pile of jade carvings and compasses, a weathered, bronze medallion stood out, marked with a greenish patina. As if called by a magnetic pull, Li Huan carefully picked it up, inspecting it through the thick lenses of his glasses. The medallion was embellished with intricate details, featuring a finely crafted figure on horseback moulded into the metal, surrounded by sooty inscriptions. With a gentle breath, he blew away the thin veil of dust that had settled on the surface, revealing the faded title engraved beneath: *Zhang Qian*. He’s definitely seen that name somewhere. The two words rang repeatedly through Li Huan’s head as he recalled passages from his mental library of history. Zhang Qian, a prestigious diplomat highly valued by emperors, laid the foundation for the first Silk Road through his expeditions, opening up vast trade routes across China and its western neighbors. “What were the belongings of such a prominent figure doing here, being sold at a measly flea market?” Li Huan pondered in awe. Typically, prized possessions owned by the deceased were buried in their tombs, which accompanied them on their journey to the afterlife. “Zhang Qian was truly incredible to have accomplished such impressive feats. I wonder what it would be like to witness his journey pioneering the Silk Road with my very own eyes” Li Huan mused to himself, rubbing his fingers over the patterned texture.

Suddenly, a blinding light erupted from the medallion, enveloping Li Huan in a shimmering glow. The light pulsed rhythmically, and as it intensified, Li Huan felt himself being swept away on a tide of sensations. The world transformed into a flurry of colors and sounds, and as the brilliance faded, he found himself standing in what appeared to be a different time and place.

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Li Huan rubbed his eyes frantically.

This had to be a dream. Body trembling, he began to observe his surroundings, trying to pinpoint where he was. Recognizing the designs and infrastructure from his history textbooks, it seemed like he was in the grandeur of *Weiyang Palace*, with servants scurrying about and vigilant guards posing stoically. The air was thick with the scent of incense, and faint sounds of soft music wafted from the guqin.

Hold on, Weiyang Palace? Didn’t it collapse almost over a thousand years ago?

Li Huan’s heart raced as he took in the vivid details—the ornate columns, majestic pillars, and the vibrant silks adorning the walls. Then it finally hit him like a ton of bricks. He has travelled back in time. Back to 126 BC, to be exact. But what sent his pulse racing even more was the figure seated on an opulent throne facing him: the Emperor Wu of Han, his expression cold as stone. Holding his hands up in despair, Li Huan immediately plopped down on his knees. “Your Majesty, I mean no harm! I swear I am no enemy!” He begged desperately, forehead pressed against the floor. “I was just strolling around the flea market when I somehow touched a medallion that teleported me back in time. I have no idea how I ended up here!”

However, as Li Huan knelt there anxiously, nobody reacted to his pleas nor acknowledged his presence. It was as if he were a ghost, unseen and unheard. Pushing himself up, confusion swirled in his mind. *Was he completely invisible?* But before Li Huan could grapple with this bewildering thought, a loud voice echoed through the entire room. “Your Majesty, the military officer you requested for has arrived.” Instinctively, Li Huan rushed to hide behind a nearby pillar, peeking his head out to get a better view of the unfolding scene. As the doors flung wide open, a towering form stepped into the chamber, kneeling before the emperor as the servants trailing behind him followed. The figure was draped in armor made of lacquered leather layered over robes, wearing a *wuguan* atop his head. Squinting his eyes, Li Huan closely observed the facial features, feeling a sense of familiarity. Staring at the medallion in his palm, he fixed his gaze on the figurine sculpted in the metal, and then at the warrior-like man before him; the resemblance was uncanny. There was no doubt — the legendary Zhang Qian was standing in front of him. With wobbly legs, Li Huan tried to compose himself from fainting right there on the spot. “Zhang Qian. It has been a very long time since I last saw you.” Emperor Wu spoke; his voice boomed with a commanding resonance, “With such a lengthy journey, I trust that you’ve brought some valuable information with you today.” Bowing his head respectfully, Zhang Qian unfurled a scroll retrieved from his pocket. “Your Majesty, to the glory of the empire, I offer my deepest gratitude for your generosity and patience. Throughout my expedition, I have compiled a comprehensive report on all my findings, which will surely not disappoint.” Despite the intimidating presence of the Emperor, Zhang Qian stood firm, voice unwavering and steady. Leaning back in his throne, Emperor Wu gave a slight smile that didn’t quite reach his eyes, a glimmer of interest flickering within them, “Very well. You may enlighten me.”

Clearing his throat, Zhang Qian gave his servants a brief nod, who quickly scampered away at his cue. Seconds later, they came back, each cradling a small cushion with different kinds of objects presented on it. “The first product,” Zhang Qian gestured at the first servant standing in line, “came from Dayuan, Fergana Valley. This fruit is called a grape. The people there make a special intoxicating beverage called wine using the seeds that come from this fruit.” As he delved deeper into the nuances of grape cultivation and wine-making, the emperor barked at the officials to note everything down. “*This must be how viticulture in China was kick-started.*” Li Huan thought. It was amusing to see the intrigued reactions of everyone in the room to this now-common fruit. Ever since grapevines made their way to the empire, the development of viticulture and wine-making has been flourishing immensely, becoming a favorite beverage among the wealthy.

Once Zhang Qian finished his explanation, he gave a brief nod, signalling the end of his presentation, and the servant holding the grapes scurried away. Next, a more familiar object—a sheer, smooth pile of carefully folded fabric—was presented to the Emperor. “Silk? This is nothing new to me. I am well aware of its value.” Emperor Wu said dismissively, letting out a scoff. However, Zhang Qian continued to maintain his solemn composure, brushing off the Emperor’s comment with grace. “I understand that Your Majesty has been accustomed to silk, but I have come to offer my insights regarding this product that could greatly benefit our economy.” Taking a deep breath, he handed a yellowed map to one of the Emperor’s guards, the paper marked with crosses pinpointing locations, “While I was visiting *Daxia*, I found these pieces of Chinese silk being sold in one of the markets. Locals there informed me that the silk was bought from indirect routes through *Shendu*, which suggests that merchants have travelled from Sichuan through Shendu all the way to Daxia.” “Are you trying to imply that there’s a pre-existing trade route that we don’t know about?” One of the court officials interjected, sounding incredulous. “Precisely,” Zhang Qian affirmed, gaze steady. “This indicates a southern route bypassing the hostile Qiang and Xiongnu, yet the demand for silk is so high that people are willing to face the danger. I believe, Your Majesty, that you should capitalize on this opportunity, and open formal, direct trade routes.” As Zhang Qian paused, Li Huan watched as a crowd of murmurs began arising from the chamber, whispers spreading like wildfire.

“*Could he have been bribed by foreign merchants to spread misinformation?*” one voice questioned.

“*This just seems like a gamble and a waste of our resources,*” another added.

Li Huan felt a pang of frustration. Zhang Qian was right. Opening a new trade route was exactly how the Silk Road came to life. Why were they disregarding his hard-earned insights based on mere speculation? He wanted

to shout in defense of Zhang Qian, but his invisible presence caused him to remain helpless. “How will you take responsibility for the fall of the empire if this plan fails?” An official chimed in, raising an eyebrow. “You come with tales of distant lands, yet leave us with uncertainty!”

Zhang Qian’s shoulders stiffened. “I have put my life in danger for this knowledge. I have seen the goods and thriving merchants beyond the border myself. These routes really do exist.”

“All of your claims have no basis except for some lousy paper,” the court official retorted. “Perhaps you’re fabricating lies for your own gain.”

Gasps filled the chamber, echoing off the ornate walls. This was more than just an accusation; it was a dagger aimed directly at Zhang Qian’s reputation and integrity. As the scene began to cloud with murmurs, Emperor Wu raised his hand, calling for silence. “Zhang Qian, your contributions to this empire have been undeniable, and perhaps your visions of new trade routes could still hold merit,” the emperor said slowly, deep in thought. “But I need more than just your words.” At that very moment, the medallion that Li Huan had been holding slipped from his clammy hands and fell onto the marble floor, the clink of metal ringing out in the tense atmosphere. In an instant, an overwhelming sensation surged within Li Huan. He felt his body morphing, with his flowing *hanfu*, once vibrant and regal, transforming into worn-out cotton. Breathless and startled, he hastily picked up the medallion, leaving a trace of fingerprints from his sweat. As he gazed into its reflective surface, a startling realization dawned upon him—he had transformed into a humble merchant from *Daxia*.

Before Li Huan could comprehend what was going on, he saw a flash of metal, and two sharp polearms were inches away from slicing his neck.

“Who do you think you are to be sneaking into the royal chambers like this? You must have guts to commit such a heinous act.” Emperor Wu seethed, banging his fist on the arms of his throne.

Li Huan looked around in confusion, trying to see to whom that comment was directed, and he found that Emperor Wu’s piercing gaze was locked right onto him, eyes cold. *Wait, is he talking to me? Am I visible now that I’ve shifted into a merchant’s body?* At first, Li Huan was ready to drop down and crumble in horror, but an idea suddenly sparked in his mind. This was the perfect chance to solidify Zhang Qian’s credibility! Feeling a surge of determination, Li Huan began his scheme, holding up his hands in surrender. “I deeply apologize for the intrusion. I am, but a humble merchant from Daxia,” Li Huan spoke shakily, trying to muster his newfound courage. “I can bear witness, as a trader who has walked the paths Zhang Qian speaks of. I can vouch for him. He is not here to deceive.” His heart pounded as he spoke, a mix of fear and hope intertwining in his chest, but he stood firm, ready to defend the truth he believed in as a historian.

“What is this trickery?” one of the officials shouted, demanding eyes scanning Li Huan. Skepticism etched on his face at the unexpected intruder, and Li Huan recognized the official as the one who had been particularly eager to accuse Zhang Qian of treachery earlier. The emperor, however, seemed intrigued more than angered, his icy expression replaced with curiosity. “Continue on,” he nodded, motioning for the guards to lower their weapons. “Not only did traders from *Shendu* bring in silk, but they also brought in Qiong bamboo canes, which shows the tremendous demand for Chinese products. Listening to Zhang Qian’s advice has the potential to reconstruct the very fabric of our society,” Li Huan asserted, recalling all the world-changing trades that had occurred solely thanks to the Silk Road. “And most importantly, it requires the emperor’s belief and the empire’s resources to truly flourish!”

After a long moment of silence, the emperor shifted in his seat, examining Li Huan intently. “I see. If you truly witnessed these trades take place, then your testimony carries weight, fellow merchant.” Li Huan felt a wave of relief washing over him, and Emperor Wu turned his head to address Zhang Qian. “Should this plan succeed, the title of *Marquis of Bowang* shall be yours, and the treasures of the Silk Road will flow into our hands. Zhang Qian, I will arrange for an expedition for you soon to begin on our expansion for the new trade route.” Hearing Emperor Wu’s words, Zhang Qian bowed deeply, feeling the weight of expectation on his shoulders. “I will prove that your decision has not been in vain, Your Majesty,” he vowed, the fire of determination igniting in his

eyes. As Emperor Wu commenced the end of this meeting, Zhang Qian glanced at Li Huan and offered him a soft smile of gratitude, to which Li Huan gladly returned.

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“EXCUSE ME!”

An irritated voice pulled Li Huan from his trance. “Sir, you’ve been looking at that trinket for quite some time now. Are you going to buy it or not?” Vision blurred, he blinked rapidly, struggling to regain his balance and consciousness. Looking around, Li Huan found himself back in the crowded flea market, jolted back to reality. The gleaming light from the medallion in his hands dimmed, returning to its lusterless color.

Glancing up, he saw the stall owner glaring at him with her arms crossed, clearly impatient. “M—my deepest apologies... I’ll buy this medallion. How much does it cost?” he stammered, feeling a flush rise to his cheeks. “Twenty *Kaiyuan Tongbao*. Now, hurry up and shoo before I decide to raise the price.” The stall owner replied, her tone filled with distaste. Fumbling through his sack, Li Huan extracted a handful of shimmering gold coins, placing them on the counter. Giving a haste bow, he clutched the cool metal of the medallion tightly against his chest, staggering as he made his way back to his *shiheyuan*. Each step was heavy with the weight of memories—fragments swirling in his mind, elusive as mist, as if he were caught in the twilight between reality and a dream. Strangely enough, he couldn’t remember anything that had just happened; any events after touching the medallion remained shrouded in a disorienting haze.

Once Li Huan arrived back in the comforting warmth of his bedroom, he cautiously set the medallion on the nightstand with a soft clink, studying it intently. “Just what kind of special pendant are you? Do you contain powers or something?” He murmured, his voice barely above a whisper.

And as if in response, the antique medallion only gleamed, a sparkle illuminating from the iridescent beams of moonlight.

The Recreation of History in a Parallel World: Trade Routes

HKUGA College, Stephan, Serge – 15

Hopping into the spaceship, going to space, let's go. It was time to venture into another world, physically identical to the Earth, but technologically different. That world was called AA6767, with cutting-edge technology, futuristic cities, and sustainable innovation. While I was in the spaceship, I was imagining what the world would look like: maybe with more robots? Or maybe lagged behind in time?.

Finally, I arrived on this planet, but I didn't know where I was. I just saw many strange names, including Kzz'six-sev-drak'ling, Thrix-six-sev'mei, and more. Looking at the architecture and other stuff, I knew that I was in a city called Kzz'sev-six-thrix'nyx-sy?k'whorl, which was identical to Xi'an in China. I looked like a lost kid in the middle of nowhere, searching for a place to stay. Every alien looked at me peculiarly, because our faces looked completely different.

Oh yeah, I also want to talk about the language first, as it would be easier to understand in the intriguing tales later on. It is called AA6767-ian, very contrasting to any language on Earth. For proper nouns, they use latin alphabets just like us (but maybe with a few more letters), but when they write everyday words, they would use characters instead, and here was the list: `~!@#\$%^&*()-_+=[]{}|\\/:;'",<>./i¿ℒ℥¥©®™±§¶||†•...∞Δ∇:::. For example, the word 'hello' was 'ℒ℥¥©' in the language here.

While I was wandering around the city, I suddenly heard someone behind me whispering, "Thrix'kzz-six'sev-zishiu-thrix (Earth Man), come here.' I turned my head around and saw someone wearing glitz and glamour. He continued, 'I am the ‡:•℥ – emperor of Sixsev'kzz'thrix-nyx'vyr (China). You should know a lot about the history of China on Earth. Although this world is parallel to the Earth, we have different histories. You guys have the Silk Road, but we don't. So, I want you to try to recreate this story to have cultural exchange with other Central Asian countries and create stronger military alliances. It seems like we are technologically advanced, but in fact, we don't know anything about other countries in this world."

I was struggling with whether to accept this challenge or not. I was thinking in my mind that the journey might be insanely arduous, especially since I was not a sporty person. However, I told the emperor eventually, "I can help you with this, but I want you to supply enough equipment to cross the mountains and deserts."

"No worries, we will provide you with everything you need. And I, together with diplomats and engineers, am going with you as well. You can rest for a week in the city. We'll hit the road next Thursday."

During the one-week rest, I discovered more about this city. It was almost identical to the ancient city of Xi'an, with colossal city walls and orderly streets, but instead of using stone, it was made of sustainable materials such as polymers. The center of the city was composed of skyscrapers that look even more futuristic than the ones on Earth, and the outskirts of the city were made of houses that look like traditional courtyards, but with solar panels on the roof. I also had a look at the people living in AA6767. Their skin was green (just like how humans depict aliens), and they were much taller than us (at least 2m tall).

On the morning of the departure, I met the emperor again in the palace of the city. He told me, "We are going to use these tools to make our journey easier. Firstly, there is a silent glider. Instead of using traditional horses or vehicles, we are going to use a glider that is anti-gravity, so we can glide in the air easily. Secondly, there is a data-chronicle lens, which is a device for live translation, documentation, in case you don't know the meaning of some of the signs. Lastly, there is a vocal communicator, which is a tiny implant for clear and long-distance communication in our minds. After taking these three gadgets and an excessive amount of food, I think we can start our expedition."

After the explanation, it was finally time to head to the beginning of the Silk Road. We reached the city walls of the city, read the signs of '{†Δ::ℒ℥¥©™±§¶||•§ ()_-=`+[{ ∴i¿::ℒ℥¥©®∞Δ Sevsix'kzz'thrix-nyx'whorl' (You are

now leaving Xi'an), and I thought, "It is time to push myself to my limits, I am sure that I am going to help the emperor."

The first few days of the expedition were not challenging, because the roads were flat and the weather wasn't erratic. However, the first challenge appeared after one week, which was when we stepped into the desert, and the temperature was insanely fluctuating. It was 40 degrees in the morning, but -10 degrees at night. But we knew that this was only the beginning of the journey to the west, so we had to quickly find a solution. The engineer told us to use a piece of cloth soaked in water and wrap it around the head to combat the heat, and to bury ourselves under the sand to keep warm at night. I was surprised that it actually worked, and now it seemed that our trip would be much simpler.

We caught a glimpse of a small town after one month. The emperor told us, "This is the city of Thrix'kzz-six'drac'vyr-mei (Dunhuang), which is also in Sixsev'kzz'thrix-nyx'vyr. Since we worked hard in the past month, we arrived one week earlier than scheduled, and we are going to take a rest there."

While we were enjoying ourselves in the city, another incident occurred. Some Mongol tribes came to the city and captured every one of us, including the emperor. Using the data-chronicle lens, I understood some conversations from the Mongols. They said, "¶•§¶¶ ∑%∞ ∇::jz::ℒ ∅∑∅∞Δ Sevsix'kzz'thrix-nyx'vyr , @#\$\$%^& Shakaza'thrix-six'sev !★
{†Δ::ℒ ℓTM±§¶• ()_-=` ∞Δ∇::jz::ℒ ∅∑∅∞Δ∇ .
¶¶†•...∞Δ :: màniz::ℒ ∅∑ ∫z::ℒ ∅∑∅∞ ∑∅∅∞Δ∇::jz ∅∞Δ∇::jz::ℒ ∞Δ∇::jz::ℒ ∅∑ ."
(Look at the people from China, and the Emperor! They are now our prisoners. We will take them far from here.)

I was completely horrified. How were we going to survive this? We were completely cooked! Our mouth and eyes were completely shut, and our glider and data-chronicle lens were confiscated. I fainted soon afterwards, and when I woke up, I found myself in a prison cell with simple architecture and a roof that looked like it was going to collapse very soon. I didn't know where the emperor and the other engineers were, but I knew that they were also in this prison. I heard the guards saying ' {†Δ::ℒ ∇::jz::ℒ ∅∑ ∫z::ℒ ∅∑∅∞Δ ∅∞Δ∇::jz::ℒ ℓ .
{†Δ::ℒ ∅∑∅∞ ∫z::ℒ ∅∑∅∞Δ∇ ∞Δ∇::jz::ℒ ∅∑∅∞ ∑∅∅∞Δ∇::jz::ℒ ∅∑ ∅∑∅∞Δ∇::jz::¶•§¶¶†•...∞Δ∇ .' .
Although I didn't know the meaning of it, I guessed that it wasn't something good.

While I was perishing with no hope of leaving this tiny box, something insanely surprising happened. One night, while I was about to sleep, one of the guards got drunk and accidentally opened my prison cell without realizing it. I escaped immediately and saw the keys to open the other prison cells. I tried using different keys to open all the doors, and managed to do it within 5 minutes. Using the vocal communicator (which hadn't been confiscated by the guards), I told all of the others to wake up (as they were all asleep) and leave this place immediately. At the same time, I also saved some other prisoners who were also captured by the Mongols. We took our belongings and left the prison surreptitiously.

"Phew," the emperor said, "Thank you for saving every one of our lives, or else we would be executed." Then, the emperor also asked the other prisoners who they were. With the data-chronicle lens, I knew that they were navigators from India and Southern Asia who wanted to discover more about the West, but they were also captured by the Mongols. The emperor asked them whether we could cooperate to finish the journey. They agreed, so we resumed our trek in the desert.

Another problem was that we didn't know where we were, so we just followed our intuition. After wandering around for three weeks, we realised that we were back in Sevsix'kzz'thrix-nyx'whorl (Xi'an). Although we were completely messed up, it was actually good to go back to Xi'an. We had to equip ourselves with more gadgets, so incidents like this would not happen again. The emperor brought the whole army this time, and also some bodyguards. Moreover, he told us to have another gadget - Emergency Button (Press it when you are in an emergency, and everyone will be alerted).

We did our journey like the last time, and arrived at Thrix'kzz-six'drac'vyr-mei (Dunhuang) in less than one month. We continued exploring the undiscovered inner regions of Asia, and soon found another city that was not in China, which was called Kzz'thrix-six'sev-sa'mar'kand-nyx'whorl (Samarkand). The emperor told everyone, except his bodyguards and me, to hide somewhere outside the city, and he would enter the city to negotiate with the people there.

Upon arriving in the city, we met the leader of the country, which was called Thrix'sev-six'kzz'vyr-timur'thrix-nyx'whorl (Timurid Empire). We asked them whether we could make military and trade alliances with them. However, he rejected, and even told us to get out, "I want our country to be an independent country. If you don't leave right now, we are going to attack you!" The emperor pressed the Emergency Button, and the whole army was alerted.

Around 1000 men ran forward to the city wall, killing everybody in that city with arms. The army of Thrix'sev-six'kzz'yvr-timur'thrix-nyx'whorl (Timurid Empire) was unprepared, so we captured the city and intimidated the leader, "If you don't let us go ahead, we will execute you!!!" He was so frightened that he gave in at last and let us go ahead.

The emperor then said, “We will let you go and our entire army will leave the city like nothing happened.”

After leaving the city, we continued our expedition into the unknown, and soon afterwards, we saw a sign that wrote ‘𐎧𐏁𐎠𐎫𐎡𐏁𐎥𐎵𐎢𐏂𐎰𐎪𐎭𐎲𐎣𐎶𐎤𐎦𐎷𐎴𐎩𐎮𐎥𐎱𐎼𐎿𐎺𐎠𐎹𐎻𐎸𐎾𐎽𐎠𐎿’ (which meant we were only 1000 km away from another city which was called Constantinople). We were so thrilled because we would discover the new world very soon and have cultural and military exchange.

The final 1000 km wasn't as arduous as the other parts of the expedition, because we finally left the desert and entered the grassland. We discovered some places near the rivers that we could settle down. Every one of us was extremely weary so we rested there for almost a week. Then, we headed our final 100 km and FINALLY, we finished our expedition and arrived to Kzz'thrix-six-sev-nyx'whorl-kon'stanti' (Constantinople).

The emperor told the army to go somewhere far away from the city, then we went into the city. After wandering around for around 10 minutes, we reached the castle of Kzz'thrix-six'sev-nyx'whorl-kon'stanti' (Constantinople) and paid a majestic visit there.

The diplomat said, “Hello King of Kzz’thrix–six’sev–nyx’whorl–kon’santi’, I am the diplomat of Sixsev’kzz’thrix–nyx’vyr (China) and here is the Emperor of. While I was back in Sixsev’kzz’thrix–nyx’vyr, I heard that the western empires are very strong, therefore I had an expedition with my fellow citizens for one year, to come to this breathtaking city. I am here to ask you for one thing –”

The King said, "Please proceed."

“– to make military alliances with you, because there appear many countries near to Sixsev’kzz’thrix–nyx’vyr which are threatening the culture of Zhong’hua–six’ssev–kzz’thrix–han’xia–nyx’vyr–people’whorl (Chinese people).”

The King said “Sure, but one thing – we must alert each other when we are in an emergency situation.” The Emperor handed an object to the King and said, ‘Here is a gadget that will help both of us. When you are in an emergency, just press this button, the other side will be alerted.’

The King was enthusiastic with this idea, and asked the Emperor, “You want me to guide you guys around the city?”

The emperor said, “Sure!” Then, we visited the city with the King. This was my overall impression of the city: It was a shiny city of glass towers and glowing streets. Traders from every land arrived in gliders, carrying different

goods such as oil and spices. The markets were crowded with rich merchants and rare items, making the city seem very wealthy. The Kzz'thrix-six'sev-hagia'sophi-nyx'whorl-great'thrix (great Hagia) amazed us with the size and futuristic sleek design, and was surrounded by skyscrapers and neon lights.

Seeing the immense amount of products sold at the market, the Emperor asked the King to open the whole Silk Road for trading.

The King said, "Of course! We really want to have products from your country. What do you think you can trade with us?"

The emperor replied, "We have different stuff such as silk, and porcelain which are exceptionally prestigious and luxurious. Silk is a very soft and shiny cloth that comes from special threads made by worms. It feels nice on your skin and looks beautiful in clothes or blankets. Porcelain is a strong, white dish or pot that is very smooth and thin like glass. It does not break easy and shines bright. China made the best ones long ago, and I know that traders from far away wanted them a lot."

The King said, "I really want those products, and I also have some goods to send back to Sixsev'kzz'thrix-nyx'vyr (China). First, we have lots of glassware produced by the Roman Empire and our empire. Then, we also have lots of metals, such as gold and silver. Lastly, due to our newly-formed military alliance, here are 10 military horses who excel in sprinting during wars. Hope you will enjoy our gifts!"

After exchanging a few more conversations, the King finally said goodbye to the Emperor and went back to his palace. The king congratulated everyone in our team, including the diplomats and I, for succeeding in this expedition. I decided to stay in the city for a few more days, while the Emperor left because he had something to handle back in China.

The Emperor said a final goodbye to me, "I really want to thank you for making the expedition easier, as you know more about the Silk Road than us. You also helped a lot when we were in the jail, since you were the one who spotted the key and rescued everyone who was going to be executed. It was a really nice chance to meet you, and I hope that we will see each other again somewhere in the future." And then, the Emperor and the whole army marched back into Kzz'sev-six'thrix-nyx-sy?k'whorl (Xi'an).

I think it was time to leave AA6767. I called my spaceship to go to Kzz'thrix-six'sev-nyx'whorl-kon'stanti' and it arrived in a few seconds. After hopping on into our spaceship, I reflected on my journey in AA6767, and I was very content because when I was on the planet, I didn't think that I would help the emperor a lot with the Silk Road. It was definitely a good experience on the planet, and I would share everything when I am back on Earth.

A few years after arriving back on Earth, I received a message from the Emperor: "Hello, I am writing to you to explain the development of the Silk Road after you left AA6767. Originally, the Silk Road was only connecting Sixsev'kzz'thrix-nyx'vyr (China) and Sevsix'kzz'thrix-byzan'roma-nyx'vyr-empire'whorl (Byzantine Empire). Now, there are many countries joining the Silk Road, including Thrix'sev-six'kzz'vyr-timur'thrix-nyx'whorl (Timurid Empire) which we attacked before, and a few empires in Sindhu'six'sev-kzz'thrix-bharat-nyx'vyr-whorl

(India) to trade for spices. I really want to thank you gratefully for what you have done, and I hope that you can come visit our planet again."

THE END

TS: All the conversations from the characters except me are in AA6767-ian, but I wrote the conversations in English using the translator the Emperor gave me.

The Legacy of Silk

HKUGA College, Sun, Yan Yuet – 15

“Find anything you fancy?”

Amidst the vibrant cacophony of vendors hawking their wares, historian Li Huan found himself in the bustling atmosphere of the local flea market, which was a stark contrast to the serene silence of his library. As he was about to navigate the thronging crowd back to the quiet of his residence, a quaint stall selling ancient artifacts and relics caught his eye. Noticing Li Huan’s curiosity, the stall owner promptly rose from her low wooden stool, gesturing towards all the myriad treasures displayed on the table. “Feel free to take a look around!” She exclaimed, brimming with almost too much enthusiasm as she eagerly anticipated her first sale of the day. However, as she stood up, she accidentally knocked over a box resting by her feet, causing all of its contents to tumble out. Bending down to help the stall owner tidy up, Li Huan’s attention was drawn to something peculiar within the scattered mess.

Nestled in the overflowing pile of jade carvings and compasses, a weathered, bronze medallion stood out, marked with a greenish patina. As if called by a magnetic pull, Li Huan carefully picked it up, inspecting it through the thick lenses of his glasses. The medallion was embellished with intricate details, featuring a finely crafted figure on horseback moulded into the metal, surrounded by sooty inscriptions. With a gentle breath, he blew away the thin veil of dust that had settled on the surface, revealing the faded title engraved beneath: *Zhang Qian*. He’s definitely seen that name somewhere. The two words rang repeatedly through Li Huan’s head as he recalled passages from his mental library of history. Zhang Qian, a prestigious diplomat highly valued by emperors, laid the foundation for the first Silk Road through his expeditions, opening up vast trade routes across China and its western neighbors.

“What were the belongings of such a prominent figure doing here, being sold at a measly flea market?” Li Huan pondered in awe. Typically, prized possessions owned by the deceased were buried in their tombs, which accompanied them on their journey to the afterlife. “Zhang Qian was truly incredible to have accomplished such impressive feats. I wonder what it would be like to witness his journey pioneering the Silk Road with my very own eyes.” Li Huan mused to himself, rubbing his fingers over the patterned texture.

Suddenly, a blinding light erupted from the medallion, enveloping Li Huan in a shimmering glow. The light pulsed rhythmically, and as it intensified, Li Huan felt himself being swept away on a tide of sensations. The world transformed into a flurry of colors and sounds, and as the brilliance faded, he found himself standing in what appeared to be a different time and place.

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Li Huan rubbed his eyes frantically.

This had to be a dream. Body trembling, he began to observe his surroundings, trying to pinpoint where he was. Recognizing the designs and infrastructure from his history textbooks, it seemed like he was in the grandeur of *Weiyang Palace*, with servants scurrying about and vigilant guards posing stoically. The air was thick with the scent of incense, and faint sounds of soft music wafted from the guqin.

Hold on, Weiyang Palace? Didn’t it collapse almost over a thousand years ago?

Li Huan’s heart raced as he took in the vivid details—the ornate columns, majestic pillars, and the vibrant silks adorning the walls. Then it finally hit him like a ton of bricks. He has travelled back in time. Back to 126 BC, to be exact. But what sent his pulse racing even more was the figure seated on an opulent throne facing him: the Emperor Wu of Han, his expression cold as stone. Holding his hands up in despair, Li Huan immediately plopped down on his knees. “Your Majesty, I mean no harm! I swear I am no enemy!” He begged desperately,

forehead pressed against the floor. “I was just strolling around the flea market when I somehow touched a medallion that teleported me back in time. I have no idea how I ended up here!”

However, as Li Huan knelt there anxiously, nobody reacted to his pleas nor acknowledged his presence. It was as if he were a ghost, unseen and unheard. Pushing himself up, confusion swirled in his mind. *Was he completely invisible?* But before Li Huan could grapple with this bewildering thought, a loud voice echoed through the entire room. “Your Majesty, the military officer you requested for has arrived.”

Instinctively, Li Huan rushed to hide behind a nearby pillar, peeking his head out to get a better view of the unfolding scene. As the doors flung wide open, a towering form stepped into the chamber, kneeling before the emperor as the servants trailing behind him followed. The figure was draped in armor made of lacquered leather layered over robes, wearing a *wuguan* atop his head. Squinting his eyes, Li Huan closely observed the facial features, feeling a sense of familiarity. Staring at the medallion in his palm, he fixed his gaze on the figurine sculpted in the metal, and then at the warrior-like man before him; the resemblance was uncanny. There was no doubt — the legendary Zhang Qian was standing in front of him. With wobbly legs, Li Huan tried to compose himself from fainting right there on the spot.

“Zhang Qian. It has been a very long time since I last saw you.” Emperor Wu spoke; his voice boomed with a commanding resonance, “With such a lengthy journey, I trust that you’ve brought some valuable information with you today.”

Bowing his head respectfully, Zhang Qian unfurled a scroll retrieved from his pocket. “Your Majesty, to the glory of the empire, I offer my deepest gratitude for your generosity and patience. Throughout my expedition, I have compiled a comprehensive report on all my findings, which will surely not disappoint.” Despite the intimidating presence of the Emperor, Zhang Qian stood firm, voice unwavering and steady.

Leaning back in his throne, Emperor Wu gave a slight smile that didn’t quite reach his eyes, a glimmer of interest flickering within them, “Very well. You may enlighten me.”

Clearing his throat, Zhang Qian gave his servants a brief nod, who quickly scampered away at his cue. Seconds later, they came back, each cradling a small cushion with different kinds of objects presented on it. “The first product,” Zhang Qian gestured at the first servant standing in line, “came from Dayuan, Fergana Valley. This fruit is called a grape. The people there make a special intoxicating beverage called wine using the seeds that come from this fruit.” As he delved deeper into the nuances of grape cultivation and wine-making, the emperor barked at the officials to note everything down. “

This must be how viticulture in China was kick-started.” Li Huan thought. It was amusing to see the intrigued reactions of everyone in the room to this now-common fruit. Ever since grapevines made their way to the empire, the development of viticulture and wine-making has been flourishing immensely, becoming a favorite beverage among the wealthy.

Once Zhang Qian finished his explanation, he gave a brief nod, signalling the end of his presentation, and the servant holding the grapes hastily scurried away. Next, a more familiar object—a sheer, smooth pile of carefully folded fabric—was presented to the Emperor. “Silk? This is nothing new to me. I am well aware of its value.” Emperor Wu said dismissively, letting out a scoff.

However, Zhang Qian continued to maintain his solemn composure, brushing off the Emperor’s comment with grace. “I understand that Your Majesty has been accustomed to silk, but I have come to offer my insights regarding this product that could greatly benefit our economy.” Taking a deep breath, he handed a yellowed map to one of the Emperor’s guards, the paper marked with crosses pinpointing locations, “While I was visiting *Daxia*, I found these pieces of Chinese silk being sold in one of the markets. Locals there informed me that the silk was bought from indirect routes through *Shendu*, which suggests that merchants have travelled from Sichuan through Shendu all the way to Daxia.”

“Are you trying to imply that there’s a pre-existing trade route that we don’t know about?” One of the court officials interjected, sounding incredulous.

“Precisely,” Zhang Qian affirmed, gaze steady. “This indicates a southern route bypassing the hostile Qiang and Xiongnu, yet the demand for silk is so high that people are willing to face the danger. I believe, Your Majesty, that you should capitalize on this opportunity, and open formal, direct trade routes.” As Zhang Qian paused, Li Huan watched as a crowd of murmurs began arising from the chamber, whispers spreading like wildfire.

“Could he have been bribed by foreign merchants to spread misinformation?” one voice questioned.

“This just seems like a gamble and a waste of our resources,” another added.

Li Huan felt a pang of frustration. Zhang Qian was right. Opening a new trade route was exactly how the Silk Road came to life. Why were they disregarding his hard-earned insights based on mere speculation? He wanted to shout in defense of Zhang Qian, but his invisible presence caused him to remain helpless.

“How will you take responsibility for the fall of the empire if this plan fails?” An official chimed in, raising an eyebrow. “You come with tales of distant lands, yet leave us with uncertainty!”

Zhang Qian’s shoulders stiffened. “I have put my life in danger for this knowledge. I have seen the goods and thriving merchants beyond the border myself. These routes really do exist.”

“All of your claims have no basis except for some lousy paper,” the court official retorted. “Perhaps you’re fabricating lies for your own gain.”

Gasps filled the chamber, echoing off the ornate walls. This was more than just an accusation; it was a dagger aimed directly at Zhang Qian’s reputation and integrity. As the tension in the room escalated, Emperor Wu raised his hand, calling for silence. “Zhang Qian, your contributions to this empire have been undeniable, and perhaps your visions of new trade routes could still hold merit,” the emperor said slowly, deep in thought. “But I need more than just your words.”

At that very moment, the medallion that Li Huan had been holding slipped from his clammy hands and fell onto the marble floor, the clink of metal ringing out in the tense atmosphere. In an instant, an overwhelming sensation surged within Li Huan. He felt his body morphing, with his flowing *hanfu*, once vibrant and regal, transforming into worn-out cotton. Breathless and startled, he hastily picked up the medallion, brushing off the dust with trembling fingers. As he gazed into its reflective surface, a startling realization dawned upon him—he had transformed into a humble merchant from *Daxia*.

Before Li Huan could comprehend what was going on, he saw a flash of metal, and two sharp polearms were inches away from slicing his neck.

“Who do you think you are to be sneaking into the royal chambers like this? You must have guts to commit such a heinous act,” Emperor Wu seethed, banging his fist on the arms of his throne.

Li Huan looked around in confusion, trying to see to whom that comment was directed, and he found that Emperor Wu’s piercing gaze was locked right onto him, eyes cold. *Wait, is he talking to me? Am I visible now that I’ve shifted into a merchant’s body?* At first, Li Huan was ready to drop down and crumble in horror, but an idea suddenly sparked in his mind. This was the perfect chance to solidify Zhang Qian’s credibility!

Feeling a surge of determination, Li Huan began his scheme, holding up his hands in surrender. “I deeply apologize for the intrusion. I am, but a humble merchant from Daxia,” Li Huan spoke shakily, trying to muster his newfound courage. “I can bear witness, as a trader who has walked the paths Zhang Qian speaks of. I can

vouch for him. He is not here to deceive.” His heart pounded as he spoke, a mix of fear and hope intertwining in his chest, but he stood firm, ready to defend the truth he believed in as a historian.

“What is this trickery?” one of the officials shouted, demanding eyes scanning Li Huan. Skepticism etched on his face at the unexpected intruder, and Li Huan recognized the official as the one who had been particularly eager to accuse Zhang Qian of treachery earlier. The emperor, however, seemed intrigued more than angered, his icy expression replaced with curiosity. “Continue on,” he nodded, signalling for the guards to lower their weapons.

“Not only did traders from *Shendu* bring in silk, but they also brought in Qiong bamboo canes, which shows the tremendous demand for Chinese products. Listening to Zhang Qian’s advice has the potential to reconstruct the very fabric of our society,” Li Huan asserted, recalling all the world-changing trades that had occurred solely thanks to the Silk Road. “And most importantly, it requires the emperor’s belief and the empire’s resources to truly flourish!”

After a long moment of silence, the emperor shifted in his seat, examining Li Huan intently. “I see. If you truly witnessed these trades take place, then your testimony carries weight, merchant.” Li Huan felt a wave of relief washing over him, and Emperor Wu turned his head to address Zhang Qian. “Should this plan succeed, the title of *Marquis of Bowang* shall be yours, and the treasures of the Silk Road will flow into our hands. Zhang Qian, I will arrange for an expedition for you soon to begin on our expansion for the new trade route.”

Hearing Emperor Wu’s words, Zhang Qian bowed deeply, feeling the weight of expectation on his shoulders. “I will prove that your decision has not been in vain, Your Majesty,” he vowed, the fire of determination igniting in his eyes. As Emperor Wu commenced the end of this meeting, Zhang Qian glanced at Li Huan and offered him a soft smile of gratitude, to which Li Huan gladly returned.

★ ★ ★

“EXCUSE ME!”

An irritated voice pulled Li Huan from his trance. “Sir, you’ve been looking at that trinket for quite some time now. Are you going to buy it or not?” Vision blurred, he blinked rapidly, struggling to regain his balance and consciousness. Looking around, Li Huan found himself back in the crowded flea market, jolted back to reality. The gleaming light from the medallion in his hands dimmed, returning to its lusterless color.

Glancing up, he saw the stall owner glaring at him with her arms crossed, clearly impatient. “M—my deepest apologies... I’ll buy this medallion. How much does it cost?” he stammered, feeling a flush rise to his cheeks. “Twenty *Kaiyuan Tongbao*. Now, hurry up and shoo before I decide to raise the price.” The stall owner replied, her tone filled with distaste. Fumbling through his sack, Li Huan extracted a handful of shimmering gold coins, placing them on the counter. Giving a haste bow, he clutched the cool metal of the medallion tightly against his chest, staggering as he made his way back to his *sibeyuan*. Each step was heavy with the weight of memories—fragments swirling in his mind, elusive as mist, as if he were caught in the twilight between reality and a dream. Strangely enough, he couldn’t remember anything that had just happened; any events after touching the medallion remained shrouded in a disorienting haze.

Once Li Huan arrived back in the comforting warmth of his bedroom, he cautiously set the medallion on the nightstand with a soft clink, studying it intently. “Just what kind of special pendant are you? Do you contain powers or something?” He murmured, his voice barely above a whisper.

And as if in response, the antique medallion only gleamed, a sparkle illuminating from the iridescent beams of moonlight.

Story

HKUGA College, Tong, Lai Chun – 15

Their eyes upturn to moon, hanging on velour veils of black. Or sun, hazed and splintered and clear and limpid, against the myriad clouds.

I stare back at them.

Sometimes they sparkle. They dream of stars, or of city lights, twisting, mirrored in their whites.

And sometimes they're dull.

Really, I've always loved retelling the stories of dreamers.

Of those who've lost their way? I get misty. They'll never claw into the good graces of bards and writers. But they'll live on in my words, and in your memory – only, of course, if you'd be so kind as to listen to an old voice ramble. Let this voice bring you back.

I followed once, a young man's footsteps, pressed into the shifting sand. Muffled clops of camel hooves striking the ground sounded rhythmically. His clenched fists held no map. Just a compass. And a handful of stars. Or at least he hoped, as he looked up, hand grasping at the thin air above, feeling nothing but the meager breeze slipping through his outstretched fingers.

He muttered softly. The wind carried his words to my listening ears.

He spoke of a sweetheart awaiting his return. He spoke of the places he would go, the people he would meet, the sights he would see. He spoke of his parents, his siblings, their reluctance to let him go. His words came in starts and stops, interjected by grunts and pauses as he sought footing on mercurial terrain, shedding wooden flats for the tried steadiness of calloused feet on sand.

He spoke of the bundled silk resting between the twin humps of his camel.

They never did believe him, when he told them there were people living beyond the reach of the river and its plentiful yield – and who would be the wiser? No lunatic would scale the sheer cliff faces sealing the basin to find otherwise. But he knew. He heard the rumors. Vases etched with the faces of unnamed gods, claywork finer than anything from within the country. Purple, green fruits that grew not on trees but on vines. Horses stronger than bulls and faster than the wind. They came from somewhere. He just had to search, and search he would. A merchant's pride dies hard.

So as he lifted his gaze to meet torches mounted on tents a dozen, his knees gave out. I peeked a glance at his face then – there were no tears. Maybe his relief overcame him, or maybe he was simply too sapped to react. Or maybe relief didn't claim him at all. I still don't know.

The nomads took to him kindly, despite his seemingly incoherent (to them) speech. He found warmth that night around a campfire of curious, probing faces. As dawn broke the next day, he woke to the bustle and clatter of tents folding. For all his ambitions, they had nothing to offer him besides goat milk and cheese for his silk.

The rest of his story is unassuming. He travelled with them in hopes that their trail would eventually take him to, well, somewhere. The nomads took him as a curio, and the children were always swarming him with glee. He picked up words, learnt to wake up before sunrise, weathered steppe winters. Married, had kids. His promised land? He dismissed it as a young man's dream.

Though that silk cloth remained, tucked neatly in roughed burlap, alongside a well-worn compass.

His grave was an unpretentious one.

That silk of his still took to the valleys and deserts long after he was gone, passed down through dozens of hands as a heirloom. No descendant remembered his name, and as the stories grew tired, no one remembered him.

—

“How much for this?”

The girl stared pointedly at her father. Her father nodded in turn. She looked back to the strange robed man.

“50 silver.”

I heard him sigh. Was he being fleeced? He couldn't tell. But setting his eyes on the cloth again, he steeled, beckoning a waiting servant to break out the coffers. His remaining riches were limited. So much for being an ambassador, hailed for connecting the lands — The court couldn't even afford him basic creature comforts. With the clink of coin in pocket and the purr of fabric against skin, the girl went humming back to whatever she had been doing, and the man stepped laboriously back into his carriage.

Under the light prying through the carriage windows, he examined his spoil. Texture like the night sky, liquid, almost. And that opaline, iridescent white. This would be quite the offering, but it buries itself among the many that the emperor receives daily. He wasn't so sure. Those overzealous buffoons always seemed to buy their way into his trust through overinflated tales and honeyed words. The countless hours he poured into fleshing out a grasp of court diplomacy; What a waste. He sighed, folding the cloth gently. It drank in the moonlight greedily, weeping it back out in soft, spectral hues. No matter. It was bought. The deed was done.

I wonder if he ever regretted it?

The emperor entered court that day to a procession of returnee ambassadors. Our ambassador found himself marooned in the retinue and the rabble. The procession moved slowly. Then it stopped. The emperor was taking his breakfast and must not be disturbed, or so they said. He couldn't venture to see for his own, and did not dare to, flanked by imperial guards spaced evenly through the reception hall.

And now he faced the ground, kneeling. He held the silk out, lying weightlessly on his sweaty palms. He glanced up. The emperor looked down from his throne, motioning. His attendants clicked into motion stiffly, bowing, then taking the silk from his outstretched hands. He watched as their backs disappeared beyond some chamber door. “Dismissed.”

He stood up and left. Not a single word had left his mouth.

That ambassador would go on to hold his position. He was grateful, truly. The imperial court was ever shifting. Officials were ever fickle. He could have been sent packing. Yes, he was grateful.

But he never left the borders again.

The silk travelled for him.

—

“Do what you will with it.”

She received it as a gift for a treatise on trade routes that had pleased the oriental throne, a work of dry fact and sourced rumor. To hell with all the vague documentation, to hell with all the records lost and burned and hidden over the years. The work of an archivist is one massively underestimated. Gift? This was just another document.

She sighed, tenderly unravelling it across the mahogany, weighing its corners with learned cautiousness. Then came the grind. Magnifying lens pressed to her eyes, examining for hours with a magnifying lens, her finger hovering above its surface as she cataloged every stain, every variation in the weave, every faint imprint.

The rain came as she sat, head bowed over the backrest of her chair, warmed cloth over her eyes.

Drip.

She lifted a corner of the cloth, peeking out from under. A sudden leak had sprung from the roof, dripping readily onto the unprotected silk. It took a moment for the implications to register. She bolted, flinging the now-cool cloth off to some dust-matted corner

As she rushed to blot it dry, the water welcomed itself through the layers of fabric unbidden.

But her haste to stem the water slowed, then halted. Dyes, latent, seemed to revitalise, patterns spiralling as the water lifted years of grime and dormancy. A palimpsest of images surfaced: not just the hidden star-map, but the faint, geometric outline of a tribal brand, dwarfed by the inked sign of some long dead emperor. As she picked the fabric up, the faintest scent of medicinal herbs met her nose. This was no silk; it was an archive.

Her scholar's mind was feverish in the face of discovery, gears were now beginning to click. This was real, physical. And she knew where she'd seen those very symbols before. Leafing through generations' worth of literary collections yielded a mess of a study, as well as all the information she needed. She began work. Cross-referencing the patterns was easy, she'd seen them all before. Piecing the timelines together took longer. Then the contents of those who lived through the cloth. Then corroborating all the many, many assumptions she'd taken.

Half a decade of lonely toil turned a dry treatise into a feverish dossier. The silk took witness, as did I.

When she died from flu, feverish and young, her family, finding no value in old cloth or unsupported historical conjectures, pawned both silk and folio.

I travelled with the cloth this time, taking its journey over paved road to field to port and over sea. All this time, it's travelled more, seen more, met more people than many would have in lifetimes. Envious, I'd think. That young merchant would have been proud, and so would that ambassador.

—

It came, decades later, to a rain-slicked port city far from any desert.

He leafed through the bundle of misfit textile. Regal. Red would do well. He plucked all that he could see, then pressed a handful of coins into the vendor's hand.

"Pleasure doing business."

He waved the vendor off.

The workshop doors creaked open, as he pushed away old looms to make way for cloth to spill out on the table. He ran his hands over the cloth and paused. This silk. Its luminosity was dulled by grime and its fold creases set

deep. But half his life spent on tailoring and dressing wasn't misleading him. This was great cloth. To think he was about to cut it for lining – he shook his head and grinned, staying his shears.

Moving it over, he gave it a good dusting, then he worked it into the inside of the greatcoat. The captain, commissioner of the coat, was an old customer of his, and he ought to have something to show for it. He knew he was the best in the country. He ran the stitches slowly, methodically, making the seams disappear into the silk. And it was done. He sent it off, smiling. I looked it over, it was quite the fine piece of work. Truly fitting for a captain braving the seas.

The captain was lost in a storm off the cape.

—

The metal detector beeped. She silently fistpumped.

The stretch had been flagged for the presence of mid-late millennium wreckage for months. Some fisherman reported findings of old cargo out just half a mile from the shore. Logically, some must have washed up here. But the small dispatch of intern archeologists had found little success. A couple pieces of rotten driftwood carbon dated to around expected values lifted hopes every now and then, but more often than not, it was a waste of half a day's labour.

She signaled to the others, then walked away to take a break – she'd earned it.

A mild commotion stirred her from a light nap. She hurried over, rubber soles pushing off moist sand with a wet patter. The foam lapped languidly along the shore, the hush of the waves interrupted by intermittent clinks of metal on metal.

She peaked over the shoulders of her course mates.

“Found something?”

“Sure did.”

The faces of a chest found themselves meeting the air for the first time in centuries. Waterlogged as it was, prying it out took a fair effort. Rotten as it was, prying it open took none. The contents were very familiar to me – An old, silk-inset greatcoat.

I guess she stuck it big.

—

I stand now before it, watching flashes of faces enter, swarm, then leave. It's almost ethereal. The exhibit is largely ignored, people snap a picture now and then. It is admired though, and that silk, restored to semblance, makes for quite a showpiece.

Though nobody ever reads the plaques.

That coat lived through proxy of all those that held the silk, and now through the people that flow through the museum halls daily. It's beautiful, really, though a little musty, a little worn, a little different. I love it nonetheless. All those people, they never really reached where they set out to. I can barely recall their names, I'm sure you won't.

What you do remember though, are the heroes of their times, the lauded pioneers, the tycoons and their empires, the kings and their exploits. The Silk Road was held on their shoulders. Beneath them, the thousands, millions or more that became the stepping stones. Our merchant found the first routes through Middle Asia, the silk finding its way through the nomads to the throne. That dossier became a backbone of the historical record, and that coat now hangs in front of the faces of hundreds of curious visitors.

I'm Story. I tell you of all things romantic and wonderful. I just hope that you'll listen to bits of the ugly, and remember the Silk Road as I do.

The Road Connecting All

HKUGA College, Wang, Haoyi – 15

The dust was as fine as gold, clinging to everything— his robes, his eyelashes, the tired lines around his eyes. Li Wei stood watching until the remnants of the last camel was just a shimmer in the heat, a shadow swallowed by the unforgiving west. What laid behind him was the familiar and overwhelming streets of Chang'an. The streets buzzed with energy, the city so alive you could feel its pulse under your feet. Yet out here, pure silence and risk. His father's hands were stained with dye, the aftermath of the relentless hours spent weaving; a symbolism of lost hope and helplessness, much contrastingly to Wei's own hands that clung onto the edges of desperate hope. Maybe, just maybe, somewhere out there would see the beauty in the cloth that spilled from their looms, that someone out there would understand its value.

Though the words "Made In China" was plastered on almost every object that we own, how exactly did China reach such a global scale? It was so wide it extended to the opposite ends of the globe. Those were the exact thoughts Sabrina pondered when she sat in business class, staring out the window as she tuned out her professor's monotonous voice about the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), or more commonly known as the "New Silk Road".

Curiosity killed the cat despite her outward disinterest in class; there were so many thoughts that clouded her mind as she spent the entire class contemplating. These questions continued circulating, clouding her mind, breaking her out of her reverie which guided her way to China. This was more than an experience, but a chance to understand the real definition of globalisation, whose definition was so oversimplified in textbooks, allowing her to see this topic with fresh eyes.

The mall bustled with the shuffling of footsteps, endless chatter that was accompanied by shopkeepers' shouting of different promotional items. Sabrina, uneasily, drifted through the maze of faces and unfamiliar language, eyes grazing past each store she went by till a store that had stuffed toys stacked to the roof on each shelf caught her eye. Without a moment of hesitation, she entered.

The shop owner, an older aged man with growing wrinkles folding at the corners of his eyes, peered up through thin glasses as she walked in.

"Oh! Where from?" he beamed with curiosity, asking in halting English.

"America," she curtly responded, expecting nothing out of the ordinary till several heads turned. Another shopkeeper from the stall next door, an elderly woman who was arranging strings of red lanterns, was clearly amused. "America! Very far," the woman said in Mandarin to the older man.

"She says it's a long journey," he translated to Sabrina who just nodded and smiled at the woman.

Somehow, their conversation drifted to the starting point of the ancient Silk Road, where the man grew up in, Xi'an. He pointed to the stuffed toys around them with jerky movements, a testament to old age. "These. Before it was silk, porcelain, and spices. Now it's these things, all to the same road, just different goods."

"The new Silk Road? The Belt and Road Initiative?" Sabrina inquired.

He nodded with a look that seemed like he was reminiscing the past, "Yes, but to us, it's continued, not new. My grandfather used to say each journey was a hope for the future." He paused slightly. "People did not just trade things, but stories and beliefs."

"Even faith travelled that road. Buddhism from India to here. The road carried gods and gold." The woman added, her English being better than Sabrina had initially thought.

Her mind pieced together the fragments being told at university and what was being told now. Her textbooks spoke of trade routes, economic bursts, and infrastructure. But being here felt different. She finally understood what those simplistic words meant, what it failed to capture. It failed to capture the pulse that connected people that were centuries apart.

The man invited her to sit at the counter with him as he poured her a cup of steaming hot tea, gesturing for her to sit at a low wooden stool. Behind him was a deliveryman rolling in boxes stamped with trade levels of

different countries: Thailand, Vietnam, Kenya.

His voice anchored her back to reality just as soon as thoughts started running gears in her head once more. "This shop used to be much smaller. My father started it twenty years ago, selling handmade toys. It didn't get far." Sabrina just nodded with understanding, giving a small smile to encourage him to keep going, despite English not being his strongest suit.

"Everything changed after the new trade routes opened. Suddenly, it felt like a fever dream. We could send things farther, that was cheaper due to the new train routes, not just ships or planes with higher shipping fees." Sabrina took another sip of tea as she intently listened.

He held up a panda keychain, "We started with this little thing and now we sell it to people all over Asia. It is even sold in the night safari of Singapore! My son handles the online orders. I'm too old to understand the advancing technology." The man's frankness made Sabrina crack a small smile at such a growing family business.

Another middle aged woman across the stall chipped in, "We get goods from Pakistan and Russia now. Silk, spices, even fabrics with patterns of different countries. Just like before, but faster and more cost efficient."

Sabrina glanced at the labels again, tracing the web of connections in her mind. "So the Belt and Road... it's not just government projects and ports but it actually changes your lives."

He smiled, wrinkles deepening. "Yes, for big countries, it is politics. But for people like us, it's bread." His words lingered with the neon lights flickering above signs in three different languages after the shop windows.

The New Silk Road was not just rebirthed through shipping routes or cost-cutting methods but in the laughter of those in business who built futures from promise and dedication. Through the hallway of unfamiliar, fleeting faces, voices and goods, she was seeing the formation of globalisation. That globalisation was not just the interconnectedness of the world but also how messy, humane and alive it was.

The highly esteemed idea of the "Silk Road" was invented in the late nineteenth century. In the past, around the twentieth century where funds were little with the lack of transcontinental connectivity did not seem prosperous. In comparison to the present, it incorporated what the past did not have – globalisation. And this was what made the New Silk Road much more endearing to most. Its lengthy legacy for decades that slowly built bridges, building connections with those around China has impressed many on a global scale.

China thinks that this might be the most successful project of the century, planting themselves in the middle of the map through rebuilding yet other countries see it as a threat. What will it be? That will be a question left open to interpretation.

The Silk Road — Blood and Gold

HKUGA College, Zhou, Zixuan – 16

The lady watered her pot of rose. She heard the mournings of fallen warriors that filled the tragic streets. She gently settled the watering can, and leaned onto the wooden framed window. With eyes of sorrow, she sighed at the clouded sky. The lady coughed and whispered lightly,

‘May all be well...’

The elderly mundane evening sighed, its unintentional action sent strands of wind tumbling through the countless sand. As the shards of gold got carried away forcibly, they swirled and twirled without a thought. Until, they slowly settled in a concave pit. Then, there was more. The pits aligned to form a trail, a trail formed by a courteous camel.

On the camel’s hunched back, carried jars of tea, baskets of silvery silks; Along with a figure of a man. His skin was scorched to a tint of dusky gold, with eyes of copper; His dusky tunic was hauled by the hands of gales. As the camel steadily enforced itself onto the sea of sand, seemingly heading nowhere. All of a sudden, the evening grew hostile. It blew onto the terrain, sending gusts of wind to shuffle and scuffle the hair of dessert, swirling up lice of sand, hazing up the ambiance with uncountable strands of sand. The man staggered, yet hastily came back to his senses and commanded the camel to sprint as fast as it could.

Storms of sand hustled toward the solitaires, formulating waves of land. The grainy air choked up the pair, but as they squinted their weary eyes, they caught a glimpse of spark. With a destination in sight, the two grew desperate. Thus, the race between nature and animals began. Ultimately, the former of life was victorious. With a gush of wind, the pair was forced to lose balance. As they rolled and tumbled down a dune, anticipating the fate of engulfment. Nothing occurred. The evening’s rage, who swarmed and blurred the sky’s airy template, withdrew its breath. At last, revealing the view of a festive inn.

With clear sight, the inn shone with warmth, men of different looks and colours were laughing, singing. The smell of wine swirled and twirled around, drunkening the emerging night. Upon stumbling into the caravanserai. A stout jolly man, skin toned olive, with eyes of lapis blue, greeted the merchant.

‘Welcome to Constantinople *philos*! Well, not quite but you’re almost there.’

The merchant spoke in silence.

‘Ah right, not much of a talker. Ahem, we hope you make yourself comfortable here, and you’re welcome to stay here as long as you can. But not forever of course, we wouldn’t want these lovely Chinese teas to lose their flavour now, would we?’

The camel’s grunt was all that was heard.

‘*Ō theoi*! Even this fellow is more talkative than you. Anyways, you’re free to occupy any vacancy— Ah, your knees, they’re bleeding. Come, let us heal you.’

The merchant stationed his camel and gathered his belongings, then entered the inn. The cheers of joy and laughter, the men and winery’s odor, unwrapped and amplified.

‘Here, take a seat. I’ll go get the equipment.’

The merchant was then distracted by a hunchback old lady. Surrounding her, was a group of children sitting obediently, with simplistic eyes, listening to the elder’s raspy voice.

‘Our saviour Jesus Christ, when he was a little boy just like you. He was deemed for greatness by the all knowing God. He taught many people about God with parables and love; he performed numerous miracles, curing the diseased; he had many disciples who would follow his path and spread his gospels. One day, one selfish apprentice betrayed him, and surrendered our Jesus to the Romans. Christ was punished for death, by crucifixion. It was the consequence of the sins of humanity. Yet, it was all a part of God’s plan. God instilled immense strength and will into Jesus’ soul and heart. As Jesus had overcome death itself and rose to become the New Adam. There onwards, he was able to prove the divinity of God. Leading more people like us to the path of salvation.

‘But why didn’t God just make Jesus immortal in the first place?’

‘Listen up my child. Greatness will never be achieved with ease. Through hardships and pain we mature and grow. Yet, we shall never forfeit to this pain and always trust in our God. For God ensures every moment occurs with a reason. Our misfortunes are the elements that define our honorable future.’

The children exclaimed in epiphany, while the merchant commenced deep thoughts in his continued silence.

The stout man returned, and started to mend the wounds of the merchant. He noticed the merchant’s behavior and said,

‘Don’t mind the kids, I know trading is men’s work. But with the war, even this place is more pleasant.’

The merchant looked back to the children, then nodded in agreement. Afterwards, he turned to his luggage and took out a toolbox. Within, were sheets of papers shaped as figures. He signaled the children to come forth, they obeyed. Then, he started characterizing the papers. His hand through legerdemain, twisted and turned, manoeuvring the sheets to fabricate a tale of combat and justice. The kids were fascinated and cheered for the paper protagonist.

‘Quite a skilful man you are. There, you’re good to go. It’s getting late, you should get some rest.’

The man gave him a small bag with a few slices of meat.

Here, these are called *apaki*, we still have plenty. We wish it would energise you along your journey. Feel free to take a bite, we also have some wine to freshen up your palate.’

The merchant took a bite . Instantly, the lean and tender texture, the subtle smokiness, filled the merchants’ mouth. It bewitched him that such a taste with such textures could exist.

The stout man laughed at his reaction,

‘Once again you’re free to occupy any vacancy. Rest well.’

The merchant gave a smile and bowed to the stout man. He waved goodbye to the children and the old lady.

Along the spacious cavern, the merchant instinctively chose the room furthest away from delight. It was almost like revisiting a friend, yearning for the baked brick walls to dilute the deafening rapture. Yet, when he rested, the sound of merriment filled the room. The merchant was troubled from sleep, yet he could not help but smile. He then took out a petite book and a quill, and started to write.

The lady was still desperately praying. Every morning, every night. Neglecting her responsibility to nurture the rose, permitting it to wilt and wither.

‘Do you even hear me?’

She said.

‘It’s been too long... Please, stop ignoring my—’

Her plea was interrupted by her coughs. Thus she remained quiet, yet continued to stare at the greying sky. With the same sorrow, look and sigh.

Morning arrived, shaking off the lively atmosphere of yesterday’s night with solemnity. The merchant exited the caravanserai, he glanced at the slumbered drunkards who were all over the place, as still as corpses. Then hovered onto the camel’s back, and continued his venture to the west.

The forward path fixated the eyes of the merchant and camel. They reflected a horizon of the Syrian Desert that sought something they could not fathom. Its extension cleaved the omniscient sky, disquieting the merchant.

Then something emerged from the flattened afar, the laborious pair stumbled across another group of merchants. A few had similar appearances as the stout man, yet their eyes were coal-black. The others, however, were chained in one line. Their bodies soaked in muddy brown. They were shirtless, with only their sheet-like skin to cover their bulged bones. They stared at the ground, not daring to raise their heads. One man stepped forward, and spoke in coarse Greek,

‘Greetings traveller, do you understand the language of the Greek?’

The merchant nodded.

‘We apologise for interrupting your advancement. We only want to ask about the duration it takes to arrive at the nearest caravanserai. Your help would be much appreciated.’

The merchant pointed to the path behind him and drew out the sun’s trajectory.

The man thanked him, then noticed the inventory on the merchant’s camel.

‘Excuse me sir, are those silks and spices from the further East?’

The merchant nodded once again.

‘Marvellous...Is it possible for us to trade our silver for these beauties? We will offer you extra if you wish.’

The man took out a small box of silverware to demonstrate his offerings.

The merchant looked within the box. Instantly, his eyes fell upon a dainty necklace. He retrieved the necklace, and agreed to trade.

The man’s face sparked with delight. As they exchanged treasures, the merchant pointed at the shirtless group.

‘Heh, I’m sorry sir, these are not for sale. Not here.’

The merchant glanced at the ones chained, his eyes met with one of them. They were blank, with absent emotions. The man thanked him for the goods and parted, while the merchant kept his eyes on the chained ones, knowing their fates were sealed, and grieved silently.

As the group travelled west, once again the merchant held out his book and quill. He illustrated the appearance of the silver necklace and the poor men, while quilling something down. He wrote:

Dear *Rhodoula*...

However, the sound of quilling seemingly intensified. The merchant paused, and looked around. In the shrouded distance, a whirl of sand unraveled to expose three masked men. Rushing towards the pair, they quickly realised the situation — bandits.

The merchant immediately turned back and fled towards the group of men. The weary camel was easily caught up by the bandits' mounts. The cries of the furious men echoed right behind the pair. As the merchant braced for impact, he felt a whoosh of wind slipping past his sides. The bandits ignored them, yet heading straight towards the group in front. He stopped and watched as the bandits attacked the traders, ending their lives. As for the chained ones, they broke off their constraints, setting them free. The once agitated cries had turned into the cries of liberation.

The arid terrain was then saturated with ponds of greenery. Across a river, was the colony of the grassfields. The pair travelled through villages and towns, eventually reaching a port by the coast. The merchant brought his camel to an inn, marking an end to the camel's journey. The merchant settled him down, and patted his back.

'All aboard to Constantinople! All aboard to Constantinople!'

The now solitary man looked upon the sturdy cog, and took a deep breath. His eyes shifted between uncertainty and determination. At last, he boarded the cog with steady strides.

The memories afterwards were of countless nights of endless waves, fluctuating the mind, wavering the will. Yet, the merchant continued to stare into the limitless void that is the vast ocean. As he recalled the concordious Constantinople that he had visited several years ago...

The sun scorched pleasantly, while the wind caressed gently. Nevertheless, they were ignored by the people of the vibrant city. The people weren't arrogant or ungrateful. They were merely busy. On one side of the street, several men bustled to restock silks; women had their hands full with looms, and tongues full of chatters. While the other side, the admiration of exquisite glasswares and metalwares crowded the stalls. It was a place of prosperity and flourish. A city that was destined for splendors.

The reminiscence was interrupted shortly by the captain of the cog.

'We have arrived in Constantinople!'

The merchant looked up and sighed. The sky carried shades of grey, painting the city with monotone. He stepped onto the docks of the Golden Horn, but the gold had long since tarnished by the corroding atmosphere. The air, which once filled with the rich perfume of the wealthy, was now drenched in the smell of the blood and withering rot. As the merchant walked through the gates into the gloom city. The Great Walls, once proud of its beauty, had lost its perfect appearance; the bustling streets he remembered were now ghost-quiet; the once crowded houses became hollowed. As pale citizens walked by, their eyes resembled the ones of the chained men in the Syrian desert.

Then he arrived at the marketplace, it shattered his last strand of hope. As all was sluggish and dull: a few haggard traders sold withered vegetables where silks once flowed; the stalls were all plain and simple; smiles and laughter were in complete absence. He clutched the silver necklace in his pocket and navigated toward a path that he had engraved in his mind.

He approached a plain stone house near the crumbling sea walls. Through the window, the lady from his memories stood. She was watering a pot of wilting flowers. He could not call her name. Instead, he stepped into her line of sight and reached out a scorched, trembling hand. Yearning to feel her warmth even through the glass.

Rhodoula looked up. Her face was pale, yet luminous against the gloom city. A smile broke across her face, a flash of the gold he had traveled thousands of miles to find. She dropped the can, the water spilling like wasted silver. The woman gasped and ran out, rushing into his arms.

‘My love!’

She looked into the pair of eyes that she yearned for ever since it left her sight.

‘I prayed to Allah everyday... I feared the Silk Road had swallowed your soul.’

He held her, feeling her frailty. He could only respond with the pressure of his embrace and the frantic beating of his heart. He pulled her back to look at her, her eyes were watery yet weary. He pointed to the East, then to the horizon, mimicking the motion of a ship rocking the waves. He wanted to tell her of the peaceful plains of the East, the villages where the air was clean and tranquil, where the wars of the West were but a whisper.

‘We will go.’

Rhodoula accepted the man’s request, reading the desperate hope in his dark brown eyes.

‘To the Middle Kingdom. No more blood, my love. Only the warmth of the mundane.’

She embraced him once again, but then the man felt her pushing away. She coughed violently, similar to a roar that tears the hearts. She pulled a handkerchief to her mouth, and for a fleeting second, dark, crimson spots glimpsed by the man’s sight.

She tucked the handkerchief away quickly, she smiled reassuringly and whispered.

‘The sea air is damp, I am only tired from waiting.’

His chest tightened, yet it was a sign, an omen for him to bring her to the placid East hastily. He signaled to depart tomorrow, for her to prepare for departure today.

‘Alright my love, as long as you’re here with me.’

That night, the silent breeze hauled the warmth within the room. They laid together on a bed of worn linen. He could not whisper his love, so he traced the lines of her palm with his bristly thumb, a silent language of the inexpressible affection. Rhodoula’s breath was shallow and warm against his neck, a jagged rhythm that punctuated the stillness of the cold bitter night.

‘Sleep now, the road is long tomorrow.’

She murmured. The man watched as she shuttered her eyes. Then, he gave into the drowsiness of joy. He dreamt of the glamorous life in his hometown, the brush of serenity onto his Rhodoula...

A beam of light seeped through the cracks of cobbles. It jolted awake the slumbering merchant. Morning had arrived, yet with a cruel, indifferent clarity. He looked out the window, the grey sky had finally scattered, letting in slivers of cold, golden light that pierced the dusty window. The merchant felt a strange, heavy coldness beside him.

He turned, a smile forming on his lips to greet the day of their departure. He reached out to touch her shoulder. Rhodoula reacted with stillness. Her skin was no longer the tint of dusky gold, it paled to the color of a winter moon, speckled with dark, blackish spots. They bloomed across her neck like bruised flowers in the night. The merchant opened his mouth to scream, but only a hollow, hushing sound escaped his throat—a ghost of a cry.

He grabbed the shiny silver necklace from his pouch, trying to press the gift into her cold hand, awaiting for her delighted response that now ceased to occur. The merchant looked at the soulless lady. He caressed her hair, and grasped her motionless head, pressing it against his chest. The silent merchant thus grieved silently, in a silent room, of a dying city.

The pot of rose wilted completely, its petals had rested upon the bare dirt, leaving its skeletal thorns and stem to feel the warmth of the seamless sun.

Echoes of the Lost

International Christian School, Chan, Kristy – 16

The desert, though asleep, breathed slowly. Constantly moving, changing, shaped by centuries of wind and movement. It whispered tales of traders, commerce, and whole civilizations. To the west, the shadows of the Mogao Caves stretched, carved with devotion and patience. As the day dawned, the place felt alive – history illustrated in ochre cliffs.

Dr. Li Wen stood before the entrance of the cave, boots sinking into the loose soil. The air was warm, tasting faintly of salt and dust. She glanced towards her motley crew: Arjun Singh, skilled in decryption, and Mira Rossi, crouching in the sand with his camera in hand.

“Once, monks came here to meditate.” Li said under her breath, feeling a need to respect the integrity of the newly unearthed caravanserai. “They believed the caves were openings into enlightenment.”

Mira’s camera whirled. “And now we open them again to understand the story behind the silence.”

Li nodded, the corners of her eyes lined with fatigue, but also anticipation. The UNESCO markers and fencing behind them were a reminder of ongoing restrictions. The permit for excavation had been a hard won battle, as this site lay at the fragile border between history and new progress, at times nearly being swallowed by the Taklamakan sands. The rumour that brought the three of them here whispered that an unknown chamber had been found beside the grottoes, but that it had been walled off.

Li turned towards the cliffs. “Let’s begin.”

The first sound they heard inside the passageway was a drip; slow, deliberate, echoing through corridors long untouched by human breath. They advanced into the tunnel, electric lanterns slicing through the quiet dark. The chamber was small, but the walls revealed life. Every surface was splashed with colour: faded murals of bodhisattvas and travelers, cracked but still discernible. Arjun beckoned Li to the farthest wall, pointing at the thin fissure framed by prayer motifs.

They widened the opening with deliberate precision, meticulously breaking apart the carefully laid stone. The gap exhaled a sigh of stale air, before revealing heaped manuscript bundles, stacked tightly to form a solid mass nearly reaching the ceiling. Li recalled Wang Yuanlu’s description of his 1900 discovery in another Mogao shrine, how the picture was the exact same – “Heaped up in layers, but without any order, there appeared in the dim light of the priest’s little lamp a solid mass of manuscript bundles rising to a height of nearly ten feet...”

“Four hundred cubic feet of paper,” Arjun murmured with reverence. His hands shook as he reached towards the first scroll, delicately brushing the surface of the paper.

“Careful, Arjun. Let Mira record everything first,” Li warned. “The world will want to see this.”

Days blurred into one another. The three of them worked quietly beneath the hiss of desert wind through the entrance tarp. Manuscripts were coaxed out of their sandy tomb, wrapped in decaying linen. A small table beneath a gently blowing fan became their world. Arjun deciphered Kaishu regular script and cursive Xinshu running script, both elegant even after a thousand years of solitude. There were also Buddhist texts in Classical Chinese containing chants copied by monks, their prayers still clinging to the fibers of the paper.

One night, Li and Mira were beckoned by Arjun. “This language hasn’t been found here before. It’s from northwestern India, second or third century,” he said, pointing to the written sheets written in Kharosthi – the ancient script used along the trade routes of what was now Xin Jiang.

“Could this prove earlier trade contact than we thought?” Mira asked, leaning closer with the camera to capture the document fully.

Li brushed dust from the fragment of history. The ink had faded to a pale brown, but one word was repeated, clearly intentionally: Asha. “What does this mean?” she asked.

“It’s a name,” Arjun explained. “And it appears at the end of several lines... These might be letters.”

By the evening, Arjun had completed his translations. He spoke with caution, reading out the letters with a sense of awe and wonder.

“To my beloved brother in Samarkand:

The silks in Chang’an bring fortune beyond measure, yet none of it warms the heart as does companionship. Tell mother that I wore her lapis ring as I crossed the desert. I have heard the making of tea calms the night during chaotic times.” He trailed off as Li bent forward, eyes sharp.

“The letter – it’s not a monk’s handwriting. It’s that of a merchant.” Li said.

Arjun nodded in acknowledgement. “And we can see that Asha was not only literate, but traveled a lot. Look at the reference to Persian embroidery, and to jade trading in Khotan. Asha instructed buyers, shared herbal remedies, and discussed insights on the goods sold and shipped.” He said, pointing to the remaining sections of the letter.

“Asha isn’t a male’s name... this was a woman.” Mira said. Li and Arjun looked back towards the camera, the realisation dawning in their eyes.

“There hasn’t ever been a recorded merchant from this time period that was a woman. But this... this changes everything.” Li whispers.

The camp quieted as they settled in for the night, minds racing with their newfound revelation. Through the open tent flap, the copper light of the sun dimmed into shadow.

The next morning, they went back to the cave with a new purpose. They catalogued everything: Tang Dynasty silk fragments embroidered with Persian patterns, threads of brocade from Persia, bronze mirrors inscribed with Central Asian motifs, and agate from India shaped into prayer beads. Such diverse treasures, all connected through the Silk Road.

Li found herself pulled to the Mogao murals, their blended artistry seemingly watching with approval. On one mural, a monk painted with European lapis pigment knelt beside a Chinese bodhisattva, accompanied by angels with Persian wings floating above them.

“It’s astonishing. Cultures that were thought to be separate, meeting here in colour and cloth.” Arjun said.

“Dunhuang was always the crossroads of the Road. We just never knew how true that was.” Li replied, smiling slightly. For a moment, the desert seemed more kind and human despite its vast expanses, like it had always been there, waiting to tell its secrets.

In mid-April, storms began arriving from the northwest. The first one hit at dusk, a fine grit rising like smoke, turning golden air into darkness. Tents rattled with violence. Mira pulled camera cases to safety while Arjun and other labourers secured the site tarp.

“Cover the manuscripts!” Li screamed desperately, dust billowing and masking her voice. The wind howled like a feral beast, furious and immense.

As slivers of light flashed through the storm, Li peered towards the faint outline of figures painted onto cliff walls, their features luminous before vanishing. The storm lasted through the night.

In the morning, the desert was changed. The outer trenches had collapsed. The desert had left one gift for them, out of pity. A sealed box, small, lacquered, and remarkably intact. Inside lay a silk bundle, pearly white. Within it, a packet of letters written by the same hand, with the same looping strokes. Atop them was a hand mirror, oxidized to bronze patina green. Along its rim, two inscriptions were written, one in Chinese seal script, the other in Sogdian.

Arjun bent over the mirror. “It says – ‘her world, reflected.’”

Back inside the tent, they started decoding the new letters. The words were stained in parts, but most remained crisp.

“To all those who may one day find my words: we came as merchants and remained as pilgrims. The caves were carved by faith, and compassion stretching across faraway lands. Men call this the Silk Road, while every thread was weaved by a woman’s hands.”

Li’s breath caught after Arjun finished the translations. “She knew she was writing to us.”

Mira lowered the camera. “Then she left this mirror so she could see who came after.”

“Wait. There's more.” Arjun said. “Her last message was – ‘do not let these sands erase the memory of us. Tell them we traded not just silk, but stories.’”

“This changes everything. What she did was remarkable. History barely acknowledges the female traders of the silk road. But here they are; there's evidence of the real backbone of the road. It wasn't men, it was women.” Li looked up at her team.

“Asha is the missing piece to our history.” Arjun said, the enormous weight of their revelation settling in on him.

They decided to dedicate their report to The Letters of Asha. Mira recorded every single detail, her documentary evolving from simple observations into a homage to the story of Asha. Through her lens, Asha's letters came to life.

News travelled fast. Within days, messages came from the government, informing them that the excavation would be suspended for a new railway construction to be built as part of a modern Silk Road initiative. Officials promised selective preservation of history, but the team knew nothing of importance would be preserved properly.

During a meeting late at night, Arjun slammed their case file onto the desk, fuming with anger. “We can't seal it up again, we've barely skimmed the surface of everything!”

“We can't oppose the order outright, Arjun. They'll revoke our permit permanently.” Mira said, always the voice of reason.

“Archaeology needs hard, cold, evidence that is undeniable. We can't just half heartedly finish the film and let it go just like this.” Arjun argued.

“We have done all we can, Arjun.” Mira said softly, reaching out a hand to calm him, but being shoved away in response.

“Enough. The Silk Road thrived because people found new paths through compromise. Have we learnt nothing?” Li interjected wearily. Arjun looked away, abashed, mumbling an apology. Mira merely nodded.

As the others slept, Li stood outside the tents, the desert air cool against her face. Across the sandy dunes, headlights of trains glimmered faintly, the new Silk Road carrying people westward, just as the ancient one did. She wondered, briefly, if Asha had also watched her caravans and culture fade in the same way.

On the twenty-fourth of May, they returned to capture the final footage. But the landscape had transformed entirely. The blinking coordinates of Li's Google maps were futile: their cave was gone. In its place stood a sandy dune, smoothed over by the winds. Only a single corner of tarp protruded from the sea of sand.

The three of them clawed through the sands on their hands and knees until exhaustion numbed them. Nearly nothing could be recovered, except fragments of fabric and a single, blank manuscript page. The trio stared at the sheet wordlessly.

“All of it, lost.” Arjun finally spoke.

“No. Not lost. They are merely protected,” Li says. “The desert has and will always be the guardian of the Silk Road.”

“What will history remember if evidence disappears?” Arjun said, echoing a past argument.

“It will remember what it always remembers. Traces of it, formed from the interpretations that we give it.” Mira spoke softly.

For many hours, they sat in silence, three silhouettes against the endless sand. Underneath them, the cave murals hidden beneath the dunes returned to their slumber, waiting to be found again in another century.

Weeks later, in Beijing, the National Museum of China unveiled the first part of the archaeologists' findings. A single glass display case held the recovered mirror, a few fragments of Persian patterned silk, and partial transcriptions of Asha's letters translated into multiple languages. They had gathered clips of their discussions, the moments of discovery, and the insights into Asha's remarkable life. They poured their hearts out onto the film, knowing it would serve as a tribute to every overlooked story of the Road. The finished product was imperfect, but it was nonetheless a representation of their resilient journey.

Mira's documentary accompanied the artifacts, her camera panning across the dunes, playing Li's voice.

"The Silk Road wasn't just a path for merchants and monks. It was a conversation across cultures, shaped by the connections and compassion of those whose names did not survive. Until now."

The crowds lingered, moved by the stories told. When the film ended, soft applause filled the hall. Sitting at the back row, the trio brushed moisture from their eyes at the sight of their own painstaking work.

"I wish we could have done more, to preserve more proof," Arjun said.

"We gave them echoes. Sometimes, echoes last longer than shouts," Li said, smiling faintly.

That summer, invitations came. Invitations to speak in lectures, to hold museum displays, all for recognition. Headlines coined them as Discoverers of the Lost Voices. But Li cared little for the applause. She spent her days reviewing images of the manuscript, reverently tracing each faded character until they blurred and faded in her mind.

Her messages with Arjun grew frequent, filled with thoughts and philosophies. "Perhaps history is not a line, but a circle; and we are merely threads passing through the same tarp, over and over."

Mira messaged their group chat with an idea – a New Silk Road Cultural Heritage Network, to link universities and museums along the Road's ancient span, sharing digital archives of texts and art. Symbolically, she suggested naming its first initiative "Project Asha".

Li laughed softly when she read the draft. On the opening page, Mira had written in both Chinese and English: "May those who walk after us remember."

Months later, Li returned to Dunhuang for a final visit, before winter closed the passes for good. At sunset, the Mogao cliffs shone with bright coral and gold. Pilgrims descended from tourist buses holding lit incense, placing them before murals painted by monks fifteen centuries ago.

Away from the crowds, Li trekked alone to the wild dunes beyond the fenced area, to where the coordinates once marked their cave of treasures. The winds had shifted the sands once again, reshaping the horizon, making it impossible to tell where their excavations began and ended.

She knelt, scooping a handful of sand onto her palm. She could see tiny flecks of silk sparkling within, threads as thin as hair, glinting like starlight in her palm. Faintly, echoes of voices reached her ears. Phrases in many tongues: Sanskrit, Persian, Chinese, blending into one timeless murmur.

"I hear you," she whispered.

She turned towards the submerged caves. Inside those stone fortresses, covered by sand, manuscripts laid beneath centuries of prayers, ink still breathing faintly. They spoke of merchants who traded jade for silver, of monks who copied sutras under flickering lamps, of a woman named Asha who crossed deserts covered in silk patterned with dreams.

The desert wind sighed, restless. Li knew it would soon cover her footprints, as it had covered Asha's caravan, and the countless others. Yet that no longer felt like loss, but instead continuation of the circle of history.

History, she realized, was not preserved in stone or paper alone. History lived whenever someone remembered that across the chasm of time, strangers once met here, at the fork of the Road, and chose to share rather than conquer.

As twilight deepened, she began the walk back, her figure shrinking against the immense sand and sky. Behind her, the dunes continued their slow dance. Before her, civilisations shimmered in memory.

Far beyond the horizon, where trains thundered westward along newly polished rails, the Silk Road; old and new; breathed again.

Grandfather's Story

International Christian School, Law, Yik Hong Caleb – 16

My grandfather always told the best stories. Whether it be grand tales of belligerent kingdoms, boisterous bandits, or voyages to the ends of the earth, to my curious and youthful self, his knowledge seemed to know no end.

He told stories of the great heroes who had cast down the sun, the valiant warriors who had overthrown kingdoms, his ancestors who had cast fortunes in bones, but, surprisingly, had never mentioned himself, until I one day decided to ask, “Grandpa, tell me your story!”

With a sigh, he nodded his head. He took a deep breath, rolled his shoulders back, cleared his throat with a cough, and reeled me in with the inescapable tug of his storytelling. “Two hundred years ago, in a major port town to the south...

1839, Guangzhou, Qing Dynasty

He squinted at the book, one of the Confucian classics. Day by day, the words seemed to metamorphose into ever unintelligible scribbles, obscuring their profound meaning. His leg stung, trembling.

He yawned, finding himself impulsively grasping at the table for it, but his pockets had long since run dry.

Ah, yes, deep in thought, he was, pondering the thoughts of the great men before him, when he was suddenly interrupted by the mephitic smell of smoke penetrating his nostrils. Was something burning, or was it just incense? But the smell was too acrid to be incense, too unpleasant to be—

A deafening blast vibrated through his ears, shaking him out of his malaise. Stumbling out of his humble thatched cottage, he clutched the worn doorpost, almost tripping. Sweat rolled down his neck.

Where had that noise come from? He scampered out of the house, rushing to a vantage point overlooking the boundless sea, spotted with flecks of wood and metal which bobbed atop the swelling waters.

A sudden burst of flame devoured one of the wooden dragonflies lining the coast, haphazardly smeared onto the canvas of the cloudy skies. As the world around them burst into fire, the tiny men on the ships scurried about frantically, swallowed by the impassive obsequies of the ocean.

And then he saw it.

A gargantuan, serpentine dragon, ebony and ivory in colour and towering in stature, outstretched its abnormally long arms upwards, thin but sturdy pillars intersected by strings belonging on a giant's loom. Dark stumps, smoking with the hiss of fireworks, protruded from the holes on the sides of the beast. As the ship manoeuvred through the waters, the dragon's maw cut through the waves as if it were a razor, sending another breath of lightning hurtling at a junk boat in its feral wrath.

What was that *thing*? How could something so destructive, so dangerous, possibly exist? While he peered at the grand ship, grasping at answers to this mystery, an incandescent flicker captured his attention as the ship's rudder navigated the stormy water. His damp pupils pursued the minuscule flame, chasing it across what seemed like the deck of the ship.

A rumble of thunder punched a hole in another ship, which hurtled into the all-devouring abyss as the beast exhaled a plume of smoke. He shivered.

How had those monstrosities gotten here, all the way from the other side of the world? He had seen their strange contraptions, modified compasses, and complex charts on rough paper detailing formations of stars that they had never before seen. Was that it?

He thought back to the winding roads to the West, where his ancestors had traded the secrets of great inventions of his nation...

As the sea drowned out the sombre funeral pyre smouldering on the horizon, he grimaced as a sudden tightness overtook his leg, shuddering. Just how had he gotten here, fallen so far? Closing his eyes, he remembered.

720, Chang'an, Tang Dynasty

The merchant rode into the town atop a camel, jouncing up and down. Piercing through the sky's thin veil, the radiant sun spoke of success to come. Lost in his thoughts, the city sped by like a blur, with fellow merchants haggling with prices, hawkers loudly crying their wares, and children weaving through the throng, their sweaty backs slipping past the crowds.

The din was still ever the same, the buzzing and thrumming of conversations a welcoming blanket over the city, and the crowds streaming out in all directions with the sour tang of sweat. And yet the city had changed since he had returned from Dunhuang, carrying with him the strange trinkets that he had earned with his sweat and time.

Where the streets had once been far sparser, they were now clustered with masses and masses of people, gushing in from the corners of the empire and beyond. He even picked out several foreign faces, including the obvious pale skin of the Hu, among the masses, which he recognised from his westbound travels.

But he too had changed. Now showered in faraway luxuries, the ring that he had once vaunted seemed paltry compared to the assortment of treasures that he now owned. His heavy load, a great burden on his camel, undulated nigh in sync with the uneven road beneath him, a bountiful harvest of carpets encapsulating the scene of a grand battle, miniature carvings of the grand Buddhas nestled in the bosom of Dunhuang's sinuous network of caves, and iridescent jewels clattering against each other.

Looking back, his decision to trade in the West had been brilliant, but still, like the visionary he ever was, he wondered. About what opportunities might await in the future, or where the roads of trade might shift, perhaps further west or maybe even to the endless seas to the east.

"Oh, he's back!" A vaguely recognisable voice called out to him from the indistinguishable sea of men. Tugging on the reins, he pulled his camel to a stop. While engrossed in the endless possibilities, he had neglected to notice the foreign yet familiar streets of the district where he had spent his youth.

It took effort to tether himself back into reality, away from his dream-like vision.

It was a good day indeed.

1433, Beijing, Ming Dynasty

The eunuch followed the procession towards the fortress that was the Forbidden City. The recent years had come and gone like the wind, and he was years older and wiser, yet his youth still remained. It seemed like just yesterday when he had stepped onto the emperor's grand fleet for the first time, following his late captain into adventure all over the world, to the far-flung corners where mythical creatures dwelt and gold and silver awaited.

Above, the sun had already subsided, yet the persistent fidgeting that scattered raindrops from ashen hands betrayed the sky's restlessness at the imminent meeting; concurrent with his anxious—no, excited—quavering, relishing the thought of Ming hegemony over the seven seas within grasp with every successive second. Surely

His Imperial Majesty would send them on more voyages, as he had in times past, to reap more of the untold riches that they had acquired!

The ornamented doors into the palace opened wide with wary welcome, a path of no return. Once they had entered, the doors slammed shut behind them.

Each step he took towards the emperor, the more the skittish sky faintly whispered outside with the rhythmic pattering of rain, as if the drums of war were thumping in anticipation of their report to the emperor. All around them, attendants bustled with bristling solemnity, their harmonious motions reminiscent of a grander heavenly machine.

With a breath, he entered the emperor's presence. Before the emperor were the damnable court officials, clothed in flowing robes of black, reflecting their crooked intentions for the empire. Their silent snickering and conspicuously hidden sneers showcased an unusually prominent pride, peculiar given the good news that he was bringing.

Before long, the court faded into silence.

The emperor began speaking, but after the emperor's first few words, the floor seemed to cave in beneath him, slamming his eardrums shut. The voyages were to be ended, the emperor had ordered, the ships abandoned and the borders closed. Opportunity a moment away, slipping through their fingers!

Already, in his mind's eye, he could picture it. The ships, his home for the past decade, burning in the rain, a flaming beacon in the lightless darkness.

His weary, calloused hands rubbed against his cloak, his reality emerging like the onset of the frigid winter.

Heavens, he was getting old.

Interlude

At this point, my grandfather stopped.

"Keep going! How did it all start?" I urged him, brimming with endless curiosity and spirit.

My grandfather merely smiled. "Why don't you tell me your story first?"

I attempted to argue, but his firm expression told me that he would not budge. "Fine."

2013, Astana, Kazakhstan

Seated in the hall, he silently quivered. It was almost time to unveil the magnum opus, the greatest project he had ever participated in. As the guests filtered into the hall, government officials, fellow businessmen, and journalists, he steadied the turbulent maelstrom brewing in his head.

The hum of the crowd dissolved as President Xi ascended onto the pedestal. "Over 2,100 years ago during China's Han Dynasty, a Chinese envoy Zhang Qian was sent to Central Asia twice with a mission of peace and friendship. His journeys opened the door to friendly contacts between China and Central Asian countries as well as the Silk Road linking east and west, Asia and Europe."¹

He could picture the lone envoy, vigorously riding on his horse in his return from the West, with nothing but the decree on which he was sent and the shattered chains with which the Xiongnu had failed to deter him from his revolutionary mission.

“Today, as I stand here and look back at that episode of history, I could almost hear the camel bells echoing in the mountains and see the wisp of smoke rising from the desert.”¹

The ancient cities, shielded from the wind and rain by looming mountains, their pulsing heart the pellucid oases that shimmered with the reflection of caravans undertaking the arduous odyssey from Chang'an to Rome, seemed about visible, a translucent window through time and space.

“Over the past 20 years and more, the ancient Silk Road has gained fresh vitality. To forge closer economic ties, deepen cooperation and expand development space in the Eurasian region, we should take an innovative approach and jointly build an ‘economic belt along the Silk Road’.”¹

What President Xi was envisioning was right before them. New and transformative opportunities would be created, the Earth further fastened together with the new bridges of trade. Cultures intertwined at the waypoint of the projects, vibrant paints mixed for a painting limning the scene of a better tomorrow.

The possibilities were endless: children fed, more jobs, entire countries uplifted from poverty. The former opulence of the Silk Road, its splendour and interdependence, was on the horizon.

“Let us join hands to carry on our traditional friendship and build a bright future together.”¹

Applause erupted in the room, echoing through the halls of the university. He stood up, and the other men and women followed, each handclap sending tremors into the annals of history.

President Xi shook the hand of Mr Nazarbayev, who shook the hand of his secretary, who shook the hand of his aide, who shook the hand of another. Each hand took the hand of another, and another, and another. The grand road stretched on and on, seemingly boundless, across borders, across nations, across continents, across the lives and livelihoods of peoples everywhere. The beacon of hope resonated with the Silk Road of bygone times, its radiance cascading through the lives of people present and future.

The Silk Road was open once again.

2040, Shanghai, People's Republic of China

He fixed his tie and took a few deep breaths as his car swerved onto the highway. The cityscape, dotted with light as the sun began to hide its face beneath the skyline, seemed unrecognisable; the past 60 years had passed in the blink of an eye, the flat, timber houses, bamboo scaffolds, and rumbling train tracks displaced by silvery, soaring skyscrapers, massive automated cranes, and near-sonic bullet trains.

Billboard signs flashed and flickered with changing colours; the inaudible whirring of now airborne automobiles buttressed the dull murmurs of the incongruous swarm, a harmonious dissonance of languages and sounds; people dressed in flamboyant colours, what the young people called fashion these days, strutted to and fro, a mosaic of strange clothes and jackets.

Nervously tucking his arm under his chin, he glanced out of the window of his car. The homogenous crowd of Han trickling about the square jutted from the scene, with how many foreigners now roamed the jungle of Shanghai.

China, the land of opportunity, worthy of its title as the middle kingdom, stood at the crossroads of innovation and prosperity. And now, with his project and its advent, it would become the herald of the next great era in human history, the architect of the brilliant patchwork composed of all cultures.

The car slowed to a stop, pulling to a halt by the pavement. He had arrived. The door slid open. He climbed out of the car, fixing his tie and suit. Everything was at stake.

With what he was proposing, the globe would be connected more than ever before. New avenues for trade, commerce, and profit would open; information would be at one's fingertips, more so than the advent of the Internet.

The trek into the building was long and tedious. The elevator ride up to his potential investor's office slowed to a crawl, the constant flux of the cityscape beyond its glass window protracted into a momentary pause within the brisk cadence of life.

At last, the elevator doors opened to the new world that he was creating. He entered.

The future was at hand.

2nd Interlude

My grandfather smiled. "Who knows what the future might hold?"

I nodded in agreement, impatiently savouring his wisdom.

"Very well then. This is how my story began. And it's not how you'd expect."

121 BCE, Chang'an, Han Dynasty

The doors of the court opened in invitation, as Emperor Han Wudi awaited his subjects. Today was the day that marked the beginning of something new, something so monumental that it would turn the empire on its head.

Seated on a throne adorned with precious stones and delicate carvings, he overlooked the procession. His perceptive eyes discerned all, past, present, and future, his gaze so cutting it could sever stone.

Nearly everything he had done led up to this moment. The news he had been anticipating had finally arrived the night before, well past midnight, but he had long since prepared to receive it.

His envoy had been sent to the western reaches with a message to relay, standing before the courts of the nations who boasted the scarlet horses of legend; his generals had been dispatched to the deserts of the north, buffeted by the flying sands and biting gusts in their valiant campaign to push back their enemies.

It had finally happened. His booming voice brought the faint murmuring of his officials, who had filtered into the hall, into complete silence.

"For many years, our lands have been plagued by the tumour that is our enemies, the Xiongnu. We have paid for a false peace with our silk, our women, our gold."

"Today marks the occasion of a new beginning. Our armies have driven the Xiongnu out of the Hexi Corridor, securing the land and bringing it under our protection. No longer will our borders be infringed upon by outsiders."

"Let us open the door to lasting peace and a brighter future."

A chant spread throughout the courtroom, which trembled with unprecedented anticipation. It grew in magnitude and scale, the earth itself quaking with the reverberations from millions of lives all throughout the empire and beyond, preserved and prospered through the expulsion of the marauding nomads.

He had achieved his purpose, secured the fate of his nation. With the northern borders protected, what else could possibly end China's golden age? He smiled, and the sweet taste of the fruits of his labour lingered on his lips.

A visionary he was indeed.

A Reflection, China

“Little did I know at the time, but to the west, the road unfurled as an ornate tapestry, adorned with intricate portraits, of stalks of green and magnificent, blood-red steeds, of wise men meditating on the meaning of existence and grand creatures with tree trunks for noses and coarse skin of silver, of fierce maned beasts the colour of bronze gold and bejewelled basins erupting with fireworks of water, of grand and unfathomable arched structures carved from opalescent marble.

And *that* was how it all began. On the gilded paths of the Silk Road, spanning continents, cultures, dynasties, generations, a great power was born and our lineage came to be where it is today.”

I sat in silence, contemplating the beginnings of my grandfather’s story. Had it been what I expected? If I had been in his place, sitting before the imperial court in Chang’an, would I have known what the ramifications of my decision were?

But that was how stories were—they evolved and changed over time, like a fickle weather vane directed by the winds of history.

Most certainly, my grandfather did tell the best stories.

But it had become more than just his story. It has become *our* story.

1. *The selected excerpts of President Xi Jinping’s speech are directly sourced from his actual speech on September 7, 2013 in Astana, as documented by the USC US–China Institute.*

Citations:

Xi Jinping, Speech in Astana, Kazakhstan, on Building a Silk Road Economic Belt With Central Asian Nations, September 7, 2013 | USC China. 7 Sept. 2013, china.usc.edu/node/21218.

New Tales of China's Silk Road : beyond the stars' Reach

International Christian School, Liu, Tinchu Annie – 16

I stared, starry-eyed, at my father's mule carrying bundles of luxury Chinese goods from my grandfather's store. Exquisite porcelain, shining with hues of lapis and ivory, poked tantalizingly out from the leather satchels strapped onto the animal's saddle. Lavish, flowing silk pooled in stunning white piles in ornate cedar boxes. These were all sights I had grown up with, being the heir to a family of well-known artisans in Song Dynasty China, yet each time my father had gathered all the goods in preparation for a long journey on the Silk Road, the sights grew all the more admirable.

My father appeared from his bed chambers, wearing his travel gear. Before, I knew the only thing I could do was wait at home in anticipation for his return, which was not always a given. It worried my mother sick, the lines of stress on her face etching away at her youthful glow. After all, my father was an old man now. It was getting harder and harder for him to take care of himself. But today, my mother wore a smile on her face. Today, I was going to accompany my father, and embark on my first journey on the Silk Road.

"Son, gather your things. We're going on a trip." It was all my father had to say before I bolted to my room. I grabbed a small assortment of various trinkets: bells, toys, and a jade necklace my mother had made especially for me. I hooked the necklace around my neck and staggered to the courtyard, my arms filled with mementos I wanted to take with me.

A pristinely groomed mule stood upright near my father's more haggard one, its black mane radiant in the scorching Chinese heat. My father handed me a string with multiple bells attached to the end. They jingled cheerily as he placed them gingerly in my palm.

"Ring these bells if you're ever in trouble, son. I'll come find you. It's a perilous journey, after all." His voice soft with undertones of affection barely hidden its gruff exterior.

I got mounted on the mule, which barely buckled under the weight of my teenage body. The other mule had more trouble handling my father's broader build, combined with the weight of the luxury items. The mules rode us through the town like celebrities, with our neighbors coming out of their homes to bid us farewell and good luck. Before long, the stone walls and lively noises of the town had faded into the distance.

As the sun traveled listlessly over the dazzling blue aether, my father and I passed through a variety of biomes and landscapes. Over the course of around three months, we stayed in various small settlements, narrowly avoiding groups of bandits, traveling down a number of nearly identical footpaths. The lush forests characteristic of the area I had grown up in began to fizzle out into thin layers of pale green grass stretching across wide dirt valleys. Each sight was a majesty to behold, but there was no time to stop and admire the view; my father was not the type to waste time.

I started off the journey filled with excitement, but it hadn't taken very long for the feeling to wear off, leaving only tingles of drowsiness in its wake. My father must have noticed my sluggishness, so we pulled off the main road and onto a winding track overgrown with heaps of spiny vegetation. As we broke free from the dense shrubbery, I squinted as the trading city of Kashgar came into view, decorated radiantly with the gold-red tinges of lanterns hanging from the parapets of the stone buildings.

Middle Eastern travelers rode on magnificent desert beasts my father called camels, which I heard could go days without water. Their turbans and flowing robes carried scents of South Asian spices and distinct hints of the arid desert climate from which they came. Jewish and European travelers were also taking up residence in the city for the night in shared rooms, their long beards framing their tall, wrinkled faces. I was unable to stop staring.

My father and I arrived at an inn, where we dismounted our mules and placed our luxury goods somewhere safe. I rushed to the rooftop of our small sandstone house, my gaze wandering across the breathtaking vista of lit rooftops, my ears drowning in the pleasure of the lively sound of chatter, my skin savoring the soft kisses of Eastern wind. The city was so vibrant compared to my hometown, where the lights would shut off not very long after dusk, and the noise of the villagers would die down into the night, as if suppressed by the navy

trickling into the sky. I looked up, and a rich profusion of stars looked back down on me. My father joined me on the rooftop soon after, holding two gourds filled with water. I took a few gracious swigs.

He chuckled as he sat down next to me, clouds of dust rising from where his robes touched the floor. He must have spotted the concern knitting itself into the space between my brows, because I felt his hand on my shoulder. "Son, I don't have a lot of years left in my life. But don't you worry. You'll grow up to be a fine traveler, with or without my guidance."

My expression fell even further.

My father sighed, playfully nudging my arm. "Why don't we take a walk through the city to kill some time, explore the nightlife?"

Feverish excitement returned to me as we wandered through the busy market square, alive with business despite the darkness of the sky. The aromatic smell of cumin and turmeric mixed with strong scents of Arabian perfume, rich in natural ingredients easily identifiable as agarwood and saffron. I must have stopped at the Arabian trader's stall for too long, because he stood up and began a conversation with me. My father gave me a reassuring smile, signalling I had his permission to engage.

"I'm going to go take a stroll around the other market stalls. Have fun with this gentleman, and meet me back at the inn if you need anything," he told me calmly. A sense of dread immediately overcame me. I understood that my father was trying to introduce me to networking opportunities and build my social skills, but as a boy who never had a lot of friends even back in my hometown, this new challenge seemed daunting.

The Arabic trader simply chuckled. "First time on the Silk Road, kid?" he asked in broken Chinese. His accent broke away at some of my nerves, my heart rate slowing down as I nodded. He held up a highly detailed map, filled with scribbles of illegible calculations and names of cities. I peered at it curiously, and glanced back at the trader for an explanation.

"I noticed you earlier. You and your dad were on the rooftop of that building nearby," he said, pointing in the direction of the inn my father and I were staying at. "You had arrived up there first, and the first thing you did was look up at the stars," he mumbled, his gaze distant. "Are you interested in them?"

It was the first time someone had asked me that question, and the first time I had ever really thought about it. The dark clouds of my hometown had always shrouded any light from the night sky beside the moon. I told the trader about my wishes. "I want to become a well-known traveler one day so I can see the sky in all types of distant lands." I braced myself for a condescending laugh, or a look of judgment, but the trader only smiled warmly at me.

"We Arabic travelers have been studying that art for years, long before you were born," he replied softly, his Chinese growing choppy at the more difficult words. "It's the same for anyone. After all, aren't we all restless souls that yearn for stars?" he added, his voice slightly more subdued than before.

Before I could reply, a deep, ominous horn sounded above the chatter of the traders. Its bellow echoed across the steep walls of the Tarim Basin, as if the very mountains themselves were its soldiers. The entire market square froze, looks of equal confusion and horror exchanged across people from different stalls. The diverse smells of spices and herbs mixed into one of universal fear.

I looked toward the kind man, attempting to put on a courageous front, but the quiver of my chin betrayed me. "What's happening?" I asked frantically. He didn't seem to understand, his eyes glassy with terror. He mouthed a few incomprehensible words in a different language. "Please, sir, tell me!"

"I knew they were coming but I didn't know it would be this soon..." he muttered under his breath. He began madly packaging his goods into a huge leather bag, the intense sound of glass shattering merging with the cries of terror from travelers all around me. Wild, unadulterated fear tore across the crowds as a stampede formed to escape the market square. The traveler turned to me, bewildered. "What are you standing there for, boy? Run! We're about to get ransacked!"

Panic slammed into my chest as I felt my entire body freeze over. The Arabic traveler, noting my affliction, grasped my hand and dragged me along with the current of the crowd, toward the back exit of the city walls. My limbs remained rigid, indifferent toward escape. It was only after a minute or two that I came to my senses, and tore myself away from the man.

“What on earth are you doing?” He hollered, pushing his way through the onslaught of terrified civilians to grab my arm. “You’re going in the direction of the army! What’s wrong with you?” Even through his anger, I could sense the undertones of anxiety and fear in his voice. Even when his own life was on the line, he was worried about me, a complete stranger. Something inside me told me I’d be safer staying with him, but familial loyalty struck something deeper within me, an irrevocably perpetual culture that had bound itself close to my heart.

“My father...” I choked out through the storms of dust kicked up by the mob rushing by. “He told me to meet him at the inn. We have porcelain, and silk, and we can’t lose them! They take years to make!” I barely managed to gasp out between intervals of coughing fits. The man’s hand was leaving red marks on my wrist, his knuckles turning white with worry. Indecision battled across his face.

“Come with me, you’ll have your whole life to create more porcelain, and weave more silk,” he begged, now more pleading than demanding. “How can you expect to see the stars of distant lands if your life ends here?”

I physically felt myself reel back at his last question. Below the layers of irrational emotion, the trader presented a logical argument. It was unlikely my father would even be at the inn, but he was a frail old man, and I could never live with the feeling that I may have left him to die alone.

“I’m sorry.” Those were the only two words I had to say to the Arabic trader before he released me, shooting me one last look of warmth before disappearing into the raging movement of the crowd. I rubbed the skin chafed by the trader’s calloused hands as I shoved my way through the crowd. Adrenaline coursed through my veins.

I clasped the jade pendant in my hand as I veered off into a narrow side alley away from the main promenade. The echoes of the encroaching horn noises became even more unbearable as they bounced off the dusty walls of the buildings beside me. Stumbling over overturned baskets of fruits and piles of bricks, I finally arrived at the inn. I looked up at the roof, as if expecting my father to be there, but what I saw instead horrified me.

Balls of ignited flesh plummeted from the night sky, shot in soaring arches, overwhelming the brightness of the stars with fiery embers. I heard the roars of enemy soldiers outside the city walls as I dove inside the inn, recoiling with each sound of meat pounding against the walls. In my hasty attempts to snatch up the sacks of luxury goods, piles of porcelain went crashing onto the floor, shards of white ceramic amassing at my feet.

My breathing quickened along with my heart rate. Without thinking, I took the bells that my father had given me on the first day from my pocket and rang them frantically. The melodious sounds of the bells were drowned by the horrendous sounds of flesh slamming against the walls and the crinkling of crushed porcelain beneath my shoes.

The door slammed open. I closed my eyes, half-expecting it to be one of the soldiers, but my father appeared instead, his breaths coming out in rasps. The bells worked! I cried out in joy and leapt into his embrace, but he hurriedly pushed me aside. “No time for reunions. Soldiers are entering the city!” my father warned me, terror in his voice. In no attempts to salvage our luggage or our mules, my father pulled me out the door, pivoting on a sharp turn down a dark alleyway.

Soldiers in bison-fur armor marched past the exit of the alleyway, their commander barking orders in an unusual language. My father slammed me against the wall, pushing me behind a pile of crates. He knelt down next to me, wincing in pain as his joints cracked. I watched his brow furrow in plainly masked pain.

I pushed myself into my father’s side in an aggressive hug. The bells in my hand jingled horrifyingly loudly as I nudged into his side. The clapping of boots on the sandstone pavement halted. My father stared at me,

wide-eyed, his face pale as limestone. The sounds of the army resumed, but this time, they were getting louder. Faint shouting morphed into thunderous orders.

My father ripped the jade pendant off my neck, and covered my mouth before I could object. He shoved me into a huge crate of apples, his hands foreign and angry to the touch. He then turned the crate around so I would be obscured from the view of anyone passing by. The cold skin of the apples caressed my heated body, in vain attempts to soothe the goosebumps across my wan complexion. I didn't dare make a sound as I could hear soldiers entering the alleyway we were in.

"Who are you with?" one of the soldiers demanded, their voices furious and impatient.

"Nobody. What do you want with me, a poor, old trader?" my father responded, his voice low and despondent. I could sense the determination rising in deep coils, his breaths hollow and fast.

"Don't play dumb," the soldier replied haughtily. "You know we're going to kill you. You may as well present your valuables to make this faster."

I could hear the jade charm of my mother's necklace clinking against the soldier's metallic uniform. A few scoffs were also heard. "This is really all you have? From the looks of you, you'd probably be carrying something much more valuable."

"You can check the inn I am staying at," my father countered. "Any luxury goods I had were smashed to pieces by your soldiers."

A slam was followed by a groan of pain. I flinched on my father's behalf. "So those were yours!" the soldiers cried in indignation. "What a waste! All that fine porcelain, smashed!"

My father roared in pain as a blade tore open his flesh. I didn't even dare peek through the cracks of the basket to watch. I could hear blood spilling, the metallic tang of torn skin poisoning the air around me. The first stab was followed by several more, each one sounding more gruesome than the last. Cracking bones and tormented screams erupted in pairs before eventually subsiding into defeated whimpers. The loud sounds of boots faded down the alleyway, their orders resuming as if a life had not just been stolen.

A deathly silence crept into the quiet alleyway. I hesitantly climbed out of the crate, several apples dropping to the floor at my feet. Yellow pulp seeped into the cloth of my shoes as I stumbled toward my father's corpse. There was no rising or falling in his chest, or pigment in his cheeks. I held my breath, as if I could give the air coming out of my lungs to him.

I shuddered as a thorny crown unraveled itself across every inch of my body. The pain concentrated itself in my chest, constricting my breathing. I barely noticed the salty tears welling in my eyes until a few of them fell on my father's deceased body, diluting the crimson of his mangled skin.

I knelt next to him, feeling as if the very substance of my soul was being torn apart seeing my father's exhausted face. His eyes remained wide open, bleary and lifeless. Dried blood formed patches near his mouth, and all over the floor around him. I had never noticed the wrinkles of time creasing his face until now, when there was nothing left that I could do. I stifled a cry of grief, knowing he would not want me to waste time on spoiled goods.

In my mourning, I rang the bells he had given me one last time. I was so lost. I foolishly let myself believe he'd come back to life, to find me. A shaky sob forced itself out of my mouth. It was agonizing, feeling every promise we made go unfulfilled.

A Mongol Merchant's Tale of the alternate Silk Road

International College Hong Kong Secondary, Chan, Ewan – 14

The Silk Road has been one of history's greatest trading lines, stretching from the European plains to the Chinese mountain region. In 751 AD, the Tang dynasty felt some rebellions against the ruling emperor and a weakening central power inside the crumbling dynasty; instead of crumbling like a worn-out wall like its predecessors, the Han and the Qin. The Tang dynasty bounced back with more strength after receiving more support from trade and help through the Silk Road. This not only created a Greater Tang dynasty but also a much more sophisticated society of the Asian region in the century. Because of this recent boom from the trading, the Tang improved most of their technologies and war tactics and conquered more territory; the territory stretched between the jungles of Annam (Vietnam) to the cold tundras in Goguryeo (near North Korea) area to the muslim forces in the Central Asia. Some hoped that this was a century of peace and would continue onwards for longer, but in the bottom of their hearts, they knew that the evergrowing powers were all ready to fight for land, treasure, dominance and glory...

Grey thick smoke rose as Nomt, the Mongol merchant, peered into the delicate firewood. It had been 6 years ever since his village was destroyed by another tribe. He wanted to become a horse caretaker when he was a lot younger, yet he decided to become a merchant after seeing the opportunity of trading across the Silk Road. It was of course very dangerous because of the frequent conflicts from different powers but it was the only thing for Nomt had to do to earn his sliver. His old spear had been with him for over 4 years and began to grow in a shade of dark brown. Every now and then he sharpened his trusty spear and fixed its shaft. His sack full of Roman silk and silver had been in perfect condition since the desert's dry weather made it impossible for rust to happen. Every merchant had their bag of silver, which usually was hidden secretly underneath the tunic. He brushed the smoke as he coughed a little. "The fire is perfect for cooking," he murmured indistinguishably as he brought out a small piece of Samarkand non and put it next to the fire, warming the bread and himself. After grabbing the bread from the roaring red beast, he gave the two camels lying next to him. The mouths of the camels munched slowly before each carefully took another bite of the bread. Nomt then took a large bite of the bread. Consisting of sweet raisins and sweet flour, it tasted something Nomt would eat forever until he was gone from this world. After finishing the bread, he rested on the sides of the camels and slept for the night.

The night looked as if it passed for one *kè* (aka ten minutes) since Nomt dreamed of wealth and living a happy life, just as he held the imaginary sacks of coins. A soggy carpet slithered across his face. Startled, he woke up but then relaxed as he just saw the two camels looking frightened and confused. His eyes traced towards two shadows wandering in the distance holding glimmering shamshirs (curved swords) and a sack of heavy ornaments. Nomt, still tired from the waking, had forgotten he had no escorts to help him since escorts only came in if one was delivering much more valuable and special items like Roman carpets and jade statues. Nomt froze as if the time froze too. His primal instincts told him to run and hide. But his other instincts forced him to act calmly, as he approached the bandits with his aged spear. His arm began to hold onto his bag of silver tightly, telling him that giving up the bag would be a grave mistake. The bandits spoke in unknown language and pointed quickly towards the sack. Nomt looked blankly towards the bandits and shook his head. The bandits looked at each other strangely as if something happened to their faces and then drew their swords towards Nomt, pressuring him to give up the sack.

One of the bandits drew his shining sword and quickly slashed towards Nomt with fierce power but then he was quickly rebound by a mighty force. His partner in crime looked at him in fear and decided to flee. The bandit looked below where his stomach lay and saw the oozing red liquid dripping from his wrapped tunic with a rusty tip from the other side of his back, his both hands lost their grip as the sword and sack fell down synchronised like the rhythms of music beat. His eyes, swelling with tears for a few seconds before he suddenly collapsed like a tumbling tower of bricks. Nomt felt regret as he saw the teenage bandit and decided to do something special for

his foe. Indeed, death such as this was not rare along the Silk Road. Yet, for hours, he dug for a very shallow pit before carefully putting the bandit's body, sword, and the sack of belongings. After completing the grave, he wept like a family member and carved out "Маш онцгой булш (A very special tomb)" on top of the grave before whistling for the camels to continue the journey.

After marching across the endless plains of desert, Nomt always felt the sting in his eyes as he walked towards a large shadow with two mercenaries towering in front of the fortress-like figure. The sound of war drums shook the dunes as Nomt knelt before a figure with a glimmering helmet. His braids flew across the open desert. The Tibetan provided shelter and protection in return for good compensation.

Nomt gave the figure a bag of silver and began to call his name. The figure showed no emotion towards Nomt and began to order his troops to make a tent for the merchant. The soldier of the fort quickly pulled out an animal hide. His camels rested near the tent as Nomt began to rest below the grains of sand. His eyes gazed at the sunset with no thought in mind, like a stone statue, until a sudden burst of horn sounds could be heard. His eyes widened as a fury of arrows came running down like hail. The soldier at the outpost looked horrified as a skirmish of Tang dynasty troops came running down like blood thirsty cannibals. Nomt began running like the wind as the Tibetan tribe began to load arrows into their bows. Both armies then met each other on the plain field where furious fighting began with javelins being thrown towards the Tang dynasty soldiers. Nomt ran breathlessly until he could not hear the flutters of arrows anymore. He then hid behind a pile of rocks with his hand still trembling with fear. He lost most of the goods, but most importantly, he was still alive. Businesses on the Silk Road were not always successful, nor peaceful. In the many years as a merchant, Nomt first felt exhausted. He missed the grass and plains and horses in his homeland. "To go or not, is a question," he wondered...

Such invasions were costly at the time. Wounds would not be easily healed, and lives were lost regardless of age and race. The Silk Road transformed from a tranquil trading route to a deadly cemetery. Many merchants, discovering the fall of the Silk Road, retreated to their home before where they were mistaken for spies. Many other powers, like the Turks and Tibetans, began to form relations with their nearest neighbours as a sudden long dreadful years of war began. The fate of the Silk Road reached a turning point again in its long history...

Uncrowned but Unforgotten

International School of Beijing, Chiu, Chi Yan Johnson – 15

It was late summer, and the sun was baking the highlands of Xizang. On a plateau stood a large tree. Under it, a boy was resting. Another took short, desperate breaths as he extended his arm for the inhaler.

"10.22 seconds, not bad, not bad. Now you still need to ensure to pack more inhalers for that competition," instructed Marcus, "c'mon, get up Paulo, you still need to do a couple more group sessions to adapt to your asthma conditions during the competition."

Meanwhile, a younger boy, on all fours, took two breaths from the inhaler. Shortly after, his breathing slowed down to tortoise speed. Paulo had a long Achilles tendon and unbelievable lung capacity, as if his body was crafted for running.

"Give me more time, Marco," pleaded Paulo, "my asthma...is...the only thing that...makes running difficult for me." The teenager fit more words as his breathing returned to normal.

"It's up to you, buddy. I'm guessing you would want to win that trophy, cash prize, and scholarship home, yes?" Teased Marco, "Well, you'd better get cracking if you don't want asthma to be the reason you lose the competition. Or even worse, come in second and be humiliated by the rest of the world."

Hearing the word 'second', Paulo immediately got to his feet and started stretching, readying his body for the next group of speed endurance practices. Training like this continued for months, forcing the young boy's limit every time.

"On your marks, get set, go!" It was the 22nd competition of the "Hexi Corridor Dash" competition, where competitors had to race through the most extreme leg of the Silk Road. From Dunhuang to Kashi, competitors had to make their way through Southern Xinjiang, traversing part of the Taklamakan desert. Being the most prestigious tournament in the world, one was only able to attend once in their lifetime. Even signing up for the competition costs a whole lot, but to compensate for the entrance ticket price, the organizers prepared a grand prize for the first place: a lifetime of fortune. The runner-up? Barely anything.

Paulo imagined his parents in front of the television, just like they did a decade ago, watching Marcus get eliminated from the Dash because of a broken bone. Marcus was in first place; he had taken a considerable lead, but all the audience's hearts sank when he hopped onto a boulder and landed his legs at an unusual angle. In an instant, Marcus' milky-white bones bulged out of his crimson flesh. The scene made everyone cover their eyes, some screaming in horror at the sight. The falling snow sprinkled on the wound like salt, the teenage boy wailed at times and was silent at others, the pain covering every bit of his skin. Now a middle-aged man, Marcus slacked off at home, lying on his bed, having barely spoken since. The younger one doesn't want history to repeat, so he spent blazing days against freezing days training for the Dash.

One, two, breathe in, three, four, breathe out. Paulo kept a steady pace as he traversed the last stretch of the corridor, sprinting with all the energy he had left. Only a few hundred meters until the trophy belongs to me, thought Paulo; however, his asthma started acting up. Breathing had become so painful that he had to stop immediately to catch his breath. The young athlete reached into his pocket for the inhaler, but it was gone!

"It seems like the first place is up for grabs again," announced Murphy, the commentator of the competition, "Paulo attempts to get up, but it seems like he's anchored to the ground! Will fate be cruel and make tragedy descend on his family once again?" The live broadcast replayed clips of Marcus, his hands wrapped around his knee, screaming in pain; it was the competition's most infamous recording.

Paulo made one last attempt to get up. Still, he was immediately stepped down by another competitor, just when Murphy commented: "It seems like we have a winner, crossing over Paulo's body, but...woah! Another shadow swooshed past the two, heading straight for the finish line!" The audience spectating in real life roared, as Wendy, the girl from behind, crossed the line with the most enormous grin possible on her face.

Paulo's lungs were about to burst, but as far as he could tell, his asthma medication wasn't on the way.

Wendy quickly disappeared in the crowd of reporters, triumphant over the rest who were left behind to bite the dust. The remaining competitors, seeing those who were closer to the finish line start to turn around and head back, did the same. It was over, as everyone knew the reward for second and third places was scarves of gold and silver lining, it couldn't even pay for a fraction of the entrance ticket to the Hexi Dash.

Paulo crossed the finish line in search of an inhaler, which he quickly found lying on the floor. However, the boy didn't have much time to process why he just found it lying around after the competition ended, because many journalists came to interview him as well: "You're the second ever person to achieve second place in our competition! What are your thoughts on being the second after the historic figure BanChao?" The boy opened his mouth to speak, but as soon as the other reporters started repeating the words second, BanChao, and first loser, he lost motivation to do so. Standing on the podium, the organizers put a scarf with a golden border around his neck, while Wendy stood right next to him, triumphantly lifting the ZhangQian cup. Only then did Paulo hear the shutters click; only then did he listen to the cheers of relief.

Again, Paulo could see his family's reaction from his very mind: "We named y'all after Marco Polo!" Screamed Paulo's mom, "The two of you were meant to be the first, the first pioneer, the first explorer, anything but the second!" She launched off the chair, fingers brushing her hair hard, and slowly collapsed to the floor. Paulo's father sighed and cupped his hand around his eyes, "You were the one to advise we only pack one month's worth of essentials," and then left the room as well; the television was still switched on. In his bedroom, Marcus figured that his brother had failed the champion, too. He grunted and turned around to face the wall of his bedroom.

Paulo hated the mention of BanChao, for everyone was educated in history class that BanChao was the second person to walk the Silk Road. His parents told him Paulo was to be anything but BanChao; they wanted him to be first, win the ZhangQian cup, the champion's trophy named after the widely known first human to ever traverse and walk through the Hexi corridor, and create the Silk Road. After making the decision to cross the finish line, Paulo knew he probably shouldn't take any modern transportation home, or else the life that awaited him was pure humiliation. Thus, he made the decision to walk back to Dunhuang, giving himself and his parents enough time to figure things out. Paulo needed space, some room to breathe, and an opportunity to explain his second-place finish.

Paulo flinched at the word 'first', irritated, he switched directions, avoiding BanChao.

That name sounded familiar, Paulo thought, probably heard it somewhere before, but this isn't any place to stay long. After all, his tone was almost aggressive.

It didn't take long for BanChao to see the red silk scarf stitched with a golden lining, for he himself was gifted one of them by the civilians he met on his journey.

"Trespassing this land could get you killed, boy," warned the ancient ghost. He had a long, white goatee, a mark of wisdom and time on the planet.

"Are you the BanChao who traversed the Silk Road all the way to Rome?" Paulo took two steps back as he said this.

BanChao's eyes went wide, as if a notorious star recognized by a real fan, "first time that happened in a while," he noted.

"The first time, what happened?" questioned Paulo.

"Never mind," BanChao continued his following speech in a much more friendly manner, "no need to be afraid of me, I'm just a wandering soul that never finds home, I don't bite."

Paulo examined the figure more closely; *it does seem like BanChao*, he thought to himself, *looks exactly like the old man printed on our textbooks*. However, he was still devastated after the loss; he had no energy to care for any supernatural creatures. He kept walking forward, and for a while, he didn't hear anything. After some more walking, Paulo decided to set camp within the Taklamakan Desert. He hit the sack briefly after he lay down, his body the least exhausted of all.

In his sleep, Paulo was choked by someone; he couldn't tell if it was a dream or not, but the sense of suffocation seemed so realistic. When the boy woke up, he found himself stuck in the middle of a sandstorm. He quickly wrapped the scarf around his eyes, seeing through the quality silk that blocks sand. He treads on, one step at a time, towards the direction of home, thinking of how he was going to explain himself to neighbors and family.

As Paulo was about to exit the desert, a pale figure appeared again on the horizon. The sun shone right through it; the boy recognized it as Banchao. Soon enough, Paulo realized that the words of Banchao were valid and that he had to act.

Paulo rang the doorbell and took a deep breath, staring at his feet. He knew he had to come back eventually. The door opened, and that was when his wobbly knees finally collapsed under mental pressure, bringing him to his knees. The boy's eyelids shut as he fell flat on the ground.

"Paulo," his mother called, "Paulo!" It was the exact voice of a mother depressed over her child, thought the teenager. Just as Paulo was about to find excuses for himself, his mother continued, "Where have you been? The whole world was looking for you!"

Although shocked by his mother's reaction, Paulo felt confused for the most part: "Mom, I know I failed, I don't want to be comforted."

"What are you talking about?" Paulo's father questioned. "You're first!" Where have you been for the past month?"

At this point, Paulo's mind simply kept track of all the information that was being poured into it, but he still insisted that his parents did this to make him feel better. *At the same time*, Paulo thought, *my parents never joked around like this*. "Mama, Papa, if this is really just a big lie, please stop now. I know this isn't possible."

"Oh dear, look at what we've done to him!" Cried Mom, "This isn't just our fault, the whole society just puts so much pressure on the ones who achieve second place."

Hearing the ambiguous words, Paulo was now more convinced that his parents had been pranking him just then. Until his dad fetched the tablet and showed him the news: "First Place Disqualified? The Lucky Boy Goes Missing," read the headline.

New Tales of China's Silk Road

Maryknoll Convent School (Secondary Section), Chu, Wing Yee Bella – 16

Prologue

Day 3285

How long do I have left? One year? Two?

That damned Theodosius and his cursed edicts! If Christianity becomes the only religion in Rome, what will be left of us? I saw what happened to the minor gods and goddesses. One night, they just disappeared, as if they never existed at all. When I attempted to search for them, I had come to two horrifying realizations.

One: my power was weakening. The underworld was wavery, teetering between the edge of reality and unreality. Spirits flickered like candles, about to be snuffed out.

Two: without people to worship us, we would truly, irrevocably, die. But we would not enter the underworld, no. We would return to become one with Mother Khaos.

We, the major gods, still had time. There might be a few worshippers to keep us alive. But what if they were hunted down?

I don't want to see my family gone. I don't want to forget the feeling of standing in the breeze with my dearest Persephone. I don't want to forget the feeling of smelling a flower, of enjoying a sumptuous feast, of talking to my brothers about the most mundane of things.

I don't want to die.

I don't want to die!

Day 3289

I remember a rumor I heard long ago—an emperor in the East, who had sought out immortality. I wonder if it worked...

Day 3291

I have decided to go on and see for myself. If he could strip mortals of their mortality, perhaps he could save us from ours.

Act I

Day 3300

I have begun my journey to Antioch. The days are starting to feel longer, now that the winter cold has passed. The waters are peaceful.

Day 3301

The waters are not peaceful.

I suspect it is the doing of Poseidon—he tends to throw tantrums when he can't get his way. I cannot blame him, though. Being upset about the loss of our brothers and sisters is completely normal. I cannot believe it either. The concept of dying as gods is unthinkable. And yet, we face such a challenge ahead of us. But he always figures it out. As for me, I have more important things to do.

Day 3308

The waters have stilled. It feels more like the last cry of a dying animal being silenced. We are nearing the horizon—I can see it. The smoke from fires inside homes, the distant caw of gulls.

Day 3309

We have arrived at Antioch.

I have been here when it was under a different name. It feels like eternities ago, though it has not changed much. The rocky hills loomed ahead as we approached from the ports. I bid goodbye to the fine fellows who had guided me there and started to scale the hills to the city. The flowers were in full bloom as I walked across plains of gold and purple.

At last, I approached the city itself. The people are friendly, but long have they forgotten about me. All I see is the effects of the man who cursed us to nothingness.

Day 3326

I saw a man tonight. Clad in exotic robes, he regaled me with tales of his homeland. Distantly, I remembered that the clothing he wore seemed to be from another time, in imperial scrolls drawn decades ago. He gave a blithe smile as he pointed at me.

“God! Cease your futile search for immortality!”

At that moment, I knew that he was the man I was looking for all this time.

“And yet, you are alive and in front of me, Emperor. If you were a spirit, you would probably be wavering,” I replied.

His smile faltered. “No matter what I say, you wouldn’t stop, would you?”

I nodded. “Not until you tell me. I would travel the whole of the Silk Road to unravel your secrets.”

“Ah, well. I cannot stop you.”

Day 3327

Despite everything, he’s still following me around.

Act II

Day 3346

The sight of camels is starting to sicken me. They are not very good modes of transportation. Combined with the ceaseless chatter of the Emperor, I am beginning to have a perpetual headache. When I relayed this issue to him, he merely laughed and said,

“Hah! You’ll be seeing and hearing both of these things for quite a while.”

Day 3365

We have finally arrived at another city. Its name is Baghdad, according to the Emperor. The people are much more modestly dressed than people back at home. They are friendly, and the food is good too. We will stock up on food for the next few days. I wish to stay here longer, but I must continue on my mission.

Day 3368

I don’t know what happened.

The Emperor continued with his taunts, attempting to sway me from my mission. At first, I acted nonchalantly, ignoring him as I always do.

I remember which sentence set me off.

“You know this won’t work; you should spend the last of your days with your family!”

I remember that my face felt like it was burning. The scorching heat that clung to my clothes, my skin, my very soul did not help either. His haughty grin, starkly illuminated by the torches, was incredibly, well, punchable. I remember summoning my bident, my other hand curled into a fist.

I do not remember anything after that.

The next thing I saw was the thousands of stars illuminating the night sky. As I came to my senses, I looked down.

The Emperor was nowhere to be seen. What remained were the ruins of a once beautiful city, razed to the ground, and an eerie silence. Even the buzzing of the cicadas had stopped. All that was left was me, the dead, and the night. Just as it had always been.

Whatever I had done, it had drained the last of my power. I could barely access the underworld, and when I attempted to summon some gold, a few copper coins spilled out from my hands instead.

I had lit a torch so I could write my thoughts down. As I sit amongst the wreckage, I now think to myself:

Perhaps he was right. Perhaps I shouldn't have believed the tall tales of the people. Perhaps I should never have gone on this journey. Perhaps I should have stayed, with my friends, with my lover, with my family.

But if there was even the slightest probability of immortality within reach, I would want to take it. They would understand. What else could I do?

Act III

Day 3397

I have decided to find a colleague of mine. A goddess by the name of Anahita, the Mother of all Knowledge. Normally, I would ask my niece, but she wouldn't know about such far-reaching information, right?

Day 3456

Samarkand is beautiful. The city square and the buildings are magnificent, with intricate patterns drawn across the ceilings and floors. It is starting to get chilly, though—I do not have time to admire the murals. I should be focusing only on my mission of finding Anahita.

Day 3468

The locals told me about a mysterious new Magi who recently arrived and settled in a small building not far from the city center. Apparently, he could connect you to any god you wanted. They are like the Oracles at home, but being able to connect to a god at a whim without earning their wrath? Truly impressive.

I will use the last of my power to try and conjure enough copper, if not silver. If I summon enough money, perhaps he and Anahita would be convinced enough to come to my aid.

Day 3469

I think I'm going insane.

Today, I went to the Magi. The incense was cloying, dulling the senses. The woman wore a veil, and the scent of death hung around the room like a shroud. I settled myself on a cushioned seat and started to converse with her.

"I seek the Mother of all Knowledge."

"I know."

"I don't care if you know or not. Just connect me to her."

"I cannot do that; she has given me her answer already."

"What?"

"She says that it is impossible, and she gives her regards."

"WHAT!?" I slammed the table, standing up. "Connect me to her. Now."

"But I cannot, god."

Perhaps the incense meddled with my mind, or was it me? The body of the woman started to morph, and her face became one that I had become intimately familiar with over the past few months.

The Emperor.

He gave one of his signature grins. “Was everything I said a lie? Perhaps! But mainly, it’s true. You know that yourself, don’t you?”

~~No, I don’t! I don’t, I don’t~~

“Explain.”

“What is there to explain? Deep down, you knew. You knew that if there was a cure, Athena would long have told everyone. You did it because you wanted a purpose. You didn’t want to die with such a waste of your life compared to your siblings.”

“How did you know that?”

“I am a part of you, after all.”

Act IV

Day 3467

I continue. He’s not real.

Day 3468

I carry on. He’s not real.

Day 3469

I persist. He’s not real.

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Day 3504

Another settlement. The snow makes it harder to walk, but ~~we~~ I am close. But why do I press on? I don’t know. ~~I think he is right. I wanted to have a purpose.~~ I should just give up.

Act V

Day 3540

He dragged me out of the inn. The weather is still as cold as the underworld itself, if it even still exists.

Day 3606

The Emperor calls this place Dunhuang. As always, I am greeted by new sights that amaze me. The Mogao Caves, as he calls them, are glorious. As we walked underneath wooden brackets decorated with designs of birds and flowers I had never seen before, through verandas that looked out to lush mountains dusted with pink flowers, and past murals of monks and a man haloed by a golden circle, which he calls “the Buddha”, I asked him why he brought me here.

“God! You must learn to let go. All things are impermanent, and therefore, instead of attempting to achieve eternity, why not do something worth the last of your days?”

“But I want to finally do something! All my life, I have never truly succeeded in anything like my siblings or nieces and nephews. And if I don’t have a purpose, what use is existing for?”

“Exist for existence’s sake. Let go of your cravings. Does life really need to have a point?”

“...I will think about your words, Emperor.”

“Think for as long as you like.”

And think I did.

Day 3660

I have continued on my journey, though I have never forgotten the Emperor’s words. We have reached Chang’an, his final resting place. He truly never found immortality, after all.

Epilogue

The **God** sits at the edge of the mausoleum. Rivers of mercury run past them, shimmering like the piles of gold littered across the halls. The ~~**Bodhisattva emanation Emperor**~~ sits with him. They do not speak for a long time.

"Rid yourself of your worldly desires, little God," he whispers.

*"You make it sound so easy," counters the **God**.*

"Because I know you can do it. You still have time."

"Why me?"

"I see myself in you. Searching for immortality? That was my whole thing. Before I died, of course."

The ~~**apparition hallucination Emperor**~~ disappears. Before leaving, he gives the **God** a piece of advice: *"Nothing stays the same, little God. The only thing that never changes is the existence of change itself. Let go."*

The **God** shuts his eyes and begins to fade. On his face is a look of contentment.

Day 3660

~~I still have time to go home and be with my family. I will.~~

Blood Silk

Maryknoll Convent School (Secondary Section), Leung, Sin Ying Alicia – 15

The first moment Princess Mei learned of her value to her father—three thousand bolts of silk, two hundred horses, and an alliance with Khan Arslan of the Western Regions—was the first time she had ever conceived of the idea of escape. Mei had been raised to be the perfect lady of the opulent court of Chang'an. She was taught to read and write poetry, to behave in proper court etiquette, but she was never taught how to defy the Emperor. Yet now, the path of obedience was her best chance for survival.

As she sat in her lavish gilded carriage on day three of the trip to the west from Chang'an, she was seated perfectly, as always, with her hands folded in her lap, her countenance peaceful behind her red silk bridal veil. Diplomats rode ahead, servants followed behind, and somewhere in the supply wagons were the gifts that would seal her fate: the finest silk in the world as if woven from the light of the moon, jade carvings worth more than the tax revenues of an entire province, and golden vessels belonging to her grandmother.

Mei touched the knife hidden in her sleeve and waited for nightfall. Six years of secret training with her bodyguard Ran had honed her mind and body. She spoke four languages, understood strategy, and had cultivated patience like a weapon. At sixteen, she was ready to defy the world.

As soon as the caravan stopped to make camp near the ruins of an old watchtower, Mei waited for the lanterns to be lit and the guards to begin their nightly routines before making her move to escape. She scanned the camp for Ran and caught her bodyguard's eye and received a brief, barely perceptible nod. Then, as she had done on every other night during their journey, she stepped behind her tent to "do her business," with Ran following at a respectful distance as a chaperone should.

Except this time, they kept walking into the darkness.

"Your Highness," Ran whispered urgently to Mei, looking very worried and trying to hide her concern for Mei's safety, "we talked about this. Once we leave, there is no turning back. Your father—"

"My father sold me like silk," Mei interrupted, removing her elaborate headdress and ornate robes. Beneath her fancy clothing, Mei wore the tunic and trousers that Ran had carefully hidden away for her. "I am worth more than a man named Khan Arslan. I am worth what I choose to be."

Mei remembered all the maps, landmarks and water sources she had learned which were her weapons of knowledge; at daybreak they made their way to the Sogdian Trading Post which Mei had previously selected as their initial shelter — a grouping of buildings that were made of mud-bricks, which is where merchants would congregate to prepare to travel through the Tarim Basin. After walking all night and into the early morning, Mei's palace-soft feet were blistered and sore and her entire body ached. However, the thought of freedom gave life to her very veins.

"Two travelers alone will draw attention," Ran cautioned as he scanned the market area for potential threats to Mei. "We cannot possibly escape if we are being watched."

As she grinned, her head was full of ideas. "A caravan of merchants going west and won't ask any questions. This guy is loading carpets onto llamas and dressed like a Sogdian, so it must be him."

Rustam was perhaps thirty, his face lined with laughter and hardship alike, shoulders squared with confidence borne from survival along the Silk Road. Mei approached with her proposal: two people seeking passage west, willing to work, asking no pay. He looked at them with a look that made both of them uncomfortable.

"You're running from something," he said in Sogdian.

“An unwanted marriage,” Mei answered, in Sogdian letting him believe she was merely a merchant’s daughter.

He glanced at Ran’s calloused hands and military posture, then at Mei’s expensive boots, which were partially covered by her dirty cloak, and said dryly, “That must have been quite a marriage. Very well. But you work. I do not carry dead weight.”

For a week, Mei discovered what work meant. She loaded cargo, watered camels, ground barley, and tended fires. Her hands blistered, then hardened. The other merchants watched her with curiosity, but they never asked her questions, because on the Silk Road, everyone had the opportunity to recreate themselves.

One night, while collecting firewood, Mei looked up at the stars spinning around above her and heard the sounds of camels sleeping. Mei turned to Ran and said quietly, “Ran, how long have you been keeping watch over me?”

He let out a sigh and tossed a branch into the fire. “You’ve got to trust me. I’ve seen enough of the world to know that courage doesn’t come easy. I’ve worn a uniform as a soldier, been a mercenary, and even worked as a bodyguard before, but I’ve never seen someone who determines their own destiny like you have.”

Mei absorbed his words and realized that she had only ever viewed him as part of the royal family – someone who would always be there to serve them. But now, under the stars in the vast desert, he was beginning to show himself to be a man who’s been shaped by combat and betrayal. “What was it that made you decide to help me?” she asked. “You were free to stay in your own homeland with your honour and position as a man in the army.”

“Honor? In the Emperor’s court, honor is like a chain around your neck. I’ve lost many friends during wars for political reasons; I’ve witnessed families being torn apart to form alliances with people like yourself. When you asked for my help six years ago, I saw a spark in you, it was a refusal to be chained. That’s worth more than any imperial seal.”

Rustam, overhearing from where he was mending a saddle, chuckled softly. “Remember, princess, or whatever you are, the Silk Road is merciless on the weak. If you happen to drop that bag one more time, a bandit will likely take it and leave you bare in the middle of the desert.”

Mei felt that these conversations with Rustam were expanding her horizons and that they were not the same as being surrounded by court officials who were limited by their formal roles. They had all lived through life’s harsh realities and they had each gone through hard times as survivors, which made Mei feel less isolated with her own struggles.

By the time night fell, and they were gathered around campfires, the conversations revealed many truths that Mei had never been told during her time at court: There was a weakening of the Tang Empire’s hold on the Western Regions, local khans were becoming more aggressive, and there were rumors of rebellion in every direction. The Persian spoke of unusual military movements being observed near the city of Kucha; the Turkic brothers spoke about a cousin being conscripted, in spite of treaties that had been signed.

“Arslan’s ambitious,” Rustam remarked one evening while stirring the appearing embers in the campfire. “Marriages and alliances are tools to build power. But Arslan wants true independence, not a wife.”

Mei felt uneasy. If what her father sent her as a peace offering is a pretext for war, was she being sent as a pawn, or hostage, or a trigger for conflict?

Over the next several days, Mei found comfort and strength in the steady presence of Ran. He guided Mei through the perils of travelling, avoiding patrols, scouting water sources, and sharing quiet moments beneath the

stars. They spoke of strategy, of courage, of what it meant to survive and to live freely. Slowly, Mei realized that she had never truly trusted anyone before, but her bodyguard had become her first partner.

Rustam contributed a lighthearted flavour to their adventures with his humour. One morning, as Mei hauled a sack of grain onto a camel, Rustam laughed and adjusted the load. "If a princess can haul this much grain without collapsing, I might just trade my caravan for a week of palace tutoring."

Mei, trying to hide the case of heat exhaustion, said, "I will take a sword over a tutor."

Rustam laughed and said, "Then we're both going to learn faster than the Emperor believes."

On the tenth day of their journey to Kucha, the two friends got their first look at the Imperial Guards.

"Play it cool" Rustam murmured. "You're my assistant. Keep your head down, speak only if spoken to."

But Mei spotted a captain in the Imperial Guard and she recognised him as one of her father's most loyal soldiers. He approached Rustam and questioned him regarding his cargo and where he was headed. After a long pause, the captain looked through the caravan and spotted Mei's face.

She saw the recognition dawn. Saw his hand move toward his sword.

"Go!" Ran shouted, and suddenly everything was chaos. Ran threw a knife that buried itself in the captain's shoulder. Rustam's camels panicked, creating a barrier of thrashing animals. The Turkic brothers, without hesitation, blocked the soldiers' path with their cart.

"We'll slow them!" The Persian trader yelled.

Mei ran with Ran dragging her, whilst Rustam shouted directions, with the sounds of fighting echoing behind them. Abandoning their caravan, they fled up into the hills, climbing until her lungs burned and her legs trembled.

When they finally stopped, they found themselves hidden inside a cave overlooking the road. Mei was crying, not due to fear, but because of shame. "Those merchants, they don't even know me, why would they ever risk their lives for me? I offered them nothing." She whispered, staring at the dust-choked road below.

Ran sat beside her, looking out over the horizon. "You were brave enough to run, and that's enough for some people to follow."

Mei shook her head, saying, "I was just a pawn in this game. My father, the Emperor... Everyone thinks of me as nothing more than a piece of silk for trade—a trophy to seal their deal. How am I supposed to have the courage to run away from all this when I don't even know who I am?"

Ran's voice softened almost to a whisper, "You are learning how to courageously stand up for yourself now; that is the most difficult part of the journey. To take a step for yourself even though the entire world sees you only as some leather cloth to be used to wrap around their power."

They stayed hidden for two days while patrols searched below. Finally, Rustam asked, "Who are you really?"

After hesitating for a moment, Mei then chose to tell Rustam the truth rather than lie. "I am Princess Mei, the Fourth Daughter of the Emperor Xuanzong; I am being sent to marry Khan Arslan."

Rustam's eyes widened, but he laughed bitterly. "And I thought I was just smuggling stolen goods! Your father will think Arslan orchestrated your kidnapping. This could start a war."

"Or end one," said Mei as she began piecing together her plan; there was the marriage, but there was also the possibility of a rebellion in Hexi Province with the same timing.

The pieces in Mei's head suddenly clicked. "What if my father planned to use this marriage as an excuse? Send me west, then claim Arslan broke the engagement or kidnapped me. That gives him justification to invade."

"Use your own daughter for bait?" Ran was horrified.

"I'm the fourth daughter of a minor concubine. My value to the Empire is only what I can be traded for. But if that's his game, then I've just ruined it. Without me arriving in Arslan's custody, my father can't claim betrayal. The war he wanted can't start." Mei answered.

"Unless," Rustam said grimly, "he blames the Khan anyway. Claims you were seized en route. Your disappearance becomes the provocation he needs."

"Then I have to go back," she said.

"That's madness," Ran protested. "He'll marry you off immediately, or worse—"

"Not if I arrive on my own terms. Not if I bring proof of his deception. Not if I present an alternative." Mei turned to Rustam. "How far to Samarkand?"

"Two weeks, maybe less if we push hard. But why—"

"Because that's where the real power is. Khan Arslan isn't the only leader in the Western Regions. Samarkand is neutral ground. If I can reach it, if I can present evidence of my father's warmongering to the merchants' council, they can apply pressure. The Silk Road only works with peace. If the merchants threaten to close trade routes, even the Emperor has to listen."

Rustam looked at her in a puzzled way. "You're not just a daughter of a king? You're a strategist!"

"You mean I'm my father's daughter," Mei replied. "I have decided to utilise the same abilities, however, somewhat differently."

The trip to Samarkand was one of extremes. The cold of night was freezing, while the daylight was intense. They maintained a low profile and did not travel on the main roads, instead, they exchanged gold and silver for horses and used their skill and sound judgment to defend against bandits which surprised Rustam on many occasions. Ran's conduct during the battle was impressive and his availability to come to a place of calm during Mei's panic moments was invaluable.

They gathered allies: merchants oppressed by imperial taxes, local leaders tired of Tang interference, and a defector from Arslan's court who confirmed Mei's suspicions. The Khan had never wanted the marriage; the arrangement had been a trap.

During the evenings in the mountains, while Rustam slept or built up the campfire, Mei and Ran would quietly discuss loyalty, courage, and the concept of freedom, concepts that she had never learned while living in a palace.

By the time they reached Samarkand, Mei was sunburned, scarred, and changed. She was in the great hall of the Merchants' Council with merchants from China, Persia, Sogdiana and Turkic merchants, and told her story with evidence that proved her father's intentions. "I am worth three thousand bolts of silk as a bride. As an ambassador,

I am worth so much more. You have the tools at your disposal: Protect me here, I will ensure the Silk Road remains open, and I will be the bridge that makes all these wars unnecessary."

The council chamber fell into a tense hush. Hours passed, but the deliberations were fraught with interruptions and conflicts. One Turkic merchant stood up with his arms folded and stated in a loud voice, "How do we know for certain the Emperor will not send his troops to impose this? A princess may speak, but armies obey the throne."

Mei met his gaze steadily, her heart pounding but her voice calm. "Because the Silk Road is older than any emperor. Trade will stop if you enforce tyranny. You will starve him, not me. I offer peace, but it must be chosen freely."

The Persian spice trader, the same one from the caravan who had aided her escape, added his voice from the back. "And if the Emperor punishes you for revealing his plans?"

"Then he will punish the empire, not the people," Mei replied, her eyes sweeping the room. "Peace is not the Emperor's gift—it is the choice of all who walk this road."

Mei saw the group of men mumbling to one another. She stepped closer to the edge of the platform and addressed the crowd. "I am not alone. See all the allies I have amassed. Look at all the merchants who have put their lives in danger to protect mine. My strength is not just because of my birth; it is due to our connections, our trust in each other, and our unified necessity for stability."

When the council finally emerged from their private huddle, the head—an ancient Sogdian merchant smiled faintly. "Princess Mei, or should I say, Ambassador Mei, the council accepts your proposal. The Silk Road chooses peace. And the Silk Road chooses you."

Three months later, Mei negotiated trade agreements, wore simple robes, and commanded respect through knowledge and courage. Ran trained local guards, and Rustam partnered in a trading company transforming commerce along the Silk Road.

Letters from Chang'an arrived—her father was furious but trapped. He officially appointed her imperial trade ambassador, claiming it had been his plan all along. Mei burned his letter and dictated her own terms: fair tariffs, respect for rulers, protection for merchants. The Emperor would accept them; the alternative was collapse.

As the sun set below the western wall of Samarkand, Mei stood with Ran atop the highest tower, facing east toward Chang'an and west toward lands she had not seen.

As the wind blew through her hair, she remembered the girl in the gilded carriage, the girl who thought freedom was running. Silk, she had learned, could bind or connect. Blood can be shed or spared, based on either fear or courage. Power could be enforced through fear, or negotiated through courage. The Silk Road is what people choose to make of it.

Her father would write histories that erased her defiance. Empires would rise and fracture as they always had. But somewhere along this road, merchants would travel without soldiers at their backs. Cities would trade instead of burn. Children would grow up never knowing how close war had come.

That would be enough.

In that moment, Mei wasn't any princess or bride, but something more unique. A woman who had chosen what her life would mean.

And far beyond Samarkand, beyond emperors and khans, the Silk Road would continue not in silk or gold or blood, but in every quiet act of courage that turned fate into choice.

It had never disappeared. It had only been waiting.

New Tales of China Silk Road

Pui Kiu College, Chan, Yan Bo – 15

In the sweltering heart of Chang'an the air hung thick with jasmine tea and roasting chestnuts. Emperor Wu summoned Zhong Xi, Wong Xi, and Kim Qi to the palace hall. Marble floors gleamed under torchlight. The emperor spoke plainly. The Parthian Empire held the key to alliance against Xiongnu raids. Peace depended on a sealed scroll delivered to Nisa. He mentioned rumors of Ferghana's heavenly horses; swift mounts that sweated blood and carried riders vast distances. Proof of western wonders worth the risk. Zhong Xi received a bronze seal as proof of authority. Wong Xi took the scroll wrapped in silk. Kim Qi, Zhong Xi's childhood friend and trusted scout, had volunteered to join. He grinned. "I'll ride that six-legged heavenly horse home and impress every girl in the capital." Zhong Xi met Wong Xi's eyes. She squeezed his wrist; their old signal for steady nerves. "We go as one or not at all," Zhong Xi said.

They departed at dawn. Camels bore provisions. City gates creaked open. Kim Qi sang a drinking song from his northern border days to pass the first desert stretches. His voice carried over the dunes. Wong Xi hummed along while Zhong Xi scanned the horizon. The landscape shifted to the Taklamakan. Sun hammered skin into leather. Copper-colored sands stretched endlessly and shimmered like molten bronze. Dust coated throats and stung eyes. Camel sweat mingled with distant cinnamon and clove from caravans.

A sandstorm rose like a beast. Winds buried the path. Kim Qi helped Zhong Xi anchor the camels. Wong Xi tied scarves over their faces. They huddled together. "Remember the emperor's lazy horse?" Zhong Xi asked through the howl. Kim Qi laughed. "The one taxes chase?" Wong Xi coughed out the punchline. The joke held them steady.

The storm passed. Kim Qi found a buried merchant's corpse with a half-finished letter. He read it aloud by firelight. The words spoke of home and fear. His voice cracked. Zhong Xi buried the man properly. They shared a silent vow to finish the journey.

At an oasis trading post merchants bartered under palm thatch. Arash the Sogdian trader offered flatbread dusted with sesame. Its nutty warmth cut the desert bite. He demonstrated a water filtration pouch of layered goat skins and charcoal. "Persian nomads use it. Cleans foul water." Wong Xi traded a jade amulet for one. Arash spoke of Ferghana's legendary six-legged heavenly horse. "It runs faster than wind and carries three men without tiring." Wong Xi sketched it in her notebook. Zhong Xi laughed it off as exaggeration. Kim Qi bet a silver coin they would see one. Wong Xi kept the sketch; it gave her something to turn over in quiet moments.

Water ran low. They rationed sips. The tainted spring came next. Skeletons rimmed its edge. The water stank of sulfur. Wong Xi assembled the pouch and filtered drop by drop. Zhong Xi stood watch. Kim Qi passed the first clean sip. "Your brains, my brawn," Zhong Xi said. Wong Xi handed it back. "We share everything."

In the Pamirs a rockslide struck. Stones tumbled. Kim Qi twisted his ankle badly. Zhong Xi carried him to safety on his back. Wong Xi bound the wound with torn cloth. Kim Qi insisted they continue. "A small caravan heads east. I'll return with them." He pressed a carved bone whistle into Zhong Xi's hand. "Blow it when you reach Nisa. I'll know you made it." Zhong Xi clasped his arm. Wong Xi nodded thanks. The siblings watched him go. The road narrowed to just the two of them.

Li Wei hauled packs over rocky passes. His sword deterred wolves under moonlight. Wong Xi read ancient silk maps and guided them through canyons thick with metallic ore scent. Blisters formed on her feet and cracked. Zhong Xi carried the heavier load so she could rest. His grazed arm from an earlier skirmish festered. She rebound it nightly.

Heat brought delirium. Wong Xi dreamed of a six-legged horse carrying both siblings across dunes to safety. She woke sweating. The image lingered.

Xiongnu raiders ambushed in the mountains. Scouts chased them across dunes first. Zhong Xi toppled a boulder to block the path. They escaped narrowly. Full attack came at a narrow defile on a windswept plateau. Sun dipped low and painted sands in fire. Zhong Xi held the pass with his strength. He shouted their childhood joke one last time. "Taxes are chasing the horse!" Wong Xi answered through tears. "And the horse is too lazy to run!" She slipped into a hidden crevice only her frame fit. Zhong Xi charged alone. His roar drew the horde. Battle sounds faded. Wong Xi fled with the scroll and tears.

She walked on alone. The filtration pouch sustained her. Copper sands yielded to green valleys. Poppies bloomed. Caravan bells sounded. Grief sharpened her. She bartered with Parthian phrases Kim Qi taught. She evaded patrols with disguises. She followed constellations Zhong Xi once mocked. Exhaustion pressed. Doubt rose one night. The scroll felt too heavy. The road too vast. She reread the emperor's words by starlight. Zhong Xi's last shout echoed. On the horizon a shadow moved; a six-legged horse or mirage. It urged her forward.

Nisa's white stone walls gleamed. Date palms lined the road. Irrigation canals glinted. Parthian cataphracts patrolled in scale armor. Guards questioned her. She used Kim Qi's greeting phrase. They let her pass. In the audience hall she faced King Arsaces. Exhausted and grieving she spoke. "My brother gave his life so this scroll could reach you. It carries peace, not conquest. Alliance against our shared enemy." She described the six-legged heavenly horse as a sign of shared wonder between east and west. The king listened. A court advisor dismissed her. She recounted Zhong Xi's sacrifice plainly. The king agreed. Envoys prepared. Treaties formed. Conflict dissolved.

From the city walls Wong Xi blew Kim Qi's whistle. The faint note vanished in the wind. A promise kept. Back in Chang'an Wong Xi met Kim Qi. He had survived and returned earlier. He wept when she told him of Zhong Xi. Together they planted a garden. Spices from the west grew beside Han soil. Wong Xi carved "Taxes chase the horse" on a stone beside a small horse statue. She added six legs quietly. Years later she told the story to young envoys heading west. The road stayed open. Their bond wove peace from peril. The Silk Road carried the echo of siblings and a friend who crossed dunes to bind worlds.

New Tale of China's Silk Road

Pui Kiu College, Cheung, Declan – 16

“Every time I kiss you, after a long separation, I feel I am putting a hurried love letter into a red mailbox.”

Though Lao Chen has never read Quabbini, the poet's words were the unspoken anthem of his life. He and all the other men were ants dragging crumbs across a vast, sandy tablecloth, for they could never stop, not even for a second. They all understood that the fragile, living inheritance between East and West was cradled in their hands. Yet, this was the duty that had stolen his son's childhood, the immense weight that had made him a stranger of a father.

A dry wind, carrying the taste of dust and distant cumin from the caravan below brushed the robes of Chen as he towered the Kyzyl art pass. The route below him, he had crossed more times even than he had birthdays. He knew this place like the back of his hand. As he headed closer, the long-piled stones he had offered thanks to reflected the shimmering glaze of the sun. Mechanically, Chen followed suit, placing one on top, for it was believed to be a promising local ritual that ensured a safe passage. But this time, as his fingers left the cool rock, a cold certainty settled in his chest. Something just didn't feel right.

“Master Chen, you do know the great Emperor values this trip very, very much, right?” A cold voice broke the silence, following a pat on the back. With a deep breath, Chen turned his head hesitantly to face Ambassador Lee.

“The Son of Heaven builds great ships now, Master Chen.” Lee continued, his fingers pressing down. He asks if this road is still a river of gold, or just a dusty, dying track. The report I bring back from the Ottoman court will decide if China turns its face to the sea forever, following the footsteps of our great general Zheng He.”

Stunned, Chen gulped nervously. The hands on his shoulder felt less like a touch and more like the seal of an emperor on a death warrant.

Desperate to look away from the stern face of Lee, Chen lays his eyes on the iron-bound chest filled with greetings from the Emperor himself. Behind those jewelry and delicate chinas were huge bags of tea leaves and sophisticated silk. Yet what caught his eyes were traditional Chinese agricultural treatises, compass and gunpowder...the last seed of knowledge meant to be sown in the West. Chen knew deep in his heart that protecting them was no longer a job; it was a sacred vow.

In the midst of the silent valley, the camels groaned into motion, their bells clanking as the troop hurried on, echoing into the unknown. With every step down the familiar switchback path, the Chinese fortress grew larger, its details sharpening into menacing clarity. Chen halted as he took a closer look: A troop of Chinese soldiers was patrolling, surrounding the monstrous fort. It was then that the posture of their commanders reminded him of someone close, someone once familiar. Spine straight as a flagpole, shoulders set like granite, broad shoulders thrown back. It took not long for Chen to realize that the man was the little boy whom he had taught to shoot.”

At that precise moment, the memory flooded back, vivid and cruel. A young boy, struggling to hold a bow too large for him.

“Ba Ba, is my posture right?”

“Yeah, keep it up. Make sure to raise ur bow a little bit more and straighten your back, and remember to always be calm. The arrow flies truly only if the archer is calm.”

“Ba Ba, one day I will be the one protecting our Great Qing Emperor, and I will be the first one to point arrows at my enemies.” His voice blazing with determination..

Chen was the one who taught his son how to aim, shoot, fight, and battle. Unfortunately, he wasn't there to navigate his boy's world nor to teach him who the enemies really were. Instead, the empire did. And now, how ironic, the young Chinese he had trained was raising his bow, his aim steady and calm, ready to loose an arrow at the very heart of his father's world—the Silk Road itself.

It was then that he exchanged eyes with his son. It was full of determination, locking on to his father, with not even a flicker of surprise noticed, as if he had long predicted the arrival of his father.

“Ba, turn your caravan around; you may not pass.”

“Wei,” his voice trembling with disappointment, yet a bit of excitement.

“This trip is none of your business; it is sanctioned by the Emperor and you have no right to stop it”.Chen shouted, almost like he was scolding his son.

His son smirked, shaking his head as if he was satirizing his father's ignorance.

"Ba, the Emperor is misled by advisors who live in the past. The Silk Road is a strategic vulnerability. It drains our treasury and lets foreign nonsense pour through our gates. Don't you see? It doesn't just bring spices and Roman cloth—it brings strange thoughts, foreign gods, and the conspiracies of our enemies into the heart of our empire. And now it seems to me that you have chosen their side. By the order of the Ministry of War, I am here to close the Silk World once and for all.”

Those words from his son broke Chen's heart utterly.

“Chosen their side? I have been risking my life, walking on razor's edge while roaming the Silk Road, trying to build a bridge and connect my country with the rest of the world while you are taught to build walls and shut the world out!! Wake up and face the truth, our country is no longer the powerhouse of the world. Other countries like Britain are experiencing industrial revolution, while we are stuck in a rut thanks to people like you with conservative minds!!”

“ How dare you speak of our country like this!! In fact, such greetings from the emperor are poison from our enemies!! The emperor will surely come to sense and no longer be blinded by dust once I burn down the Silk Road!” Wei roared.

“I have seen enough to render my judgement ! ” Originally watching from the side, Ambassador Li took a slow yet deliberate step forward. “Commander Wei, your zeal for the empire's new path is noted.”His voice was quiet, yet it cut through the tension like a knife. He then turned and gazed at Lao Chan.

“Master Chan, a decision has been made. Thanks for your time, it has been proven that the Silk Road has lost all its value, and I see no need to preserve the Silk Road” Li added, while giving a faint, almost imperceptible nod to his own aides.

"We have seen all we need to see. Prepare to return to the Forbidden City.”

The sunsets as Commander Li and his troops exit the Kyzl Art Pass, at the same time marking the end of China's part in the Silk Road.

Looking at his desperate father, Wei exclaimed,” You should be ashamed of yourself for being a ghost and protecting a road that no longer exists. Guess what, you are so pathetic that you are not even worth the paperwork of arrest. Go wander back on the imaginary bridge you have built and never come back!”

Having lost the Silk Road, then now his own son. Chen was destined to be a lonely man. Right now, he has been wandering in the vast desert for days, both exhausted and hopeless. The poet's words returned to him, not as an anthem, but as an epitaph. “Every time I kiss you, after a long separation, I feel I am putting a hurried love

letter in a red mailbox.” As for him, the “love letter has never been the silk or silver, it has always been the Silk Road itself. The route that he had spent the entirety of his life on. It was his life’s work to build a bridge connecting all parts of the world so his boy could never feel trapped within its borders. He had offered Wei the entire world, and his son had chosen a single, fortified gate.

It is without a shadow of doubt that his son and the Emperor refused his love letter. However, his unwavering spirit and love towards the Silk Road will be forever admired, while his story will always be dubbed as one of the most touching new tales of China's Silk Road.

New Tales of China's Silk Road

Pui Kiu College, Chung, Yuen Ting – 15

Everyone has heard of China's infamous Silk Road, but not everyone knows about the history behind it. How was this 6,400km ancient trade route actually built? How did the Chinese, over two thousand years ago, forge such an impressive and vast network across one of the world's most hilly terrain? The Silk Road was not built in a day, its construction was a slow, tiring process. Today, we will be looking deeper into the history of the Silk Road in China.

The Silk Road happened not for trades but for defense. In around 138 BCE, Emperor Wu of the Han Dynasty had a pressing problem. The powerful and hostile Xiongnu confederation had started attacking and invading the northern border of Emperor Wu, which led to him conceiving a strategic plan. He wanted to expand his western borders as a defense mechanism if the Xiongnu army were to start an attack. Furthermore, he decided alliance was of paramount importance to defend for his empire, so he sent Zhang Qian, his soldier, to create alliance with the Yuezhi people, who were enemies of the Xiongnu. The western border he had an idea of expanding, is exactly the Silk Road.

Emperor Wu chose Zhang Qian for this mission. Zhang Qian's journey was a 13-year voyage of capture, escape, and exploration. While his first mission failed as the Yuezhi were not interested in war nor fighting, he returned to China around 126 BCE with something more valuable, geographical knowledge of central China. Since Zhang Qian gained more geographical knowledge of China, he and Emperor Wu could start planning and developing their expansion to the West. Rather than just planning theoretically, they started turning the idea into a viable plan to expand their empire. The Han Dynasty State started seeing potential in their plan, seeing that these western regions held not just potential allies, but immense wealth and opportunities for economic exchange. The strategic idea to find an alliance then transformed into a state-sponsored project to establish official corridors for trades.

The Han Dynasty State started sending troops and soldiers to build the pathway. Firstly, soldiers were sent to break the dominance of Xiongnu as they were rejecting the plan. With Xiongnu finally cooperating with the state, their primary plan was to establish military-agricultural colonies (tuntian). This meant that the soldiers secured a stable supply of food for themselves when they started expanding. Soldiers were dispatched to lead and watch over different fields and valleys, where they constructed forts and watchtowers. Tuntian was a crucial part of constructing the Silk Road, as it was an anchor for developing a sustainable agricultural system for future trades and economic development.

Infrastructures were built around the Silk Road to help troops transport. Han engineers and soldiers improved existing trails and built several transport systems, for instance, beacon towers for communication and warning. Beacon towers were designed to help troops communicate without having to shout. The lights would flicker when there were warnings or issues that needed to be solved. Furthermore, post stations were built as an area for officers and troops to rest or exchange horses. This was crucial as many soldiers were often working days without resting, and the post station allowed them to recharge before their next mission. Lastly, wells and water storage were built in arid sections. Troops who were exploring required water to survive, which is why they built wells to extract water whenever they needed, acting as a stabilizer for their health. This created a state-maintained corridor from Dunhuang to Kashgar, which was about 1000km long.

After 60 to 80 years of restless construction and expansion, the Silk Road was finally completed. The only thing it was missing was trade. After decades of hard work, the Han state started actively engaging with merchants, hoping to encourage trades between states. They used multiple methods in hope to create alliance, for example, giving diplomatic gifts to merchants or states who contributed to using their Silk Road. They offered pieces of silk to foreign states, exchanging different cultures. The Silk Road was finally coming together perfectly.

What started as a military defense, ended as a worldwide trade route for the Chinese merchants. The construction of Silk Road had a different interpretation, but it ended perfectly and gave the expansion a great ending. The Silk Road not only increased trades between states, but even let other countries understand that the Chinese troops and soldiers were not weak, and were hardworking. This 6400km route earned lots of respect from other

countries, and till this day the construction of the Silk Road still shocks many foreigners. The construction was definitely difficult, but the results made everything worth it.

China's Silk Road

Pui Kiu College, Ho, Siu Hin – 15

As Hung crossed the finish line, he suddenly felt his whole body quivering as tears began to flow down his eyes. Years ago, he was tasked with the goal to cross China's Silk Road with his group known as the Runners. The Runners were famous to be able to cross any road, any distance. However, Hung's tears were bittersweet.

Months before the run, the Runners had been planning the optimal route for this road. Every minute detail down to perfection. His whole team felt very confident despite knowing the challenges ahead of them. As the day comes, the whole team has been training and doing fitness in order to succeed in this challenge. Hung did not slack off, in fact he trained for over twenty hours a day, seven days a week. His body fat percentage had dropped to five percent after all that training. This really impressed his girlfriend Jill who is also a part of the Runners. Together they planned to beat this mission in a month.

The day came, millions of spectators were spectating this challenge as if the Runners complete it, it will become a monumental achievement as the distance itself is four thousand kilometers. “Beep” They heard, the Runners immediately started sprinting across the road. As days passed, they started crossing the first border between two countries. Jill and Hung were completely in sync, their steps had the same rhythm, their steps had left marks next to each other. But during the half way mark, the Runners noticed that there was a shadowy figure standing in front of a gigantic wall spanning kilometers in the distance. This figure even though is a few kilometers away, his height was still massive. As they slowly approached the gentleman, the gentleman said “This New Silk Road is dangerous, are you positive that you would like to enter this danger zone?” The Runners did not think much of it and said “Yes.” The gentleman sighed, forced to open the door to obey their orders. The gentleman after letting all the Runners pass through, he only said two words before closing the door. Those words were “Good luck.” After the door was closed, the Runners immediately fainted.

Hung and Jill woke up next to each other, noticing their partner having a small antenna in their heads. A voice suddenly echoes in their ear. “Welcome players, you have now joined the New Silk Road game. Your mission is to escape this complex in 1 hour. If you do not escape, you will be stuck here forever. On the off chance you manage to escape this place, you will be set free. Your time starts now, good luck.” Jill and Hung quickly scrambled around the room finding different keys, they tried it on the lock in the door. “Cling” The door opened. Inside the new room they see the same exact layout of the first room, however, the positions of the keys were different. They quickly collected all the keys and tried it on the door. The third room was no exception. After more than sixty six rooms, they had no sign of escaping this place. Jill and Hung discussed whether or not to continue escaping or to give up thinking this is not the right solution. After wasting valuable and precious time, they decided to try until the hundredth door. But one door later, their facial expressions changed.

Inside the sixty seventh room, the rooms had split into two. The same voice spoke into their ears “Congratulations on completing part 1 of the complex. In this section, you and your partner must be split apart. Your goal is to escape a room while sharing the code to the other room without any ways of communication. A septum-like wall will split the next rooms into two. The only rule is that you can not enter the same room as each other. Remember all roads lead to Rome. Also you only have sixteen minutes remaining. Good luck.” They both hugged each other and said goodbye. They sprinted into the room, inside showing 2 doors with a keypad. Each room has a four-digit number meant for the other room. Hung wasted no time and started to knock on the wall, allowing them to communicate the code for the padlock. They quickly began entering different doors. As the timer reached two minutes, all the doors they had passed had eventually left them into the same room, which was the voice's clue “all roads lead to Rome.” The voice then said “Congratulations. This is the final round. In this part, you will have the remaining time to decide who moves forward and who does not. Sounds simple right? Because it is. Only one person can move on, while the other person can rot here. Good luck.” In front of them is an iPad. The iPad has 2 buttons and a title. The title says “Who will move on?” with the buttons saying Hung and Jill. Jill immediately ran to the buttons and pressed herself, Jill immediately started laughing at Hung, saying all the amount of time he spent training and did not care for her. As the timer reached

zero, Jill felt immense pain in her skull. The antenna had enlarged, stabbing her brain through her skull, Jill fell down on the ground. Hugh, distraught, saw the door open. Hugh, while mourning, walked into the room.

The new room was beautiful, with flowers surrounding the walls, the walls being made of marble. Statues around the four corners of the room were handcrafted. In the middle of the room, there was a table with endless amounts of food and drinks and two seats. The voice then said "Please sit on one of the two seats." Hugh, while crying, walked to the left seat and sat down. The door then closed while a wall opposite to the door had started to have a door shape carved out. As the carved out wall fell on the ground, the same gentleman greeted him. The gentleman then mentioned that Hugh is the only one to escape the complex, with all the Runners being executed in the building. The gentleman then said "You now have two choices, you can either leave this place via the carved out door, or you can revive Jill." Hugh thought about it for quite some time, boring the gentleman and invoking him. Hugh after deep thinking, decided to stand up and leave the building, thinking Jill was no one to him after her words. The gentleman then said "I see you have made your choice, very well. You will now be transported back to the spot before you walked past the door that led you to faint, no one will remember the Runners that died, everyone's memory besides yours will be erased. Thank you for playing this game." Hugh's eyes forcefully shutter themselves. As Hugh opened his eyes, he saw that he was back to the Silk Road. Hugh then spent the next two months crossing between country to country. In the end, as he crossed the finish line with millions of people celebrating his accomplishment, he only cried tears of bittersweetness. Only he knew about the tragedy that happened, the people that were lost.

A few years later, a new group of Runners were formed as they wanted to tackle a new challenge, as they were in the middle of their mission, another large wall and gentleman had appeared. The gentleman said "This New Silk Road is dangerous, are you positive you would like to enter?" Hugh immediately screamed "No. I have played these games before." The gentleman then said "Very well, I see you still have PTSD despite it being a few years ago. Your choice will be honored." The new Runners asked what was that, Hugh could only say "You will not like it."

Zorus Solace and the Silk Road of Light

Pui Kiu College, Lau, Cheuk Ling Jolene – 15

When you're the son of Apollo, people expect you to beam sunshine 24/7. Yeah, well, try staying cheerful when your sandals are melting in the deserts of Persia. I'm Zorus Solace — healer, archer, musician, occasional monster magnet — and I never asked to be born half god.

Apollo once told me, *"The world moves east, my son. Follow the path where the sun rises."* That sounded poetic until I realized it meant walking thousands of miles through sand, mountains, and lands where nobody knew what a *lyre* was. My mission? To spread the arts of healing and music — basically, to remind humanity that knowledge doesn't vanish just because empires fall.

It was 130 BCE, the Greeks were still licking their wounds after the Romans snatched our glory, and my father refused to let his legacy fade. So he sent me, a sixteen-year-old who still occasionally tripped over his quiver, to travel the new Silk Road.

Good thing I wasn't alone — Julius Beauregard, the daughter of Aphrodite, insisted on coming. I think she joined partly because she loved adventure, but mostly because she couldn't stand the idea of me wandering off without her to keep me alive. People think children of the love goddess are all looks and charm, but Julius was also fierce, practical, and entirely capable of turning marble statues back into people. That last part, as it turned out, saved more lives than any bow or spell I knew.

We crossed the deserts of Persia healing merchants and travelers. I showed them how light and songs could cleanse wounds, while Julius coaxed dead vines back to green life, making shade over weary caravans. Music followed us — blends of Greek lyre and local drums creating new melodies under the blazing sky.

But even as we worked, I felt something stalking our trail — a quiet, slithering sorrow. Some nights, I'd wake from dreams of stone, serpents, and a woman's eyes full of endless grief.

It began on a road in the Zagros Mountains. The trail turned from sand to marble. Statues littered the cliffs — a merchant with his hand outstretched, a soldier mid-stride, a mother shielding her child. Perfect expressions of terror.

Julius touched one carefully. "These aren't sculptures," she whispered. "They *were* people."

The air was thick with an old magic — one that hummed in the bones.

"Medusa," I breathed.

"But Perseus—"

"Yes. He killed her centuries ago. But a curse like that doesn't die. It just... grows lonely, until it finds a way back."

We followed the statues until the air smelled like copper and earth. Then she appeared.

Medusa stepped from the shadows, serpents swaying around her head like a living crown. Her eyes glimmered with exhaustion, not cruelty. Her robes were tattered, her skin cracked like old marble.

"Another hero?" she rasped. "Do you come to finish what Perseus began?"

Her voice wasn't rage; it was heartbreak. The snakes around her hissed softly — not threatening, but mournful.

Something in me stirred. Apollo was the god of light, but he was also god of serpents — sacred symbols of healing, death, and renewal. I could *feel* them, hundreds of tiny pulses in the air, hearts beating like trembling lyre strings.

“I’m not here to kill you,” I said. “I’m here to end your pain.”

“Lies,” she hissed. “Do you pity me, child of light?”

“I understand you,” I whispered. “Snakes aren’t evil. They shed their skin. They heal. You could too.”

Julius put a hand on my back. “Zorus...” — the warning in her voice was clear — “don’t get too close.”

But I stepped into the sunlight. The golden rays bent toward me, drawn to the connection bleeding between us. The serpents froze, tongues flicking, curious. I started to hum — a tune from Delphi, one my father taught me that mirrors the cycle of sunrise.

The melody wrapped around the snakes like warmth after winter. Slowly, they stopped hissing.

For a trembling moment, Medusa’s face softened. “So... peace,” she murmured, stepping toward me. Then her eyes flashed with green light. The curse surged, stronger than compassion, demanding to live again.

“Now, Julius!” I shouted.

She flung her bronze rose into the air — its petals became mirrors, spinning in rings around Medusa. Sunlight bounced in a thousand shards.

I loosed an arrow of pure light. It split into rays across the mirrored petals and struck Medusa from every side. She cried out — not in rage, but in relief — as her body turned to stone once more, not as a monster but as a woman finally at rest.

For a long moment, I just stood there, shaking. The snakes’ last hisses echoed through the valley.

Julius knelt beside one of the marble travelers. She placed her palms over the stone — and her voice changed. It became music, soft and strange, like the sound of wind through petals. A glow spread beneath her fingers, delicate as sunrise.

One by one, the statues broke free — gasping, coughing, some weeping in disbelief. The curse had lost its grip. Julius had brought them back.

I stared, stunned. “You... revived them?”

She smiled, tired but luminous. “Medusa’s curse came from despair. Aphrodite’s power is love — the antidote to despair. I just... reminded them what it felt like to be loved.”

The travelers knelt, thanking us in a dozen tongues. We left offerings at Medusa’s stone form — not in victory, but in gratitude.

In the months that followed, Zorus and Julius journeyed farther than any Greek or demigod before them, their journey, carrying Apollo’s light and Aphrodite’s grace into lands shaped by sand, spice, and song. From Persia to India and beyond the deserts to Han China, they shared not only Apollo’s light but the heart of a fading civilization. Physicians learned to blend Greek healing with local herbs and spices, creating remedies that carried both wisdom and warmth. Musicians wove Zorus’s lyre melodies into their native rhythms, letting the sound of sunlight mix with the pulse of the East. Julius’s gift of life refreshed gardens and markets, showing that beauty and medicine could grow side by side. And so, across every city touched by their footsteps, the music of healing and harmony spread — a golden bridge between worlds, shining long after two young demigods disappeared beyond the dawn.

Silk Road – The Resuscitation of the Dragon with Stalwart Omnipotence

Pui Kiu College, Lee, Hin Lok – 16

Renowned as the Celestial Artery of Civilization, silk road is a constellation of winding paths. Spanning from the Middle Kingdom's splendor to the distant shores of the Mediterranean. It was not only a single road, but a glorious network of caravan trails and maritime passages, a vibrant conduit for silks of exquisite finery, spices of sui generis aroma, and jewels of dazzling brilliance.

Against this backdrop, its true prominence lies not in material wealth alone, but in the priceless commerce of the mind and spirit. Along its dusty tracks flowed the sacred scriptures of great faiths, the luminous secrets of astronomy and mathematics, the arts of paper and powder. It was avant garde, the world's first great web of connection with people from all walks of life. A splendid array of thriving empires, for instance, Persian, Roman, Mongol, and Chinese, exchanged not only treasures but also ideas, cultures, core values, and so much more. It is the quintessential exemplar of weaving the very fabric of history and binding the Eastern and Western realms in a silent, majestic, and amaranthine dialogue across epochs.

Without a shadow of doubt, the Silk Road had played a pivotal role in the forging of next Eastern and Western countries. Yet, some may ponder whether this network established over a millennium ago, still embodies the steadfast connection across countries.

The simple answer is yes. In 2013, China had relaunched the Silk Road, a sovereign's gambit to weave the frayed ends of the world into a single, magnificent tapestry. This is no mere mending of ancient paths, but a conscious architecture of destiny. The zenithal impacts will be expounded as follows.

Assaying to become the plenipotentiary instrument of national strategies, the new silk road embodies a monumental undertaking to metamorphose the arteries of global commerce and diplomacy. Far beyond a simple infrastructure program, it is a sophisticated and multifaceted architect of a new world order, weaving together concrete, capital, and influence into a cohesive grand design. Its primary function is the physical reconfiguration of continents through the construction of transcontinental corridors. It includes high-speed railways traversing Central Asia, deep-water ports dotting the Indian Ocean littoral, and digital networks spanning Southeast Asia. Rather than being projects with monotonous purposes, they are deliberate seeds planted across the world, intended to proliferate China's influence on the market, by rerouting traditional trade flows, and creating a China-centric lattice of dependency rooted in tangible connectivity.

Simultaneously, it operates on a nomological plane, seeking to institute novel regimes of technical standardization, monetary practice, and digital governance, becoming a soft power *lex mercatoria*. This normative ambition aims to ensconce Chinese operational paradigms as the hegemonic defaults within emerging economic ecosystems, effecting a gradual but inexorable deracination of incumbent Western institutional precepts.

Last but not least, however, is geopolitical sublimation. The transmutation of capital expenditure into durable strategic leverage. Through the instrumentality of developmental finance, Beijing accrues profound diplomatic fiduciaries and cultivates asymmetric interdependencies. The New Silk Road thus embodies a form of recursive statecraft—a long-range, systemic gambit to re-centre the global order. It is a deliberate, grand-scale exercise in metapolitics, wherein the construction of physical infrastructure serves as the substrate for a more fundamental reconstruction of international allegiances and ideological predilections. In essence, the Initiative is a proleptic framework, building the substructure of a future wherein Chinese primacy is rendered ineluctable through the very architecture of global exchange.

In final telos, the Belt and Road Initiative may be apprehended as a project of paramount ontological engineering—an endeavor to materially and normatively re-inscribe the spatial and institutional contours of the international system. Through its macrological infrastructure and nomological expansions, it executes a form of geo-economic sublimation, wherein concrete and capital are transmuted into enduring strategic influence. The Initiative's telos resides not merely in the rectification of logistic deficiencies, but in the systemic re-centering of global networks around a Sinocentric nexus.

By and large, the Belt and Road Initiative transcends the parochial characterization as a development fund with an exquisite assortment of purposes, *exempli gratia*, being a preclusive strategy, a long-range, deliberative architecture designed to obviate alternative spheres of influence and prefigure a unipolarity of connectivity. In its

comprehensive ambit, it aspires to institutionalize a new operational paradigm for global interaction, one where Chinese precepts become the inevitable defaults of transnational exchange, the ultimate denouement of this vast enterprise. Should it achieve its plenary realization, it would be a world whose very circuitry, both physical and digital. Inexorably affirming the centrality and indispensability of the Chinese state. In the light of this, the New Silk Road is less a route than a reconditioning of geopolitical reality itself.

The Connecting Thread

Pui Kiu College, Li, Yu Yin Icy – 16

*“My darling, I have much to say
Where o precious one shall I begin?
All that is in you is princely
O you who makes of my words through their meaning
Cocoons of silk”*

–Nizar Qabbani

My name is Noah, and I was the first. They speak of the Silk Road now, a grand name for a thread of dust and longing that stitches the world together. They talk of caravans groaning with spices and jade, of empires whispering to one another across the scorching deserts and forbidding mountain passes. But before it was a road, before it was silk, it was my path to her. Before it was a route of trade, it was a monument to our separation.

Her name was Luna, and she was a weaver's daughter. To say only that, however, is to call the symphony a noise. She was an alchemist of silence and motion. In her father's workshop, filled with the gentle clatter of the loom and the faint, mulberry-sweet scent of the silkworms' feast, she performed her quiet miracles. She could take the frantic, blind spinning of the silkworm—that tiny creature's entire life's purpose, a tomb of its own making—and through a process of gentle steaming, patient unraveling in warm water, and the steady, rhythmic spin of the wheel, transform it. In her hands, that solitary cocoon became a shimmering testament to light, a filament so fine and strong it seemed spun from moonlight itself.

I, by contrast, was a mapmaker's son. My world was one of parchment and ink, of imagined lines and theoretical frontiers. I drew the jagged teeth of mountains I had never felt under my boots, charted the serpentine courses of rivers whose songs I had never heard. My father, a practical man, said we were unsuited. "She deals in tangible truth, son," he would say, tapping a finger on my latest drawing, "in the weight of thread and the warmth of cloth. You deal in unreachable lines, in the ghosts of places."

But he was wrong. We both dealt in metamorphosis. She took the internal and made it external—the worm's silent struggle into sublime, visible cloth. I took the external and made it internal—the vast, unknowable world into an image the mind could hold. We met in the space between these two acts, in the mulberry grove behind her home, where the air was thick and sweet, and the light fell through the leaves in dappled coins of gold.

"Why draw what you cannot see, Noah?" she asked me one evening, her fingers stained a permanent, faint green from the leaves she tirelessly harvested.

"For the same reason you weave what you cannot keep," I replied, my gaze tracing the way the sunset gilded her profile. "Is the beauty not in the act itself? The map is not the land, just as the silk is not the worm. They are both what remains after the struggle is over. A record of a transformation."

She looked at me then, a deep, measuring look that seemed to see past my eyes and into the very contours of my soul. Without a word, she reached into the fold of her tunic and handed me a small, finished piece of silk, a plain, unadorned square, cool and impossibly soft against my work-roughened palm. "Then this," she said, her voice barely a whisper, "is the record of my struggle today. Keep it."

It was the first thing she ever gave me. I understood it was not a gift of an object, but a gift of her effort, her time, her silent, focused self. It was the most profound gift I had ever received.

Then the Emperor's decree came, a scroll borne on imperial parchment that felt cold as stone. He needed a path to the West—a stable route through the deadly Taklamakan Desert and over the icy shoulders of the Pamir

Mountains. The task fell to my aged father, and I knew with a sickening certainty it was a death sentence for a man whose eyes were clouding with age and whose heart was weary.

That night, in our mulberry grove, the air heavy with the scent of impending rain, I told Luna I would refuse the Emperor. I would not leave her.

"You must go," she said, her voice fierce with determination. "Your father cannot. And your drawings... they must become real. They must be tested against the wind and the stone. This is your purpose."

"My purpose is here, with you," I pleaded, the words tearing from a heart that felt like it was cracking open. "You are my wholly world."

"No," she whispered, her hand finding mine, her grip strong and sure. "Your purpose is to see the world. My purpose is to preserve the spirit. If you go, your seeing will have meaning. And my creation..." She paused, drawing a small, folded square of silk from her sleeve. "My creation will have a story behind it."

She unfolded it. It was not a picture of us together. It was a simple, profound symbol: the Yin and Yang, the two swirling halves of a single whole, but pulled apart, separated to opposite edges of the white silk. A single, shimmering thread of the deepest blue connected them, spanning the empty space between.

"Our love will be this thread, Noah," she said, her eyes holding mine, refusing to let me look away from the truth of it. "Your journey is the pulling apart. My life here will be the act of holding my end of the thread taut. This separation is not a break. It is a tension. And tension," she insisted, her voice dropping to a whisper, "is what gives the loom its power. It is what allows the cloth to be woven."

*"Come, I will make the continent indissoluble,
I will make the most splendid race the sun ever shone upon,
I will make divine magnetic lands,
With the love of comrades,
With the life-long love of comrades."*

— Walt Whitman

I finally understood. She was not sending me away. We were beginning a new, larger work together. Our love was not ending; it was being stretched across a grander loom.

The journey was a hell of sand and stone. The desert was a vast, yellow void that whispered lies and tried to swallow all hope, scouring our skin and our sanity with blasts of grit. The mountains were unforgiving giants of granite and ice that scorned our fragile human warmth. I was no heroic explorer; I was a terrified man, leading a band of skeptical soldiers and avaricious traders who muttered my name like a curse with every misstep. I missed Luna with a physical pain, a hollow ache in my chest that was my most constant companion.

But in my darkest moments, huddled in a tent while the wind screamed outside, I would take out the square of silk. I did not look at it to remember the softness of her cheek or the sound of her laugh. I looked at it to remember the purpose. The tension in that embroidered thread was the very tension in my soul. My loneliness was one half of the symbol; her steadfast life back home was the other. The thread between us was not a memory; it was a live, taut cable of shared intention. My journey was giving meaning to her stillness, and her waiting was giving purpose to my wandering.

After two years of unimaginable hardship, we reached the Ferghana Valley in the West. I saw its legendary "heavenly horses," creatures of thunder and dust, and met people with eyes the colour of summer sky and rich earth. I tasted wines that burned with unfamiliar spices and heard music played on strange instruments that felt both alien and deeply familiar, as if recalling a dream. With every new sight meticulously recorded on my maps, I

thought, "This is for the Emperor." But deeper down, in the silent, secret chamber of my heart, I knew, "This is for Luna. This is a new colour, a new texture for the grand cloth we are weaving together."

As I returned, a man aged far beyond his years, the Emperor praised my maps as works of genius. The court celebrated me as a hero. But my heart, a single-minded homing pigeon, was racing toward one thing only: the mulberry grove.

I went to her home, my boots still caked with the dust of a continent. The loom in the corner was silent, shrouded in a fine layer of dust. Her father, now a stooped and ancient man, looked at me with a pity so profound it stole the air from my lungs.

"Noah," he said, his voice raspy with regret. "You are too late."

My world stopped on its axis.

"A powerful lord saw her in the market a year after you left. He was captivated. He offered her a life of comfort, of status... We... I... encouraged her. We thought you were lost to the desert, a ghost in the sand. Her heart... it was broken by the silence. She agreed."

She was married. She lived in the splendid isolation of the capital.

I was destroyed. The great achievement of my life, the road I had bled for, felt like a gaping wound, a monument to my failure. I had crossed a continent to build a future for us, and that future had vanished while I was away building its path. I fell into a deep despair, a ghost at the very court that celebrated me, believing the thread had finally, cruelly, snapped.

*"I measure every Grief I meet
With narrow, probing, Eyes –
I wonder if It weighs like Mine –
Or has an Easier size."*

– Emily Dickinson

For months, I moved through my life like a shadow. Then, a Western merchant from the very routes I had charted came to court, presenting gifts to the Emperor. Among the trinkets of gold and jars of spice was a bolt of woollen cloth, woven with a stunning, complex pattern of interlocking beasts and spirals. The court murmured, admiring its vibrant, foreign dyes.

But my eye, trained to see underlying structures, saw the pattern beneath the patterns. It was the same one: the two halves, separated, connected by a single, unbreakable thread woven into the very foundation of the design.

My heart slammed against my ribs. I pushed through the crowd of courtiers. "This pattern!" I demanded, my voice too loud for the decorous hall. "Where did it come from?"

The merchant, startled, explained. It came from a trading post in the West, a place I had helped establish. It was taught to them by a foreign woman, a Chinese lady of high status who had traveled there with her husband. She called the pattern "The Connecting Thread."

In that moment, the truth crashed over me not like a wave, but like a sunrise—a slow, dawning, glorious light. The thread had not broken. Luna had not given up. She had taken her new life, her new position of influence, and she had used it to send our message back down the very road I had created. She had not accepted the end of our story; she had woven its essence into the fabric of the world, sending it back to me like a homing beacon. Our connection had not been broken by her marriage; it had been transformed, scaled into something larger than the two of us.

I requested an immediate audience with the Emperor.
"Your Majesty," I said, my voice clear and strong with a conviction I had not felt since I last stood in the mulberry grove. "The road is open. But a road is just dirt until it is given a soul. Let us send our silk, our greatest beauty. But let us also send the seeds of the mulberry tree and the knowledge of how to nurture the worm. Let us send our poets and our philosophers. And let us ask for their knowledge, their medicines, their astronomy in return. Let this road be a loom, and let our cultures be the threads. Let us weave a tapestry of understanding between East and West, so that no two hearts need ever be fully separated by silence again."

The Emperor, a man who understood the power of symbols, agreed. The Silk Road, as a true exchange of spirit and substance, was born.

The first caravan was loaded not just with bales of silk, but with seeds, scrolls of poetry, and delicate artworks. And at the very top of the most important chest, I placed Luna's original square of silk. Let it be the first official item to travel the entire, formalized road. Let it go back to her, a message that I had finally, fully understood the lesson of the loom.

I did not go to find her, to disrupt her life. Our work was done. We had held the tension. We had proven that a personal love could become a bridge for all of humanity.

I saw her only once more, by chance, in a palace garden years later. She was serene, a woman of grace and quiet power. There were no tears, no recriminations, no need for dramatic words.

"You see," she said softly, her eyes holding the same deep light I remembered.
"The thread held."

"It did," I replied, my voice thick with a peace that passeth all understanding.
"It became stronger and more beautiful than we ever imagined."

We smiled, two old friends, two collaborators who had built a world between them. Then we turned and parted, for the final time, our shared work complete.

The lesson of the Silk Road is not that love means staying together. The lesson is that true love can sometimes mean being pulled apart for a higher purpose. The silkworm must be undone, separated from its cocoon, to become silk. The idea must leave its birthplace to become wisdom. Luna and I learned that love is not a circle that encloses two people. It is a thread that can connect worlds. Our personal, private love was the first strand. We sacrificed its small, comfortable form so that it could become the foundational thread upon which a thousand other connections were made—of trade, of art, of ideas, of peace.

And that is the true meaning of the Silk Road. It is the story of how a man and a woman, separated by a continent and the dictates of fate, discovered that their love was not diminished by distance. It was amplified. It became a road. And a road, once open, allows everyone to journey, to share, and to understand that we are all connected by countless, invisible threads of shared hope, enduring beauty, and common humanity. Our personal sadness was real, but it was the necessary loom on which a greater, universal joy was woven.

*Our two hearts were separated,
A pull that felt like fate,
But our lonely, woven thread of love
Became a continent's gate.
For the silk must leave the cocoon to fly,
To make the world we name home.*

China's Silk Road: Threads of Eurasian Civilization

Pui Kiu College, Yip, Yi Ching Avril – 15

The well-known China's Silk Road, which many have heard of as a discovery by Zhang Qian during the Han Dynasty. The establishment of this lengthy journey has not only brought numerous advantages to China and nearby Asian countries, but it has also become a crucial trading network to some European countries, such as Russia, Italy and Ukraine.

The story begins in China during the Han Dynasty from 206 BCE to 220 CE. The Chinese had been keeping the secret of the raising of silkworms and the production of their glossy thread of silk for centuries. Silk became a symbol of Chinese ingenuity and a sought-after luxury throughout the world as it was lighter than linen, warmer than cotton, and glistened with a royal beauty.

Zhang Qian, the imperial envoy, is credited with providing the political motivation for the official opening of the lengthy route. Around 138 BCE, he was sent west to form alliances against nomadic confederations. However, Zhang Qian did not succeed in his mission. Though he failed in his primary diplomatic objective, he returned to China around 126 BCE with something far more valuable: intelligence. His detailed reports described sophisticated urban centers, powerful steeds ("heavenly horses" from Ferghana), and a willingness among these western states to engage with China. He revealed a world of potential allies and untapped markets. Emperor Wu, recognizing the strategic and economic opportunity, launched a series of military campaigns to secure the Hexi Corridor, the vital gateway from China proper into the Tarim Basin. This policy of "pacifying the west" opened the door.

His travels returned with vital information about the Western Regions. He provided detailed accounts of the sophisticated urban civilizations of Central Asia, such as Ferghana with its legendary "heavenly horses", Bactria, and Sogdiana, and reported on the indirect trade links that extended as far as Parthia and the Hellenistic world. The Han court was motivated by his reports of advanced cultures and eager markets to actively secure these routes, mainly for diplomatic "tribute" missions that operated as state-sponsored commerce.

Civilizations were changed by what was exchanged between these mountains and desert trails. Silk became more than a textile; it was a currency of diplomacy, a symbol of imperial prestige, and the ultimate luxury good. Porcelain, lacquerware, and most of all, paper and paper-making technology all originated in China. Jade, other valuable stones and jewelry came from Central Asia, as well as powerful and divine horses for the Chinese cavalry. Spices, glassware, aromatics, and new foods such as walnuts, grapes and pomegranates came from the Middle East and India. Due to the Roman elite's love for the material, the Senate repeatedly issued and disregarded decrees prohibiting the wearing of Chinese silk for moral and economic reasons, which drained the empire's silver reserves to the East.

While silks, spices, ivory, and glass were tangible goods, the most transformative exchanges were intangible. The Silk Road was the internet of antiquity, transmitting knowledge for the mind and spirit across empty deserts and mountains.

The Silk Road was not about the things that people traded. It was really about the ideas and thoughts that people shared. The Silk Road was like a path that helped people think and feel deeply. People shared ideas on the Silk Road and one of these ideas was religion. The Silk Road was important for Buddhism, which started in India. It went to China but it did not go in a straight line. Buddhism went to China through the countries in Central Asia that were connected by the Silk Road.

Some monks, like Faxian, who lived in the century and Xuanzang, who lived in the 7th century traveled to the west to get sacred texts. At the time missionaries from Gandhara and Kashmir traveled to the east on the Silk Road. The Silk Road was an important road for the spread of Buddhism. In oasis kingdoms like Kucha and later

in the Chinese cities of Luoyang and Chang'an, Buddhist teachings mixed with Daoist and Confucian ideas, changing and evolving into the Chan (Zen) and Pure Land schools that would later shape East Asian Buddhism.

Manichaeism, a dualistic religion from Persia, spread along trade routes all the way from Rome to Fujian. Nestorian Christianity, also known as the Church of the East, set up steles in the Tang capital, and Islam came peacefully with Arab and Persian traders long before any military actions, establishing a strong presence in China's northwest.

The dissemination of technology and knowledge has been widespread. The invention of paper originated in China and subsequently spread westward, revolutionizing the methods by which individuals maintained records and authored books. This innovative technique of paper production eventually made its way to the Islamic world and Europe via Samarkand. Additionally, various other innovations, such as gunpowder, the compass, and advanced iron-casting techniques, traversed these routes. From the West and South, novel mathematical concepts, including the Indian numeral system, were later introduced to us through Arabia. In addition to these changes, there were improvements in astronomy, wine-making, glass-making, and metalworking. Also, medical knowledge from Greece, Persia, and India mixed with Chinese medicine. The stirrup, which probably came from Central Asia, greatly changed warfare in Europe by helping knights ride horses better.

While the Silk Road is famous for its caravans loaded with silk, spices, and gems, its most important and lasting effect might actually be in the soil itself. The trade of agricultural products—like crops, fruits, technologies, and knowledge—across Eurasia transformed diets, economies, populations, and landscapes from the Pacific Ocean to the Mediterranean Sea. This subtle, biological change, fueled by the travels of merchants, monks, and migrants, ensured that the impact of the Silk Road would be felt at the most basic human level: on our dinner tables and in farmers' fields.

China brought in alfalfa and grapes for wine from Ferghana, along with walnuts, pomegranates, sesame and cucumbers from Central and Western Asia. In exchange, peaches, apricots, and rhubarb were sent westward. Instruments such as the lute (pipa) and zither made their way into China, while artistic designs, such as the Hellenistic vine scroll seen in Buddhist art and the Chinese dragon featured in Persian textiles, show a lasting conversation about the different aesthetics in different countries.

The Silk Road was shaped by the land it passed through and the dangers that came with it. The routes started in Chang'an. Went around the Tibetan Plateau, which was a really scary place. The roads split into two going around the Taklamakan Desert also known as the "Sea of Death" from either the north or the south side of the Tarim Basin.

Towns such as Dunhuang, Turfan, Khotan, and Kashgar were like little islands in the desert, where people from everywhere could gather. Kashgar was a key location where the routes of the Silk Road intersected. These towns served as stopping points for caravans to take a break, find food and water, and pay hefty taxes to the local leaders. The Silk Road was filled with these significant towns that were crucial for travelers along the route. However, these oases were not just places for people to rest. The oases were like mixers where people from different places came together and shared things, deepening their knowledge on unfamiliar cities and countries.

From Kashgar, the route went over some tough mountains. The Pamir Mountains were mostly overhead and freezing due to the high altitude. There was not a lot of oxygen in the air on these skyscraping mountains. People called the Pamir Mountains the "Roof of the World". South of these routes went over the Karakoram mountains, which were also insanely tall.

When the caravans came down into Central Asia they reached some famous cities. These cities were Merv, Balkh, Bukhara and Samarkand. Samarkand is the most famous of all these cities. In these Sogdian merchant hubs, goods changed hands, languages were translated, and deals were brokered. The journey then continued through the Persian Empire to the frontiers of the Roman world in Syria, or south to the ports of the Arabian

Sea. Few, if any, individuals traveled the entire route. Instead, goods moved in a staggered relay, passed from one middleman to the next, their value multiplying with each leg of the journey.

The Silk Road over land started to decline. This happened because many things came together to cause it. After the 1400s the Mongol Empire broke into pieces. This disrupted the time that had existed when the Mongols were in charge. During that time all the routes were open. People like Marco Polo could travel easily.

The Silk Road began facing issues when strong and influential empires like the Timurid Empire and the Ottoman Empire rose to power. These empires were frequently unkind to travelers and certainly made it difficult for people to transport goods from one location to another. As a result, traveling on the Silk Road became quite costly and unsafe.

The thing that really caused the Silk Road to decline was when people started to explore the world and find alternative trade routes. This was known as the Age of Discovery, which happened during the 1500s and 1600s. The Silk Road was no longer the way to trade with other countries. The Silk Road was not used as much and frequently as it was before, leading to the decline of the Silk Road, which only became a thought buried behind the other events occurring in humanity. European vessels wanted to get to spices and silks directly, causing them to sail around Africa and cross the Atlantic. This made the economies of Central Asia not as important as they used to be. The Ming Dynasty then stopped trading with countries and Russia slowly took over Central Asia. This cut off the trade routes that used to connect these places around the globe. As time passed by, European vessels and Asian spices and silks were no longer linked by Central Asia.

The Silk Road is still with us in a way. It did not really disappear, it just faded away but it imprinted a deep mark on the globe. The Silk Road contributed to the vast change the cultural and technological landscape of Eurasia. This was all because of the Silk Road people from places like the Sogdians, the Tokharians, the Uighurs, and the Persians got to know each other and exchange cultures. They shared food, languages, and religions with each other, which deepened the relationship of different Eurasian countries.

Nonetheless, the people of Xinjiang and western China were still affected by the Silk Road. You can see it in the way they look in their culture. The Silk Road showed us that it was possible for people, from various parts of the world, to connect with each other through trading and cultural exchange. It showed us that people do not have to be isolated from each other. The Silk Road proved that people can come together and share things and that is an important thing. The Silk Road was a deal because it showed us that we can learn from each other and grow together.

The China Silk Road was really something. It was not a road that people used a long time ago to buy and sell things. The China Silk Road was a place where lots of things happened. It was a place where people fought and argued. Also a place where people learned from each other and created new things.

This is where people who followed Buddhism met people who followed Christianity. The China Silk Road is where people from China shared their way of writing with people from Sogdian. On the China Silk Road people smelled musk from Central Asia. Tasted pepper from India when they were shopping in a market during the Tang era.

The China Silk Road reminds us that big things that happen in the world are not about countries and their armies. The China Silk Road is an example of how people moving from place to place and trading things can make big things happen. This is not about people who buy and sell things but also monks who travel and share new ideas.

The China Silk Road is an important part of human history and civilization. It shows us that when we open up paths for people to travel on it brings different worlds together. The China Silk Road weaves these worlds into one big and complicated world that is all connected. The China Silk Road is a thing that shows us how everything is connected. The threads spun in the workshops of ancient China reached, directly and indirectly, to

clothe the courts of Rome and inspire the arts of Venice, leaving a legacy that continues to shape our globalized world today.

New Tales of China's Silk Road

Pui Kiu College, ZENG, Fanjing – 14

On the day of his prophesied triumph, Lucius Claudius Flavius stood in a chasm surrounded by nothing but darkness and death.

How ironic that, once upon a time, all the children dreamed of being in his shoes.

It was the honour of every boy to bring the delicacies of the Roman Empire to Sina—the land past the Greeks, past the Persian Empire, past the hunting nomads' territory—to trade. The children of Antiókheia would lay in their beds at night, recalling the stories from proud merchants in the forum, telling tales of that faraway utopia of fine teas and expensive silks; of men and women in draping robes while hags sold their handmade pottery; of large square towers with amber tiles overhanging red walls and bright lanterns...

Lucius had no intention of ever visiting there. As a child of Apollo, god of the Sun and Oracle, Lucius was a demigod with the blood of an augur. He watched for auspices—birds of omen—and tended ravens and crows. He read messages from the sky and took joy in deciphering the dances of wing and beak.

That was before the dreams came.

Peaceful sleep turned into restless nights, every vision repeating the same scene over and over again: himself stepping into unfamiliar streets, deep, raspy voices overwhelming his mind. *Come*, the voices called out as green mist filled the air. He would wake every night to a much deeper, commanding voice that echoed, *Come*.

As nights passed, the voices became more frantic, filling his mind with enthusiastic urgency. Then in a twilight, Lucius woke abruptly. It took him a moment to realise that his room was humming with unsettling energy, and panic robbed his body of movement. "What do you want?" He cried out in desperation. *Go*, the voices replied, eerily quiet. Lucius cringed away angrily. "Where do you want me to go?" He yelled at his walls, sick of the same order that's been among birds, in his mind, everywhere. He grabbed his staff, the *lituus*, and ran out to the atrium, raising it to the skies. "Father and god, give me guidance!" His voice rang with accusation and authority, more than he intended. For a moment, nothing happened, and he wondered briefly if he had angered the gods.

But then the staff began to quiver, and dark shapes barrelled through the night, circling atop him. A deep voice boomed into his head.

"Son of Apollo, augur of Antiokheia

Journey Eastwards to the land of Sina

Bring with you a horde of two

Speaker of Seres, tinkerer of tools

Retrieve from Cappadocia, Euphrates and Mesopotamia

Rock and sand and dyes of hues

To forge a cup of amber, emerald and blue

Finally to bring back the treasure of Rome"

The voice receded, and birds scattered into the silence.

Lucius stood there, stunned and slack with disbelief. *Sina*, he thought numbly. My father is sending me away to *Sina* on a quest. Too overwhelmed with emotions to go back to bed, Lucius watched the rays of the sun tear through dark clouds.

It was until late noon, during preparation, that it struck him what a treasure of Rome was doing in Sina in the first place.

14 Martius 6CE

"How far away from the volcanic tuffs are we?"

Lucius and his two companions, Marcellus and Caius were in Cappadocia, trekking on steep mountains. They had dismounted and were now leading their horses through treacherous terrain. Lucius' entire body ached — so intense was the pain that he could barely move. "I *hate* this," he ground out as blisters on his feet bled. He didn't want to look at the red prints he left among rocks. It made him nauseous.

"We all do," Marcellus, the blacksmith apprentice and glass-crafter said ahead. "Is anyone going to answer my question?"

"It should be close," Caius replied. "And for the record, I don't. I don't know what's wrong with you, honestly. You should be honoured."

"Good for you," Lucius snapped. They had been arguing pointlessly like this for the past week. Lucius' bones were screaming in agony, and it had not done well to improve his mood. Next to him, Caius scowled.

"The quest is doomed with you two here," Lucius heard the Sere-speaker say under his breath. Lucius' anger flared, but before he could think of a scathing remark, the pebbles under his sandal crumbled away, and his heart flew to his throat as he fell backwards—

Firm hands caught his flailing arm. He gasped as Caius held onto him. Lucius saw his own terrified face in his quest mate's wide eyes. The whole ledge had fallen away, leaving him dangled over the edge. With great effort, he climbed back up gingerly, his heart thundering in his chest. Pain shot up his leg as he stood on a sprained ankle. He hissed in agony.

"Lucius? Are you all right?" Caius frowned at his bloody soles.

"Yeah. I'm fine." Lucius paused, and mumbled, "Thanks."

Caius nodded. For a moment, Lucius felt a mutual truth. But as they continued on, Lucius noticed vultures circling above them. They signalled one word: *death*.

2 Aprilis 6CE

The Euphrates spoke of tribulation.

As Lucius took in the chorusing waters, waves that slammed at the riverbed, and the deafening roar that melded with the song of fallen angels, he wondered again if the gods were playing them.

"This river is cursed," Lucius mumbled to his peers, joining them by the river to wash. The waters had been telling him something about bound angels, waiting for some sort of command, and the extinction of men. There was something about the glorious yet sombre echo of the song-like proclamations that bugged him. Truthful or not, the voices made him uneasy.

Lost in thought, Lucius plunged his hand into the frigid water, fingertips tingling at the iciness. A chill swept up his arm, and suddenly he couldn't move.

Paralysed, Lucius felt a coldness sweeping up his skin, tugging and yanking him down. Terror flooded him, and he struggled desperately. His chest tightened in fear as voices swarmed into his mind. Yowling, nasty, vehement, they screamed into his ears.

"I know what you're looking for— but you'll never get it without my help!"

"You're no hero. Even your companions are better than you!"

Beyond it, another slithery, raspy voice hissed, "*Lucius Claudius ... so young and innocent... you don't know what's waiting for you in Chang'an... come here... and I'll tell you...*"

The voice snaked into darkness, and Lucius strained against the grip of the shrieking sounds. *Wait!* He thought, grasping at air—

Glacial, bony fingers stroked his face. “*Come find me in Sina... bring the cup with you... ask for the Reaper, they know who I am... I have the object you’re looking for...*”

The voices receded, and Lucius tore his hand out of the water, eyes wide.

He recognized that voice—the voice of the ‘Reaper’. It belonged to the one in his dreams.

27 Aprillis 6CE

Lucius and Caius sat around the forge, watching Marcellus shape liquid glass with tongs. The blazing, honey-like substance pooled on the worktable and Marc pulled it slowly into a vaselike shape, adding details with thin pincers.

“It’s beautiful,” Caius exclaimed, watching the glass cool in the air, shining yellow and deep cobalt. Marc smiled proudly, dipping it in water which Lucius had fetched for him. Fiery glass met ice water with a simmering hiss, and steamed billowed up.

The result was astounding. From the base, the goblet was a translucent yellow, which melded into bright emerald, then deep aqua. The cup was clear with a crystal-like rim. Intricate spiral patterns intertwined with milleflori, lacing over the stem and curling around the bottom of the cup. The glass was flawless and cool to touch.

“You’re brilliant, Marc,” Lucius praised.

“Thanks,” Marcellus looked terribly satisfied with himself, “The inspiration came from a dream, actually.”

“Oh?”

“It’s funny. There was this old man atop a throne, holding a cup like this,” he thought for a while, “He called himself the Reaper. Odd name.”

Lucius’ blood ran cold.

14 Maius 6CE

Sina was gorgeous.

After trekking through the Taklamakan desert, where sand ate at blisters, scorching air burned skin, deprivation and thirst tore at their sanity, and broken promises of mirage left them heartbroken, a city felt like a gift from the gods.

Upon arriving at the Jia’yu Pass, the three broken souls felt the amazing whisper of hope again. They proudly presented themselves as envoys from the great Roman Empire, and were given the best rooms of a beautiful inn.

Lucius had never tasted such delicious food. Especially the lamb. The lamb was amazing. Delicious soup and chewy *Nang* and soft but flavoured *Mian*, spicy broths and chicken that tasted different yet mouthwatering, eaten with strange cutlery called *Kuai’zi*, in blue china bowls and plates.

The sheer difference of culture left Lucius overwhelmed and disoriented. He wondered how the merchants coped – he certainly couldn’t adapt.

Later that night, as Lucius stared absentmindedly at the ornately-framed window, he noticed something. Large raptors flying eastwards.

“What do the vultures tell you?” a voice behind him inquired. Lucius started.

“Vultures?” he echoed. *Oh, no.* “Death,” Lucius said, “Vultures flying eastwards mean death.”

“Or guidance.” Caius suggested. Lucius frowned at him. “Vultures are respected in these highlands. Vultures were summoned to pick at the carcass of humans, to enable them safe passage to the Sino afterlife.”

“No,” Lucius snapped protectively. This was against everything he’d been taught.

“You don’t know anything about Sina.” Caius fired back, “That’s why Apollo needed me.”

Lucius gasped at the direct mention of the god’s name, “Don’t say that!”

“APOLLO!” Caius shouted. Lucius waited for him to be struck down by a lightning bolt. Nothing happened.

“Our gods cannot reach us here, Luc. Why else have your visions stopped? Clearly another force is interfering.”

That wasn’t strictly true. Lucius had been visited by the ‘Reaper’ many times, though he did not look like any deity. A villainous thought crept into his mind. “Caius,” he whispered, dead serious. “What ‘other force’ are you implying?”

“The Seres had their deities as well, Luc.”

Lucius shut his eyes briefly. His head was pounding. Great. First the angels. Now this. “And if, let’s say, one of their deities were called ‘The Reaper’, who would they be?”

Caius paused. “Isn’t this something Marc said? About the cup?”

Lucius said nothing.

“‘Reaper’, as in ‘harvester of souls’? The most related deity would be Yan’lo’wang, or Yama – the keeper of the undivine deceased.”

“Does this have anything to do with–” Lucius swallowed “–With fallen angels?”

“No. Why?” Caius took a step towards him. “What’s this about?”

“What if,” Lucius wondered aloud, pretending not to have heard him, “The vultures *are* guiding us towards...death? Towards Yama?”

He began to pace. Two great empires, one west, one east. Two different lands, each with their separate deity systems. Two divine treasures, two unraveling stories. “Maybe this is a peaceful exchange between Sina and the Roman Empire. Maybe the cup is our peace offering – our tribute – for the treasure!”

He spun, excited, to find Caius, but the boy’s expression was dark. “So this cup isn’t for the Emperor, then?”

Lucius’s hope stuttered out. “T–the emperor?”

“We need something as pilgrimage for the Sino ruler if we wish to proceed into Chang’an. Or else we’re stuck.”

“*What?* Why didn’t you mention this earlier?”

“Why didn’t *you* tell us about the Reaper?”

Stunned, Lucius watched Caius go.

26 Maius 6CE

“What have you brought me?”

Lucius bowed low. “This is a gift from our gods. Arrows that will always strike true. May you be blessed with the powers of Apollo, god of archery.”

Caius translated his words for the Emperor of Sina, who nodded.

Lucius held still as his bow and quiver were examined by the Emperor. The man's wrinkled fingers brushed the godly wood of the bow. His heart tightened painfully as the Emperor took the weapons – *his* weapons away from his palms.

"Rise," the ruler ordered, seemingly satisfied.

The Emperor continued, "Someone awaits your presence in Chang'an. I assume you know of this?"

Caius tensed.

"Yes."

"He has left a message for you, young augur." he flicked his finger, and a servant moved forward and handed Caius a scroll.

There were only three words on the deep blue fabric.

Yong'ning'men.

27 Maius 6CE

The markets were bustling. The three had passed many throughout their journey, but the ones in Chang'an felt ... different.

Merchants hollered at passengers. Litters were carried through a mass of royalty and peasants alike. On the two sides of impossibly wide, rock-tiled streets were inns and shops and stalls, some simple and quaint, some towering in glorious splendor. It was nothing like the orderly, plain tabernae back in the Empire. This was chaotic – in a beautiful, harmonial way.

Even in the day, lanterns burned bright, lining yellow rooftops. In their carriage, Caius spoke up, "The Reaper wanted us to meet him under Yong'Ning'men. I just remembered. That's the North wall and ..." he hesitated. "North, to the Seres, symbolized death."

Lucius' spirits lifted. So it was Yama after all.

Lucius counted 53 stores before the carriage skidded to a halt. They had arrived.

Yong'Ning'men was a looming wall, so thick that there was a passage on top. Beneath the arched entrance, a hooded figure smiled coyly at them.

"Hello, Romans," The Reaper rasped, using that same, dusty voice Lucius had heard in the Euphrates, "Have you brought me what I asked for?"

"Yes. Who are you really?"

"Ah," he turned his head slowly towards Caius, who had spoken. With a start, Lucius noticed a glint of white on the man's forehead, and a slight motion of a dark sphere. "Speaker of Seres, you of all people question my identity?"

"You're not a real god," Caius breathed.

"Really?" The Reaper's words were a regal, low hiss. Suddenly, even before he raised a hand to remove his hood, he felt like a proper deity. As the god let light shine on his face, Lucius gasped.

Yama had a round, cobalt-skinned face. Three malicious eyes stared down at them. Thick red brows were knit in a scowl, and large gold rings hung from his long-lobed ears. He had a look that commanded fear and respect.

The Sino lord of the dead was terrifying.

As a child, Lucius was taught the etiquettes when facing a god. Sino or not, Lucius knelt before Yama now, and his friends did the same reluctantly.

When they rose again, the three were in a vast, dark hall, and the arch above them no longer belonged to Yong'Ning'men. In front of Lucius, the Reaper sat high atop a throne made up of skulls and faces of monsters. Dark bronze jewellery clothed the god, who was now twice the size of his previous self with an aura of gloriousness.

"Bring me the cup." This time, his rich voice boomed across the room.

Lucius obliged.

"So, child of Apollo," said the Reaper softly, "Have you any idea why you're here?"

"My father told me to bring back Rome's treasure."

"Hm. I have the 'treasure', all right. However ..." The Reaper pulled a long sword out of thin air. Lucius froze. He knew that word.

"*Scipius*," Marcellus marvelled.

The sword of Publicus Cornelius Scipio Africanus Major, greatest general of Rome, crosser of the Alps.

"Yes," the Reaper didn't seem impressed. "He died in Liternum. His sword was buried with him. His last wish was to leave Rome."

Ingrata patria, ne ossa quidem habebis, Lucius remembered. *Ungrateful fatherland, you will not even have my bones*. Embittered by continuous political attacks and accusations of corruption by opponents led by Cato the Censor, Scipio left Rome, the place he had fought for and protected, toward the end of his life. Later, the senate agreed he was a hero, but the warrior was long dead. "The sword was a gift from Mars, *our* god of war," Lucius growled. "While we respect his choice of burial, his sword does not belong to you."

"Wait." Caius stepped forward, "Scipio is *here*? Now?"

"Oh, of course not." The Reaper's chuckle was even more terrifying than his frown. "Your gods reclaimed him. He deserved Elysium, sanctuary for the deceased heroes, no?"

"Anyhow, there's a slight catch to the quest. You see, death is never fair. It takes and consumes without discrimination. Maybe, if you can give me a reason to 'return' this sword, I will do so. But until then, you have not earned it."

A thick silence filled the cavern.

"Lord Yama," Lucius said calmly, trying to suppress his anger and disbelief. "I think you know very well why we are here. After all, it was you who had called out for me back in Antiokheia, wasn't it?"

"You wanted me to come. This quest was for Sina and the Roman Empire to connect, wasn't it? Fate allowed there to be two Great empires, two belief systems to coexist at the same time. This quest was an exchange of cultures. A peaceful acknowledgement. The cup...there was something more to it. It was made up of the sands from another belief system altogether – a biblical one. A perfect blend of everything between Sina and the Roman Empire.

As for the sword, it was passed on, from the Roman gods to you, a god of the east. So I think, lord Yama, that the sword was, in the end, also more than just Roman. And the Fates have decided that it is time for these two objects to return to where they need to be... as a sign of peace."

The Reaper's eyes shone with approval. "Very good, augur."

Then, gently, Lord Yama placed *Scipius* onto Lucius' palm, from Sina unto Rome.

The Story of the Silk Road Merchant

St. Margaret's Coeducational English Secondary and Primary School, Cheuk Him, Leung – 15

A merchant named Liang lived in the center of the lively and vibrant city of Chang'an, where the roads were like rivers flowing into the ocean. With his intelligence and quick movements, he easily traded on the Silk Road—a huge and important trade link between the East and the West—like a pro.

Silk, spices, and gems were Liang's daily company. At times he would sit down and think back to his first Silk Road trip when he first took along the most beautiful silk in the world—brightly multi-coloured patterns imbuing the aura of the sun and moon. The silk was the lightest of all and the most luxurious and elegant item in the world; it was desired by the great rulers and the rich and beautiful across distant countries.

During the journey, he went through the burning deserts, and then high snow-covered mountains, and he met people trading from the Persians and going on to the Roman Empire. It was not only a chance to swap the merchandises at each and every stop; that was also a great occasion for the exchange of ideas and culture. He was all ears listening to the stories of far-away places and at the same time telling his own and thus forming ties that were not divided by mobile and fixed boundaries.

Discovering a little village in the center of the vast Taklamakan Desert, one day, Liang was surprised to see that the two worlds East and West had come close enough that their goods were actually mingling together. He was told that spices from the South were soon to be here in the form of cardamom and turmeric that were going to boost even the blandest of dishes. Besides, the villagers recounted the coming of Buddhism—the new religion to the East—its very doctrines infiltrating a bit of Liang's mind. The man had an epiphany; the Silk Road was no longer only a commercial road; it was a cultural, an ideological, and an aspiration bridge.

When he returned to Chang'an with his camel that was heavily loaded with the treasures, Liang realized that he had drawn the right conclusions from his journeys. The Silk Road was like a lifeline that kept people connected and hence the world was smaller and more interwoven. By negotiating silk and sharing stories, Liang assumed the role of protector of this legacy and he kept on telling to every listener that the value of life was equal to the value of each thread used in the weaving of its tapestry.

New Tales of China's Silk Road

St. Margaret's Coeducational English Secondary and Primary School, Cheuk Lam, Yuen – 15

Two thousand years ago, as the first morning light shone over Chang'an's mountains, a brave group of merchants prepared for a journey that would change history. Among them was May, a brilliant weaver who wanted to show her work to the world. She packed a bundle with the finest silk—soft, shiny, and colourful, May felt excited about what lay ahead.

As they embarked, the caravan raised dust as they made their way along ancient routes towards the west. Mile after mile drew them closer together, while each difficulty they overcame became a new story filled with laughter. They crossed hot deserts, climbed lofty mountains, and forded dangerous rivers. Trial after trial, stories of foreign lands filled their hearts with wonder.

One evening, as the sun set, May and her friends reached a vibrant oasis. Amongst palm trees that stood tall in the shimmering waters, they felt astonished to see merchants from Persia trading silks and spices in a gracefully beautiful dance of commerce. The air was filled with delicious smells of saffron and cumin, mingled with earthy scents of the desert.

It was in this enchanted setting that May came into contact with Amy, a kind Iranian merchant who laughed as warmly as the sun. They soon warmed up to each other and started talking about their cultures over servings of warm tea. Amy told May about the colorful rugs from her land that included stories of heroes and spirits. May, in turn, explained to Amy how silk was produced, painting a vivid history with words. Together, they envisioned a bridge—not just a pathway for goods, but a way to understand each other better. With each trade, the differences between them seemed to fade away, replaced by a beautiful tapestry of shared experiences.

But as the years passed, the Silk Road changed. It was no longer just an avenue for merchant caravans. It had become where cultures converged. The Silk Road was alive with new concepts and new technologies. It led to the development of the compass, which would aid explorers, and the tales told in books to connect people from different places. However, like in every legend, the Route started fading away. The passage of time buried the trade Route under the sands of forgetfulness. It was only in 2013 that there was a buzz about reviving it. The beginning of the New Silk Road reignited a spark that would soon fade away into forgetfulness. As the world changed, May's spirit was reborn in every traveller and trader. The New Silk Road had become the most compelling memory of a past that threatened to get lost: a boisterous link among 150 nations, joined together not only by commerce but also by dreams of a better future.

In this new time, Amy and May were those kinds of girls who became global friends, sharing ideas and culture at every turn. Towns and cities shone bright with creativity as people worked together. Imagine a day when a faraway child learns about ancient China through exciting animations and shares his stories with friends in another country. New generations of artists, scientists, and creators collaborate across the globe to write the next exciting chapter in history.

As demonstrated in the case of May, the links of trade have the power to transform the world. The New Silk Road shows us how we can unite. It does not just weave goods and services together. It intersperses dreams, ideas, and stories. But in this never-ending saga of exchange, every footstep, whether taken by the courageous sons and daughters of old or by today's visionaries, serves as a constant reminder that a better world can be created through a mutual understanding, and a world in which silk, art, words, and science can flourish together can be made.

A Bowl of Noodles on the New Silk Road

St. Margaret's Coeducational English Secondary and Primary School, Ching Chi, Tsoi – 15

Chris runs a veal noodle shop called “Chris noddle shop” near a subway station in Xi'an. The business is not stad. He never thought that he or his shop would have anything to do with the ancient Silk Road that he had read in textbooks. Three years ago, his son Roy graduated from a logistics college and found a job in arranging containers for China–Europe freight trains, and the situation changed.

Roy's job is to stare at the computer screen and track a flashing line extending from Xi'an, through the wilderness of Kazakhstan and the forests of Russia, and extending to Duisburg, Germany. Chris thinks that this job is meaningless, and it is far worse than learning the real skills of hand–made noodles.

The change began in an ordinary afternoon. Roy came home from work and took out his mobile phone excitedly. "Dad, look! Our freight train began to transport "cross–border e–commerce" goods. Now Germans can buy Chinese chilli slices, Sichuan pepper and cinnamon online!"

Chris glanced at it and muttered, "What is that? What does this have to do with us?"

"Everything!" Roy insisted. He explained that a spice exporter whose goods were arranged through the train by him, was looking for a local restaurant to make a "Silk Road Spice Noodles" recipe package for the European market. They want something real and have a story.

Chris was sceptical, but he was very interested. After closing the door, he spent the night in the small kitchen to do experiments. He clumsily recorded the process with his mobile phone and explained in simple Mandarin how these spices walked the old road. Now, in his broth, he is ready for a new journey.

A few months later, a sample box arrived from Germany. Inside are vacuum–packed noodles, concentrated broth and spice bags – all with a simple bowl sign, and a winding road leading to the bowl. The description is available in German, English and Chinese. The importer's note reads: "Taste it by our team. Real and wonderful. "Story" sells well.

That weekend, Chris hung a new sign on the window of his shop: "Hometown of the Original Silk Road Spice Noodles." He added a new and more spicy version to the menu. To his surprise, it became popular. Young Chinese customers are familiar with the "Belt and Road" initiative from news reports and come to try "Noodles to Europe". Some European backpackers follow travel blogs about the Silk Road, looking for "famous noodle shops in online recipes".

One night, a regular customer, a college student, was filming his noodles for social media posts. Chris boldly pointed to the QR code on the new logo. "Scan that," he said. This led to a short video – an amateur scene of Roy cooking, which was stitched together with a map showing the freight train route from Xi'an to Germany. The title written by Roy says: "From our pot to your post. Train sharing, taste sharing.

Chris world did not change overnight. He still gets up at 4 am to make dough. His store is still only 30 square metres. But some things are different. When he sprinkled cumin into his cauldron now, he didn't just think about the taste. He thought of the dusty caravan that originally brought it to the east, now the steel train that brought its modern version to the west, and his son, the "digital camel driver", who connected his father's hand with the global appetite.

For Chris, the new Silk Road has nothing to do with geopolitics or trillions of dollars of investment. This is about his family's recipes arriving in a kitchen in Munich. This is part of a story about his ordinary craft being regarded as a grand and continuous story. It's about realising that this road is not just in history books or satellite maps – it quietly drove into his station, just outside his door, adding a new and lingering spice to his life.

New Tales of China's Silk Road

St. Margaret's Coeducational English Secondary and Primary School, Kai Pong, Tang – 16

The dust of the Taklamakan is no different. It continues to smell of eternity. Cursed to roam the lands of earth forever, I have been recording the sights of this wasteland for millennia. Once, my name was Lin, an immortal merchant.

My first memory of the west was an army. Even before the Silk Road was a road, I witnessed for myself the Macedonian invasion of the Ferghana Valley. Their young king, Alexander, was a whirlwind of ambition, clothed in not cloth, but impenetrable bronzen armour. His men overpowered, but when they lived, what did they yearn for? Not our land, but our silk. They were astounded by its extreme lightness, a sophisticated thing that their swords could not weave. At the very moment of their victory, the real center of their desire was not in Pella or Babylon, but here, in the East. With their swords, they aimed at the east, but their wants, and our commodities, kept going west without stopping.

Centuries passed like sand. I was with caravans, the sound of wheels and trade cutting through the endless sand. I was in the caravanserais of Samarkand, where Sogdian merchants bartered with Persian silver for Chinese paper. I recall a Roman merchant whose fingers were drawing a phoenix on a piece of silk that I had sold him in Chang'an.

"It is spun by those blessed by the stars, they say," he whispered.

I laughed. "They reside in villages which you will never see. The blessing is in its creation."

He looked towards the east, beyond the farthest point. "Then the center of the world is there."

He was right. During the Tang Dynasty, I stepped into Chang'an, the heart of trade of the eastern world. Two million people—a symphony of accents and cultures. Uighur horsemen, Korean scholars, eastern monks from the steppes. I created a trading house, "The Eternal Venture." My timelessness was one of my merits. I brought the court frankincense and glassware, but what I sent out was the essence of the East: silk, porcelain, paper, gunpowder, the compass. The world met here. Every river of silver and spice, every idea, came from this city.

Afterward, there was lengthy silence, forever, I had assumed. The Road had perished. The emperors turned to their own affairs. The caravans disappeared, the merchant houses got destroyed. The dust covered the kingdoms again. For half a millennium, I existed like a phantom in the West. I witnessed their Renaissance, their Industrial Revolution. They made new worlds and wrote legendary histories, putting themselves squarely at the center of the globe. They talked of the East as a far-off periphery, a place to be used. They had forgotten. They had forgotten that the very idea of a global network was the result of the tracks I had walked.

Then, I heard a whisper in 2013. A promise. A "Belt and Road."

My antique heart, a sleeping ember, started to beat again.

I returned to Xi'an, the old Chang'an. My trading house was long gone, grinded down into dust by the tires of construction trucks. At a Dry Port, I saw gantry cranes, replacing the slaves and livestock of old, piling onto a mountain of shipping containers. A train, much longer than any caravan, was being filled with laptops and microchips destined for Germany. A journey of two weeks, not of two years.

A young but passionate logistics manager, Wang, talked about "multimodal transport solutions" with the same energy that old traders used for bargaining over cloth.

"This is the new Silk Road," he said. "We are linking the east together."

“You are reconnecting it,” I said.

I glimpsed the new pathways: the cranes of Piraeus, the roads traversing Kazakhstan, the deep-water port in Gwadar. The caravans had become high-speed trains; the caravanserais, financial centers. The appearance had changed, but the principle was still a two-way flow, a binding together of worlds.

At present, I am in Bishkek, witnessing the completion of a new railway line. A local old man, his face reduced to wrinkles, is watching from a fence.

“They say this will bring jobs,” he tells me. “Goods will come from China, quicker than ever.”

“And your goods will be sent to China,” I say. “The world is knocking at your door again.”

He narrows his eyes against the sun. “My grandfather used to say the world moved away from us. Is it coming back?”

I look at the unstoppable progress, the metal rails shining under the very Central Asian sun that was shining upon Alexander’s armour. I do not see a beginning but a return. For a millennium, the world met in the East. Then, for five hundred years, it turned its back. Now, the pendulum is moving back. The highways and ports are veins, and the blood is getting ready to flow from the heart again.

I sat with the old man.

“It never really left,” I tell him. “It was just asleep. The center of the world is not a place you can conquer. It is a place that produces, that connects, that lasts.”

The dust, as I see it, will be here forever. But now, it is the dust of progress. And I, Lin, the immortal merchant, have a new path to follow.

New Tales of China's Silk Road

St. Margaret's Coeducational English Secondary and Primary School, Lennon, Eriksson – 15

In the tenth year of the Tianbao era, under Emperor Xuanzong of Tang, a boy named Li Ming watched his father's caravan disappear into the dusty west from the gates of Chang'an. He was twelve, and the Silk Road was a golden thread in his imagination, woven from his father's stories of Samarkand's blue tiles, the thunder of Ferghana horses, and the strange, hollow eyes of Byzantine coins. His father, Li Gang, was a caravan leader, a master of the route. "The Road is not a path, but a conversation," he would say, his hands tracing maps in the air. "We trade silk and porcelain for stories and steel. Balance is everything."

Li Ming's own world included the family compound, his mother's quiet worries, and the meticulous ledgers of goods: bolts of shimmering silk, celadon-glazed jars, and cakes of compressed tea. He longed for conversation, not inventory.

Fifteen years later, in the spring of 768 AD, Li Ming stood at the same gate. His father was gone, taken by a sudden fever in Kashgar the previous year. The responsibility for the family business, now fragile with debt and competition, fell onto his reluctant shoulders. He was a scholar at heart, more comfortable with brush and ink than a camel whip and bargaining. His first independent caravan was a desperate gamble: a modest train of twenty Bactrian camels loaded with silk, paper—a prized Tang invention still unknown in the West—and medicinal herbs.

His guide was a grizzled, one-eyed Sogdian named Anwar, who had worked for his father. "The Road has changed, young master," Anwar grumbled as they navigated the Hexi Corridor. "The Tibetan Empire pushes from the south, the Abbasids stir in the west. And the winds carry a different greed now."

Li Ming, however, felt buoyed by romantic historical ideals. He recited tales of Zhang Qian, the imperial envoy who first opened the Western Regions for the Han Dynasty over 800 years earlier, and of the monk Xuanzang, who braved the deserts a century ago to bring Buddhist scriptures from India. He believed in the old poetry of exchange.

This idealism shattered in the oasis town of Dunhuang. There, he met the villain who would change his journey: Magnus Varro, a Roman merchant from Constantinople. Varro was everything the old Silk Road ethos was not. He was physically imposing, with a smile that never reached his cold, grey eyes. He represented a new, ruthless form of commerce. He dealt not only in goods but also in information, influence, and coercion.

"Your father was a man of charming principles," Varro said, swirling wine in a jade cup he had likely acquired through sharp practices. "Principles are a luxury on a road ruled by strength. I propose a partnership. Your paper, all of it, comes to me. I control its flow west. In return, I ensure your safe passage through the Taklamakan. The 'Sea of Death' is more thirsty than ever."

Li Ming refused, holding on to his father's code. Varro's smile tightened. "A conversation, is it? Sometimes, the most persuasive argument is a silent road."

Disaster struck a week into the Taklamakan Desert. At a crucial well, they found it sabotaged—filled with sand and rocks. Anwar spat, recognizing the work. "Varro's men. He buys the loyalty of local bandits with silver." Panic set in. Two camels died of thirst before Anwar found a dangerous alternative route. Their water was severely rationed; the precious silk began to feel like a foolish burden. Li Ming, his lips cracked and skin burned, realized his bookish knowledge was useless here. He survived only by silently watching Anwar's harsh desert wisdom—reading the stars, finding moisture in the roots of tamarisk, and calming the terrified animals.

This was not the glorious Silk Road of history. It was a fight for survival. The elegant ideas of cultural exchange felt like a dream drowned in sand. He had failed his father's legacy.

They limped into Kashgar, the great Western Market, alive with voices and colors. Humbled and hardened, Li Ming knew he could not compete with Varro's wealth or viciousness directly. He had to be smarter and truly understand the "conversation." He spent days not selling but listening. He drank tea with Uighur horse traders, shared bread with Persian carpet-weavers, and discussed astronomy with a Nestorian Christian scholar who spoke of Greek fire and water clocks.

From them, he learned Varro's weakness: his greed made him predictable. He monopolized luxury goods for the wealthy, ignoring the common people. Li Ming also discovered a local need. A sickness was affecting the children of the oasis, and the Greek medicines Varro sold were overpriced and ineffective.

Remembering his ledgers, Li Ming recalled he had a large quantity of ★qinghao★ (artemisia), a herb used by Tang doctors for fevers. He brought it as a minor trade item. With the scholar's help, he found a local healer, and together they prepared a simple remedy. He distributed it freely at the caravanserai, asking only for news or friendship in return.

The act spread through Kashgar like a refreshing breeze. It built a currency more valuable than silver: trust. The Persian carpet-weaver, whose child recovered, introduced him to a Sogdian intermediary who could get his paper to scholars in Baghdad, bypassing Varro's hold. The Uighur trader, impressed by his integrity, offered favorable terms on strong mounts for the return journey.

Varro, sensing a shift, confronted him in the market. "You trade medicine for gossip? This is not commerce. This is charity for the weak."

Li Ming, no longer the timid scholar, stood firm. "Zhang Qian didn't travel to make gold. He traveled to make connections. Xuanzang traveled for wisdom. You see a road to plunder. I see a network to nurture. You have customers, Varro. I have partners."

The true test came on the return journey. Loaded with new goods—lapis lazuli, rosewater, and a valuable cargo of saffron bulbs—Li Ming's caravan was attacked by Varro's hired bandits in the Tianshan foothills. This time, Li Ming was ready. His "partners" had provided him with information. More importantly, the Uighur trader had sent two of his own sons as guards, fierce archers who knew the passes.

The skirmish was short and intense. They successfully defended the caravan. Capturing one bandit, they learned Varro, overextended and his reputation damaged by Li Ming's growing influence, had fled west ahead of his debts, his crude monopoly attempt broken.

Standing again at the gates of Chang'an months later, Li Ming was a changed man. He had not only saved his family's business but also expanded it. Yet the real treasure was in his mind. He saw the Silk Road now for what it truly was: a living, breathing organism. The Han had given it structure with their walls and horses, while the Tang had infused it with vibrancy through their paper and tea. It thrived not on force but on mutual need—the Chinese silk for Roman gold, the Central Asian horses for Chinese steel, the Indian spices for Persian glass.

In his report to the local market official, he wrote: "The Road thrives not by the might of one empire, but by the delicate trust between a thousand individuals. An evil man sees only a line to be drawn and claimed. But the truth is a web, and when one strand is pulled with malice, the whole network trembles and rejects the poison."

He thought of the future, of the new tales yet to be written. Perhaps one day, the roads would carry not just camels but also ships of steel across even larger seas, and the conversation would grow to include a hundred more nations. The principle, he knew, would remain the same. Balance was everything. The villainy of a Magnus Varro was merely a desert storm—fierce but temporary. The wells of cooperation, though sometimes hidden, were what truly kept the journey alive.

He entered the bustling city, the scent of saffron and foreign leather mingling with the familiar smell of home. He was no longer just Li Ming, merchant of Chang'an. He was a keeper of the conversation, a weaver in the great, endless web. The new tale of his Silk Road had just begun its first chapter.

New Tales of China's Silk Road

St. Margaret's Coeducational English Secondary and Primary School, Chan, Lok Lam – 15

Silk was a significant steppingstone of Chinese culture and economy for over 4,000 years. Not only does it represent innovation and secrecy, but it also symbolizes China's transformation through trade and history.

In a magical valley hidden in the clouds of old China, there lived a young girl named Mary. She was not only special but also the creator of silk and its tale.

One bright morning, Mary finished her silk tale—a long story of dragons, rivers, and peace, spun into a golden cloth. It was not only beautiful but also alive with whispers. Furthermore, the cloth urged her to embark on her journey along the Silk Road. Moreover, as the creator of silk, Mary knew the road would carry her magic. Yet, she was shy; the world was full of unknowns. But the cloth gave her a cloak of silk wings, and she flew away with her tale in hand.

As Mary soared along the enchanted path, she met a wise owl named Fei. He was not only smart but also a keeper of old secrets. Furthermore, Fei told her how Mary had created silk long ago, when gods gave her the power. Moreover, he shared parts of her own tale, like kings using silk to build floating castles. Yet, Fei warned of shadow beasts that might steal her story. Still, Mary's silk wings lit the way, turning dark paths into light.

In a sparkling city called Chang'an, Mary saw markets where her silk danced like fire. She was not only happy but also taught dream—weavers to add her tale to their cloths. Furthermore, she met a fairy queen who wore dresses from Mary's silk. Moreover, the queen learned how Mary created the tale from her heart. Yet, Mary longed for her valley and wondered if she should go back. But the golden cloth showed dreams of lands waiting for her magic.

Deeper into the trip, Mary crossed a desert of whispering winds. The sands were hot, and echoes called. She was not only weary but also met a giant bird guarding a crystal lake. Furthermore, the bird, charmed by Mary's tale, became her guide. Moreover, there she found a boy named Amir, who used silk to paint skies. Yet, Amir's world had rivers of liquid silk, and together they fought fog monsters with glowing threads. Mary's cloth shone brighter, opening doors to wonder lands.

At the end of the Silk Road, by a sea of endless stars, Mary faced her big choice. The cloth's magic showed that she, as the creator of silk and its tale, could link all hearts. Furthermore, Mary wove a huge web across the skies, sharing her story. Moreover, she taught people to make silk that healed hurts and brought joy. Yet, the golden cloth turned into a rainbow bridge, but its power lived in her words. Mary became a legend, her tale sung by winds.

In the end, Mary's journey proved that silk was more than cloth; it was a living story. Not only did she create silk, but she also wove its tale for the world. Furthermore, her adventure inspired brave souls to explore. Moreover, even now, when silk glows, it tells Mary's magic. Yet, the real charm is in creating your own tale, just like the ancient roads joined dreams.

New Tales of China's Silk Road

St. Margaret's Coeducational English Secondary and Primary School, Kam, Ho Lam Matthew – 15

Shifting sand dunes made from gritty gold grains. Turning all one can see into boundless barren wastes.

Serene sapphire seas are what one wishes for. But it is capricious.

The haunting echo of shipwrecks consumed by its abyssal angry depths reminded them of its menace.

Perilous, is it not?

Yet thalassocracies still sent their own. Travellers and traders still strayed from the safety of the sprawling imperial palaces. Ignoring the looming possibility of becoming lost in the wind.

And they still choose to brave it.

Is it the alluring call of sun-kissed riches? Its honeyed luster enthrals all those who hear its siren song. Or is it the distinct scent of spices seen as exotic? Warm coloured powers; easily discernible fragrance floats into scent glands. But surely, it's not the mere look of the miniature reddish brown star? Or the fiery taste of flaking parchment scrolls and the redolent aroma of the musky brown heart wrapped in a lacey rouge aril from mythical spice island.

Besides those who ate that forbidden apple, in order to transport their livelihoods, great galloping beasts that should have been emblematic of freedom and the humped yet reliable nomads of the sand travelled with them.

But mostly it was other people. Some were whipped, some had enough riches to fill a crypt; some with volition denied and some who rode on horse hide.

Unfortunately, it was mainly the former.

Suppressed epileptic images. Crumbling clay ruins. Moaning of the matriarch. Entombed wishes of deliverance. Weak childish flesh. Soft young flesh. Malleable now tarnished brains. Dove shaped prayers shot down by pen on a book. Wishing for a portal to another world. Cuffed hands. Imaginary free hands. Bound feet. Imaginary running feet. Gods so called mercy disproving the existence of god. Hundred eyed wheels. Hundred wings personification of justice that will never come. An arrhythmic heart. A countenance puzzled by hell. A prayer written in blood. A prayer drowned in the want of gold. A kaleidoscope of unholy discipline. A ship bound to unfamiliarity. A hyena hunting in the dead of night. A womb forever dirtied. A pig slurping the remains. A scraped knee from forced reverence. A building built from defeated limbs. A beautiful eclipse watched through a blindfold. A hundred eyed snake devouring itself. Ripped childhood. Burned home. Absent givers. Tarnished hope. Whipped flesh. Groaning portal. Wrinkled prayers. Mocking god. Inescapable punishment. Starving self. Watching monster. Breathing person.

Barely breathing, barely a person.

But a legacy never stops moving, only the people trampled under its fate do

New Tales of China's Silk Road

St. Margaret's Coeducational English Secondary and Primary School, Oi Lam, Yau – 16

I took a sniff of the warm lamb meat in front of me. Ah. How pleasant the scent was and how they dance and swirl around my nostril has turned up the corners of my mouth, making the heavy rocks stored inside my brain grow wings and fly away. It would be perfect to go on a wonderful trip to Xinjiang through silk road and taste the lamb there. But now my tears are rolling down as I think about staying in this annoying stressful working place.

Uh! I want to go there so bad! That heaven! That utopia! Oh God! Just let me stay away from work!

Boom. I suddenly blacked out for a second and at the next moment I saw the stunning view of grassland, which was exactly like Xinjiang. The greenness of grass contrasted with the clear blue sky, so unreal that I wanted to slap my face to see if this is a dream. The moment I lifted my hands, I realised that they are not my hands. Instead, they are full of white fluffy hair and touching the ground like they are my legs. No way. I wanted to scream but the sound that came out of my mouth was 'meh' instead.

Seeing a shepherd who was wearing a traditional Xinjiang costume walking towards me, a ridiculous thought came across my mind. I had reincarnated as a goat in Xinjiang.

It might sound absurd, but it is the only explanation for what happened to my body and the drastic change of environment. I became what I ate.

As I was so stressed about this situation, a strong man carried me on a truck. Not yet finished enjoying the view, I was forced to leave this beautiful place. As an extroverted goat, I soon got along with the other goats who were on the same truck as me. They told me in 'meh' that we are going on a trip through the 'milk' road. This is the first time for me to go through the silk road which had been on my check list for a long time and also to know that goats are as dumb as they look. I cannot believe that this dream finally came true when I am no longer a human.

We drove past a market where the air was rich with the scent of spice and echoes of distant traders. The vibrant market buzzed with vivid colours of silks and woven textiles. How fascinating to witness many kinds of cultural exchange. I was completely immersed in the rich history of this road. Old rest stops offer a look into the past, reminding me of the many travelers who have walked this historic route, surrounded by breathtaking beauty and rich culture.

After a super long journey, we were finally unloaded from the truck. When I was put on a wooden table, I knew exactly that my life was coming to an end. Before the knife fell on my neck, I was grateful for the last wonderful trip as it really does worth this cost. I closed my eyes and accepted this ending. Thank God for this opportunity to be a goat.

New Tales of China's Silk Road

St. Margaret's Coeducational English Secondary and Primary School, Wing Tung, Lam – 16

My name is Mary and my world was the dusty, sun-baked yard of my father's pottery workshop in Chang'an. For generations, our family had shaped clay into practical, sturdy pots, for instance, bowls for rice, jars for water, simple cups for tea. They were honest and useful, but they were brown and plain. I never thought our work was special. However, my father said our purpose was to be useful, not beautiful. I believed him, but in my heart, I secretly dreamed of creating something more, something that held a story within its curves.

Everything changed the day my uncle, a merchant who traveled the western routes, returned. He brought with him the most fascinating person I had ever seen, a young man named Chris. His eyes were the colour of the summer sky and his hair was like spun gold. He was from a place so far away my uncle called it simply "the Roman Empire."

Chris was a glassblower. My father, ever the practical man, had agreed to host him in exchange for learning new techniques. At first, Chris and I just stared at each other across the courtyard, separated by more than just language. He moved with a strange, confident grace, and his tools were unlike anything I had ever seen. He didn't have a potter's wheel. Instead, he had a long, hollow metal pipe.

For days, we worked in silence, side by side. I would wedge my clay, centering it on the wheel, my hands becoming caked in the familiar, cool earth. Chris would gather a glowing, molten blob of sand and minerals on the end of his pipe. It looked like captured sunlight. He would then blow into the pipe, his cheeks puffing out and the blob would swell like a magical, breathing bubble. With simple tools, tweezers and wooden blocks, he would shape this glowing air into the most delicate things I could imagine. A cup so thin that light passed through it, a small animal figure, a bowl that seemed to be made of solid water.

I was mesmerized. My work was about pushing, shaping and containing. On the other hand, his was about breath, expansion and capturing light. We were both makers, but we spoke different languages with our hands.

One afternoon, I finally gathered my courage. I pointed to a beautiful blue glass vase he had just finished. "It's... like holding air," I said, knowing he wouldn't understand the words, but hoping he would see the wonder in my eyes.

He looked at me, then at the vase. He smiled, then pointed at the vase and said a word: "Caeruleum." Then he pointed to the sky. Blue.

That was the beginning. We started our own trade route, right there in the dusty courtyard. We traded not in goods, but in words and gestures. I taught him the words for clay, wheel and fire, while he taught me the words for glass, blow and cool. We shared meals. He grimaced at our steamed buns at first, then devoured three of them. I was hesitant about the strange cheese he produced from his pack, but its sharp, creamy taste was a delicious surprise for me.

We began to learn about each other's worlds. He told me stories of a city built on seven hills, of vast aqueducts carrying water, of public baths where people gathered to talk. I told him about our Emperor, our reverence for our ancestors and the poetry we wrote about the moon and plum blossoms. He was amazed that we had paper and could write things down so easily. I was astonished by the clear, hard glass he called "a window," meant to keep the cold out but let the light in.

One evening, as we sat by the fire, an idea sparked in my mind. It was a crazy thought, a mixing of our two worlds. "Chris," I said, pointing from his pile of glass fragments to my lump of wet clay. "Together?"

He frowned, not understanding. I mimed mixing the glass into the clay. His eyes widened in shock and for a moment I thought I had offended him. But then, a slow, excited grin spread across his face. He nodded vigorously.

The next week was a beautiful, frustrating mess. We became true partners. We experimented, failing again and again. My clay, when mixed with his crushed glass, would crack in the kiln. His glass, when he tried to shape it around a core of my clay, would shatter. My father would shake his head, muttering about “useless experiments,” but I saw a flicker of curiosity in his eyes.

We didn’t give up. We learned from each failure. I learned that his glass needed to cool very slowly. He learned that my clay needed to be purified in a special way. We were no longer just a potter and a glassblower. We were inventors, bridging the gap between earth and fire, between East and West.

Finally, the day came for us to open the kiln after our latest attempt. The air was thick with anticipation. As the kiln cooled, we peered inside. There it was. A single, perfect vase. It had the strong, elegant form of my Chinese pottery, with a gentle curve I had learned from my father. But its surface was something entirely new. Swirls of Chris’s crushed blue glass, caeruleum, had melted into the clay, creating a brilliant, shimmering glaze the colour of a deep, starry night. It was sturdy like my work, but it held light and colour like his. It was both useful and beautiful.

Chris and I didn’t cheer. We just looked at each other and in that look, we said everything. We had done it. We had created something that could only exist because our paths had crossed.

When my uncle prepared for his next journey west, we gave him the vase. “Sell this,” we told him. “But more importantly, tell its story. Tell people it was made by a daughter of China and a son of Rome, working together.”

Years later, my uncle returned with an empty space where the vase had been, but a pouch full of silver. And he brought back a story. He said the vase had ended up in a wealthy Roman household. They valued the silver, of course, but they valued the story more. It was a symbol of a world that was much larger, and much more wonderful, than they had imagined.

My father’s workshop changed after that. We started making glazed pottery, using the techniques Chris and I had created. Our family’s work became famous for its beauty as well as its use.

Chris eventually returned to his home and I stayed in mine. But the distance didn’t matter. We had built a bridge between us. The new Silk Road, I realized, wasn’t just about trading silk for gold, or glass for clay. It was about trading ideas. It was about discovering that the man from the other side of the world wasn’t a stranger, but a partner. He had different skills, different stories and a different colour to his eyes, but he had the same desire to create, to share and to understand.

The greatest treasure the Silk Road gave me wasn’t silver or a new technique. It was the profound understanding that our differences aren’t walls that separate us. They are doors. And when we are brave enough to open them, we don’t just meet a new person, we find a new part of ourselves, and together, we can make something more beautiful than either of us could have ever made alone.

The Archive

St. Mary's Canossian College, Sam Yee Carina, Chiu – 15

I collect tales.

The air itself died here. It hangs heavy and still, a suffocating blanket of heat that offers no respite, nor whisper nor movement. The sun is not a celestial body but a vengeful god, a white-hot coin hammered into the hard, bleached sky. It pours its fury onto the earth below with a strangled laugh, and stares and caresses the land with a menacing grin.

Beneath it, the desert stretched into eternity—a vast, skeletal wasteland of sand and shattered rock. Dunes rise like the frozen waves of a burning ocean, their crests sharp enough to cut eyes.

The sand, a fine, pale gold from a distance, is a gritty, blinding smear of silica and dust that scorches the skin fiercely. Nothing grew but the occasional thorny sentinel of a dead bush, its branches twisted into agonized shapes.

The world is a dry bone and the sun is the tongue that licks it clean. It has licked me clean. There is nothing left of the man I was, the man with a name, a purpose. There is only the heat and the thirst and the sand. Always the sand. It grinds between my teeth. A final, gritty meal filling the cracks in my lips. I think it is filling my lungs, one tiny, sparkling grain at a time. I will become a statue of sand, a monument to nothing, in a desert that has already forgotten names.

I am the Archivist. I have to remember that. It is the last knot on a rope I am slipping down. I was sent to find hope. To walk the corpse of the Silk Road and find what new life was sprouting from the rot. A beautiful, stupid mission for a beautiful, stupid world that was already dead, it just hadn't stopped moving. Yet.

My satchel is still with me. Inside, my notebooks. The ink has run dry. The words are ghosts now, blurry smears of fear and delusion. And the jar. The goddamn jar. It was meant for a sample of the future. It is empty.

I fell some time ago. I don't remember it. It feels like falling into a bed. A warm, soft bed that wants to hold me. This is a nice thought. I will hold onto this thought. I am lying in a bed. The sheets are warm.

A shadow moves. It cuts through the white-hot glare. A shape. Tall. I try to focus. My eyes are gummy, stuck together with salt and sleep. It is a man. He is wrapped in cloth the color of dust and old blood. He has no face, just a slit for eyes. Those eyes are dark. They are the only cool thing I have seen in practically forever.

He kneels. The world tilts. He has a waterskin. He brings it to my lips.

I whimper. An animal sound. Torn from a place deeper than thought. The water is warm. It tastes of leather and something else, something metallic and familiar. It doesn't matter. It is wet. It is life. I drink greedily, choking, spit running down my chin. He pulls the skin away.

"Slowly, brother," he says. The sound of two stones grinding together. It is the best sound I have ever heard.

He helps me up. His arm is like iron wrapped in old rope. He is stronger than he looks. He half-carries, half-drags me to a ledge of rock that offers a sliver of shade. It feels like a palace. He gives me more water. Then, a piece of meat. It is dark, fibrous, tough. I don't care. I suck on it. Salt. So much salt. And that taste again. Metallic. Like licking a battery. Like the smell before a thunderstorm that never comes.

"You are far from the paths," the man says.

He sits, watching the empty desert. He is utterly still. "My name is Elias. I walk the Silk Road. I collect the tales."

"Tales?" My voice is a rusted hinge.

"The last tales," he nods slowly. "The true ones. Ones that come after the end of lies."

I tell him I am the Archivist. I tell him about the jar. The words are ash in my mouth. He listens. He nods.

“Hope was the last lie to die,” Elias says. His dark eyes fix on me. “It is a comfort we can no longer afford. Now, there is only truth. And the truth is written in the body. In what it needs to continue.”

He gestures to the meat I am gnawing on. “The land provides. For those who understand its new language.”

I look at the strip of meat. I have been sucking it soft. The fibers separate. I see a pattern in them, a network of tiny, tough threads. It looks like... no. My mind is playing tricks. The sun. The thirst. I see things. I see the ghost of a tattoo on Elias’s wrist, just below his wrappings. A faded blue chainlink. I knew a man once, a geologist, who had a tattoo like that. Michael. His name was Michael. He was heading east, years ago. Said he’d found a map to an aquifer.

The meat tastes of salt and metal.

Elias sees me looking. He pulls his sleeve down.

“The body is a text,” he says, his voice hypnotic. “It tells its own tale. We must learn to read it.”

A coldness that has nothing to do with the gathering evening chill seeps into my bones. I look at his long staff, propped against the rock. It is not wood. It is too straight, too smooth. It is stained dark at one end. It looks like a femur. A human femur.

I stop chewing. The meat is a lump in my mouth. I cannot swallow it. I cannot spit it out.

Elias is watching me. There is no malice in his eyes. No cruelty. There is only a vast, terrible patience. The patience of the desert itself. The patience of a man who has read the last true tale and accepted its ending.

“The world is empty,” he says softly, as if confirming my darkest thought. “But we are not alone. We carry each other. We sustain each other. It is the last communion.”

My stomach convulses. I retch, my body trying to expel the horror I have consumed. Nothing comes up but a little bile and water. Elias doesn’t move. He just watches. He knew this moment would come. He was waiting for it.

He reaches into his pack and pulls out another strip of the dark meat. He offers it to me.

“The truth is cruel, brother,” he whispers, his voice full of an intimate sorrow. “But it is all we have left. You must be hungry. Eat. Become part of the tale.”

I look from the meat to his eyes, to the long, bone-white staff. The Archivist in me screams. The man I was screams. But the animal, the starving, desperate animal that is all I have left, is quiet. It is considering his offer.

The sun dips below the horizon, the world plunging into a cold, blue dark. The first star appears, a single, sharp pinprick of light. It looks like an eye. Watching. Waiting to see what I will do.

I am still so hungry.

I am so very hungry.

I am bleeding. There is a deep, hot pulse of it at my side. A final, desperate inkwell. The blood is not red, not out here. It is a rich purple-black against the infinite, bleached pallor of the sand. It is the only thing that looks alive. It is the only thing that looks real.

Elias sees it. Of course he does. His eyes, those cool, dark slits in a face wrapped in the colours of a dying world, flick down to the wound. They hold no surprise, no pity. They hold the quiet, acquisitive gleam of a scholar finding a footnote that completes the thesis. A curator finding the final, perfect piece.

“The land provides,” he says again, his voice the sound of two stones grinding together in this immense, suffocating silence. “But it also takes. The balance is... delicate.”

He moves. Not with the hurried compassion of a saviour, but with the ritualistic precision of a priest preparing a sacrament. From his pack—a thing of worn leather and despair—he pulls a roll of cloth, faded to the colour of a long-dried scab. Then, a small clay pot, its surface etched with patterns that swim in my fevered sight. He uncorks it. The smell is sharp, herbal, a ghost of something green and growing that masks something older, more fundamental, beneath. The smell of an autopsy. The smell of a spice market, long dead.

“This will help.”

I flinch as his fingers find the gash. They are not the gnarled roots of an old desert wanderer. They are... familiar. Their dryness, the specific pressure of them, the way the middle finger crooks slightly—it is a memory I cannot place, a ghost of a touch from a life before the sand. The pain is a bright, clean fire, a shocking reminder of a nervous system that still functions, that still insists on its own existence. He works with a detached, efficient grace. The paste from the pot is a cold agony, a thousand stinging ants devouring the heat of the wound. Then the binding, the cloth wrapped tight, a brutal, comforting squeeze that promises to hold me together even as I feel myself coming utterly apart.

“You are lucky,” he grinds out, tying the bandage off with an intricate knot. “The cut is clean. It will tell a good tale.”

The metallic taste is still on my tongue, a permanent veneer. My thirst returns, a dull, scraping need at the back of my throat, but it is different now. Tainted. I am afraid of what the water will taste like now. I am afraid it will taste of him. Of me.

Elias settles back against the rock, merging with the landscape once more as the blue dark deepens, swallowing the last of the day’s violence. The stars emerge, but as cold, sharp holes punched in the fabric of eternity, letting in the infinite, indifferent void.

“I knew a man,” I whisper, the words torn from a place that is not a voice. A last, desperate attempt to build a raft of memory before the sea of sand closes over my head. “With a tattoo like yours. On his wrist. A chainlink. Michael. He was a geologist. He was... he was looking for water.” Pathetic. Looking for water. The most beautiful, the most stupid mission in the world.

Elias is silent for a long time. The wind is the only answer, a soft, constant sigh over the dunes, the desert breathing its slow, endless breath. When he speaks, his voice is different. Softer. It is worse.

“I remember Michael,” he says, the gentleness in a ruined voice. “He spoke of aquifers. Of ancient rivers sleeping beneath the dust. He had hope.” A pause, filled with the sound of the wind. “It made his flesh sweet.”

The world does not shatter. It dissolves. There is no crash of horror, only a silent hollowing out. As if his words have reached inside me with a spoon and scooped out everything that was left—every memory, every fear, every last vestige of the man called the Archivist—leaving nothing but a cold, echoing shell. My mind, my beautiful, stupid, Archivist mind, scrambles for a different meaning, a metaphor, a lie. It finds none. It finds only the truth, waiting for me here in the dark. Patient. Terrible. And in its own grotesque way, logical.

He is not a monster. That word belongs to the old world, a world of laws and supermarkets and fables that burned away long ago. He is something else. A priest of a new, brutal faith. A librarian in a library where the books are made of skin and the tales are written in hunger.

“Why?” The word is a breath.

“The tales must be preserved,” he says, as if explaining that the sky is above and the sand is below. “Not in ink.” He gestures a wrapped hand toward my satchel, my ruined notebooks. “Ink runs. It bleeds. It is a ghost. Not in jars.” His eyes flick to my empty sample jar. “Jars are for hope. They are empty. The truth is written here.” He taps his own chest, a dull thud against the wrappings. “In the flesh. In the blood. In the strength it gives to continue the walk. We are the living library. The last archive. To consume a man is to know him. To honour his journey by making it a part of your own. It is the last, true act of remembrance. The final communion.”

He looks at me, and in that look, I see it all. He did not find me by chance. He was drawn to my struggle, to my fading life, as a scholar is drawn to a rare, crumbling text. He was waiting to see if I would become a tale lost to the sand, or if I was worthy of being read.

The horror is not a wave but the sea itself, and I am at the bottom. The meat in my stomach is a leaden sacrilege. Michael. His name was Michael. He hated protocol, loved terrible coffee, and could read the hustle of the world in a strata of rock. And now he is a memory in my cells. A footnote in my own consumption.

I think I should scream. The animal inside should be tearing at the bars of its cage. But it is not. The animal is listening. The animal is interested. The animal understands the simple economy of calories and survival. The animal knows the bandage on my side is a debt incurred, a loan of life that must be repaid.

The cold of the night seeps into my bones. I begin to shiver, a violent, uncontrollable rattling that feels like it will shake my teeth loose. The fever is starting. The wound is turning. The land provides, and it takes.

Elias watches my shivering. He does not move to add another blanket, to offer more water. His stillness is absolute. The stillness of the Sphinx, of the dunes themselves. It is a lesson.

A gust of wind, stronger than the others, snakes through our meager shelter. A playful, malicious spirit. It catches the loose end of his head-wrap, flipping the cloth back from his forearm.

The tattoo is there. A faded blue chainlink.

I know that tattoo. I know the scar that cuts through it, a thin, precise white line from a long-ago accident with a rock hammer. I know the pattern of freckles that dot the skin around it like a constellation I once mapped on a long, dusty drive.

My eyes, gummed with salt and exhaustion, drag up from the wrist, over the familiar terrain of his forearm, to the face. The slit for eyes is just a shadow. The wrappings are just the tattered remains of a shirt I packed myself, stained with my own blood from the fall. The dark eyes are my own, reflected in a pair of cracked sunglasses—my cracked sunglasses—perched on a rock beside him.

There is no one else here.

There has never been anyone else here.

The piece of meat in my hand is from my own side. The bandage is loose and wet. The metallic taste in my mouth is my own. The saviour, the philosopher, the storyteller of the apocalypse... is a phantom. A beautiful, terrible tale I have told myself to make the unmakeable possible. To give a ritual to the raw act of survival. To have a witness for my final, unforgivable sin.

The figure watches me understand. It does not smile. It does not move. It simply waits, a manifestation of a choice I have already made in the deepest, most animal part of my brain, a truth my conscious mind could not yet face. It is the tale I needed to hear to do the thing that must be done.

The shivering worsens, wracking my body. The world bleeds at the edges, the stars smearing into cold tears. The fever is a furnace now, burning away the last of me.

I look from the meat in my hand to the empty, waiting face of my salvation and my damnation. The Archivist is dead. Michael is dead. The man with a name and a purpose is dead. All that is left is hunger. The simple yet all-consuming hunger.

I am still so hungry.

I am so very hungry.

My hand, shaking with a violence that seems like it will tear the tendons, rises to my mouth. The journey is infinite. The space between my hand and my lips is the entire length of the Silk Road, from the bustling markets of Xian to the silent, bone-white ruins of Palmyra. The road of dreams and empires, of spices and slaves, of ideas and plagues. It is the road I walked to find the future, and it has led me here, to this rock, to this choice. It was never a road of silk. It was a road of dust. And dust is all that remains.

The meat touches my lips. Not sustenance but an archive. It is the last testament. It is Michael's hope. It is the geologist's knowledge. It is the Archivist's failed mission. It is my own desperate, failing body.

I take a bite.

So loud in the absolute silence of the desert night. A wet, tearing sound. A sound of ending. And of continuation.

I chew. The truth is cruel. It is of salt and metal and the taste of a world that is over. It is the only truth left.

I swallow.

I am the tale.

Mom, I Want to Play

St. Paul's Co-educational College, Jiajun, Cai – 16

Hassan's mother had been uneasy. She wanted to hide the ubiquitous posters that had been posted everywhere throughout the country, even in this smallest, most rustic and remote village near the border of this country, from the sight of her only kid. It had been advocating for 'Joining the Army!' with a detailed depiction of the man of a typical Arabic, with a chevron moustache, who had been abusing his power to the country in terror for 2 years already. She had been so worried that she desperately wanted to keep her child safe from the cannons, as seen from her silver-white hair and creases and grooves of age on her head. Her husband had sunk without a trace after being enlisted half a year ago, and there was no way of losing her remaining child in this shattered family. She thus asked, 'Go study, study everything in the lecture.'

'Mom,' he explained, 'the college's suspended half a year ago. There's nothing to study. Plus, I got a straight *Montaz* (Excellent) last semester.'

Sweeping the floor, she suggested from the room, 'Then study more for the future lectures. You certainly must bring your brain back from the university in Baghdad anyway. Just don't go outside.'

'Why?'

'No why. In the name of Allah, it's too dangerous outside.'

In fact, Hassan had been uneasy either. He never wanted her mother to notice his self-conscious determination of enlistment after seeing the posters; not motivated by patriotism but compelled by the shrieks from the neighbours when the Secret Police of Saddam came after being suspected of evasions from the mandatory military service. He knew that fate spelt doom for his death, either in his father's or his neighbour's manner. He never wanted to cast any disgrace to his family, so he would rather forgo his study and expectations and ultimately his future. Only his lips moved as if he wanted to say something yet ceased and signed though, for he could not tell his mother, as she would be too desperate on hearing that.

'Fine. I'll just go on reviewing then,' he murmured and entered his study. His thin face and glasses emanated his past academic excellence then, but they combined and formed tragedy now.

The next they through some means of another uncle of his, Hassan knew that one of his uncles in Basrah had died together with his family because of the bombardment from the Iranian air forces. He knew that the war was cruel as was any war, but he had never thought of the catastrophes relating to his families. He once constantly complained to the very own god he believed, when he first lost his beloved father, venting why such heavy blows would be set onto him. Sometimes, he even questioned the very existence of the god that he used to be devout. When he had later been exposed to the horrific news every day of countless casualties, he was gradually desensitised. Wrongdoings and inhuman atrocities on the field far away had wholly reshaped his emotions. He almost ended up being apathetic to the demise of one of his dearest relatives when he was young. Hassan ended up keeping this a complete secret, lest his mother knew and further discourage his ideas to be confessed.

Meanwhile his mother received the exact same information through her closest remaining sister. Apart from feeling powerless she had nothing to do. Being insensitive to these catastrophes for similar reasons, she ended up keeping this a complete secret, lest his son knew and be as worried as herself.

Hassan finally found an excuse interesting and compelling enough to confess his thoughts in an implicit way. One day he came to his mother and wanted his mother to accept what he had thought.

'Mom, I want to *play*,' a little stuttered, he uttered.

'Pardon?' She asked. It might be due to his mother's hijab, or her ever-declining hearing, or both.

'I... well, just wanna play, no, I mean – visit, with Uncle Zayin and dear Ali in Basrah. I hadn't met them for 3 years since that Ashura,' he muttered.

Hassan hoped that his mother would not know that he knew his uncle had died, whilst his mother dropped her caution as she hoped that his son did not know the truth and spoke as childish when referring to her brother as he had when he was small. After all, Hassan's family had once lived with them for a period of time.

But in fact he definitely knew his mother had known everything, and his mother knew that Hassan had known everything about her brother, considering how quickly the information had spread. Yet neither the

parent nor her child wanted to tear down the façade in their conversation. Hassan's mother knew the day would come, irrespective of her anxiety and reluctance anyway, but she had not expected that it would come so suddenly and quickly. And Hassan knew his mother thought so, and then he attempted to speak circumlocutorily, but obviously his mother spotted so and he failed.

'You don't explain, I know. Just wait,' sighed his mother deeply as though he had committed unforgivable crimes. 'You should *give* something to them as gifts. Ali and Amina would be happy and excited to have them.' The two intimate names immediately rang a bell in Hassan's heart. The two were the only cousin he knew.

She tried hard to run to the storeroom as she might with her old body and clumsy costumes. There were faint sounds when she was rummaging up the drawers from the room. She returned with two brooches.

'These two little thingies, one for Ali and one for Amina, had *intriguing* histories despite their sizes.' She looked at her bewildered son and went on. 'You know there's an oriental country from us called China. They've managed to establish a route 2000 years ago. They dealt in silk and tea and ceramics with us Babylonians then, so we call it the Silk Road, but their ornaments were famous, nonetheless. You see, the people there loved *peace*, and we Babylonians did too, so they managed to spread the virtues. Look at this, I've managed to buy them from the bazaar celebrating the first anniversary of diplomatic recognition of China in Baghdad in 1959, and the theme was *peace*. Look at these good symbols! This is the pigeons, obviously, this is for Ali,' she explained while categorising the brooches. 'And a bunch of white orchards. This is an order of *calm and harmony* in China. This is for Amina. She would have recognised them, if she had not...' Hassan's mother came to an abrupt halt. She knew if she had continued, she must have revealed the secrets. Little did she realise Hassan spotted it early.

He looked at the exotic, pictures-like characters with strokes and dots painted on the ornaments. He understood none of them, but certainly he knew that this differed from the usual cursive and intricate script he had used to write, and so did the news he had been exposed to that had made his mind numbness.

'In the holy name of Allah, this may be a good sign of change,' he consoled to himself. Yet the words his mother had emphasised still made this conversation one of the most tense and painful moments he had had. He felt being badly hit by the fists of irony. This was one of the hardest feelings for approval in his entire life; he was so depressed that he showed no feelings of relief, let alone exhilaration after her mother granted him the approval. He took the two delicate ornaments with his trembling hands carefully and returned to his room to start packing his bags for the army. He predicted the gang-like secret agents for the supreme dictator of this country would come the next week again to execute those men dared to defy and not to enlist, so it was always better to leave and add his name to the list as early as possible.

That night he could hardly fall asleep. He thought of his college, his family, the supreme leader, and everything he had encountered, and China. He knew that China was a vast and fascinating country with 5000 years of splendour from the extensive books he had read when he was small and had been obsessed with history, yet the hard truth from the conversations between him and his mother laid another layer of meaning.

The next day, when the dawn just came and the sparkling dew-drops had still been clung, he left the village in the freezing cold where he had never left before college. He picked the time when his mother had not yet awoken, lest she prevented him from leaving at the very last minute.

Yet his plan failed and his mother appeared at the porch earlier than expected. 'Hassan,' she called. He looked back with fright and surprise, but his mother just smiled at him. 'Play with them happily, *I'm sure you will*. Grab a coat so you won't catch a cold.' Hassan was on the verge of tears: they almost ran down uncontrollably from his eyelids, but he did not allow it. 'Man should be strong, strong as iron,' he promised to himself.

The war dragged on. Hassan was told that the Iranian supreme leader, Khomeini, had been provoked when his armies confronting with the deadliest chlorine gas and the weapons sent from the United States, most notably the mines. He was told by the officials ahead of him that Iranian troops would use 'unknown tactics' to combat them, so they were told that it was better to 'prepare beforehand.'

Hassan did not want to. In fact, anti-war sentiment grew tremendously fast throughout the army, as they believed that they themselves were the unjust intruders, as opposed to the propaganda of the other way round. Yet none of them dared to speak aloud, as Damn Saddam (that was how the army called their leader when nobody eavesdropped) would consider those opinions as treason, and treason directly meant death.

In fact the whole army had just been using tactics from Europe 70 years ago, settling in the trenches sloppily. Hassan noticed that there stood a trade monument built by an Iraqi emperor centuries ago to commemorate the accomplishments of the Silk Road. It was especially ironic to see that the army commanded the troops to dismantle the pyramid and make fragments the building blocks for the military facilities. From the time when Hassan arrived there with other comrades by the personnel carrier and noticed these changes, satirical words from his mother ran through his head again and again. 'China always loves peace, and so does Iraq.'

Sometimes they were throwing aided advanced granules perfunctorily or firing the artillery casually. This continued until the arrival of the waves of children.

One day there mustered countless children, aged between eight to twelve as Hassan could tell. Their skin colour was uniform — the one identical to Hassan and his comrades. The opposition forces did not manoeuvre nor attack, so Hassan and the fellow soldiers were less tense. At the very moment where they almost returned, the commander demanded, 'Move! You get the "Ticket to Heaven" in the name of Allah'.

'Blasphemy,' Hassan dismissed.

Yet after the cannons were fired, which frightened the children, waves of unforgivable and unforgettable scenes — the real blasphemous tragedies — were witnessed. The children ran and screamed and eventually evolved to shrieks. Most of them stepped on the mines planted by the Iraqi Army, which was anticipated by the Iranian Army. The mines exploded, and the flesh of the innocent children splattered and splashed everywhere, leaving this desert of peace in the past a witness of waves of massacres: the Iranian troops certainly could not detonate all mines that blocked their attack just once, so they sent children to confront waves after waves ruthlessly.

'I saw millions of Alis and Amina dashing towards us just like dumb beasts. I saw the futures of millions of Alis and Amina interrupted both by us and them.' Hassan described afterwards.

Yet the casualties and the destruction and the reeks of the battlefield by the artillery never stopped the Iranian aggressions. Khomeini sent more child minesweepers, eventually to an outweighing state where even Hassan's side could not defend.

The onset of the real tragedy began when Hassan's brooches were commandeered. Hassan still kept the presents for emotional support. Every night, he travelled back for ten years. He slept with the two precious presents — his last connection to home — as if his uncle and his kids were alive. In his dreams Ali spoke to him just like he spoke gibberish to Hassan as a baby ten years ago. Sometimes he dreamt of China, wondering how the figures like Zhang Qian and Su Wu, although incorrectly recalled from his books, had established tales and tales of peace and friendship between the Chinese and the Iraqi 2000 years ago. The only thing he did not dream of was the hard reality.

Yet his dream ultimately perished with the brooches being taken over use. Somehow the military discovered that this precious possession could shine very brightly in the desert environment on the battlefield. To attract the children so that the Iraqi forces could shoot them more closely and easily, they used countless methods, including clangs, shot bullets. It was then proven that shiny objects, preferably dazzling glares to the children, worked the best.

At one of the most emergent moments where children uncontrollably rushed towards the trench—side with the clumsy yet furious growls by the old, rusty weapons at the back of the opposition side. It was so uncontrollable as the soldiers that stood at the station on the trench had overly waved. As for the last resort, the two brooches, with all the treasured shiny things that Hassan and other fellow soldiers had collected over days, were flung and scattered in the middle of the desert illogically and furiously.

Hassan suddenly felt completely lost, as he gave all his connections and memories to the two precious ornaments. After experiencing all those traumas, he could accept all the deprivations of all his possessions, except for the two pillars of emotional support.

He somehow managed to climb out of the trench successfully and landed on the field. After he staggered and stumbled, he finally managed to orient and locate the right position for his thrown properties. He accelerated.

He hoped that no one was looking around vigilantly, yet he was wrong.

In fact he was traced both by the Iraqi and Iranian personnels. The Iranian side was thrilled for having a free military exploit, and the Iraqi side was irate because of his abrupt appearance on the fierce and violent field. Once he heard a thud afar, he knew the grim reaper attacked on him, yet reaction was futile, regardless of speed.

A defiant bullet pierced into his skin and passed through his thin body. He fell immediately at the muffled sound and jarred. His body was lain and crooked, with a red fluid oozing from the heavy, fatal wound and seeped into the fibres of his creased olive-green uniform. Before he lost it, his last conscious gave him the senses of metallic flavour from his mouth, induced by the liquid that trailed from one side of his white lips. He grasped the two ornaments tightly and firmly as he had wished. He then laid down silently.

Before he could lose any connection to this world he wished, 'May wars perish and may peace persist.'

May wars perish and may peace persist.

Salang's Passage

St. Paul's Co-educational College, Sin, Yeung – 15

The Ending

The poor dirty beggar knelt on the side street, broken by regret and guilt. The desert was slowly swallowing his existence leaving nothing but a shadow of someone who carried a curse across his own kingdom, wiping it off the map. How could one person cause so much destruction?

A Father's Last Wish

Salang came from Niya, a tiny village clinging to the edge of the desert. Every day was a battle against the punishing sun. His dad was a tanner who taught Salang more than tanning hides, he also taught him wisdom. His dad's favourite saying, "Leather is the best material in the world, it bends but never cracks!"

Salang believed he would carry on his father's legacy but little did he know, a sandstorm would tear his family apart. His parents' final wish on their deathbeds to Salang: Leave the desert, carve a path for yourself. By the time Salang left the desert, the Silk Road was the artery of the empires. Salang's entourage was mainly entrusted with silk cocoons from China for Lord Hamsa Samir, a desert ruler whose wealth was built on taxing exporting silk. Salang became well known for his booming voice and his great negotiation skills with all walks of life. Yet beneath the bravado hides a man haunted by loss, desperate to fulfill his parents' wishes. This was the beginning of a treacherous life.

The Delivery

The sand crunched under the hooves of the camel; sweat, spices and dust mingling into a pungent scent yet the travellers were desensitized towards the stubborn sun that chaffed their already weathered skin and chapped lips. They were in a lull of the monotonous desert scenery. Barely anything excited the animals nor the people.

"We aren't far away, let's stop here to take some rest." Salang yelled to the exhausted group of men.

Fatigued with the journey, no one responded but started removing the heavy bundles off their shoulders.

"Yeeehaaaa!" sliced through the silence and echoed across the sandy mist.

Someone reacted after a few stunned seconds. "Bandits! Bandits! Protect the goods! Protect the goods!" Salang jumped up from the ground, squinting at the bunch of masked men from afar. His body lunged towards the wooden boxes hanging on his camel.

"Everyone! Forget the jewels and tea, guard the silk cocoons. Lord Hamsa Samir's orders."

The gallopings of the horses blinded their senses, leaving only terror. In an instant, the bandits already approached the caravan. The air was still, all eyes trained on the glistening scimitars held over them threateningly. Salang immediately knelt before the leader of the bandits with a forced smile.

"Lord, take whatever you please. Have mercy on us."

"Spare your lives?" the bandit sneered and spat on Salang's face.

The bandit stared hard into Salang's eyes and paused for a long time as if he was making up his mind. Suddenly, he snapped out of his thoughts and shouted at his outlaws, "Grab the goods!" Immediately, the bandits flocked to the goods and started seizing everything in sight. Just as they were busy snatching the boxes, one fell and broke open. Millions of black seeds spilled out. On closer inspection, the bandits jumped away, cursing dirty. They realised it was a box of wriggling insects. After looting the entourage, the bandits escaped.

Everyone in the caravan heaved out a sigh after a long while. Quickly, some picked around the mess to salvage what was left. A few men gathered around the insects, sieving them from the sand and throwing them back into the wooden box. No one noticed a short man sprinkling a handful of dark seeds into the same box. After the heist came frustration and a sense of hopelessness as to how they would be able to explain to Lord Hamsa. The tension hung on the group, including Salang.

Salang's voice was calm but the sheath on his sword was slick with sweat. "Everything will be fine. The silkworms are safe. We may beg the Lord for mercy on us for we saved the most valuable commodity of all." Although Salang tried to comfort his people, he knew the path ahead was bleak. The rest of the journey to Kyrgyzstan was in utter dread.

By the next new moon, the group finally arrived at the caravan site. Tomorrow they would have to enter the city and head to the Lord's palace. Salang made a final inspection of the goods in the stable and then he saw it. A parchment seal with a crimson crest. Only one person's secret guards called Khebtuul used this crest. It must have accidentally fell off one of the bandits. Salang knew that crest pattern well yet this brought back a flood of painful memories during that tragic sandstorm that took his family away. He clenched his fist. He was now certain that the bandits had not spared him or his people out of pity. They had been sent by the very person who ordered the silkworm shipment. Salang inhaled sharply. He had walked into a trap unknowingly.

A Cruel Joke

Before the great Lord Hamsa, Salang and his entourage bowed low. Only with a grunt from the man did Salang speak.

"My great lord, we were attacked by bandits. Yet my men protected your precious silkworm shipment." Please inspect the goods.

Lord Hamsa raised a finger and some of his guards scurried forward and opened up the crates. After checking, the leader nodded his head at the lord. With another flick of his finger, the men started carrying the boxes out. Salang and his men still with their heads bowed followed behind but before they could step out, guards blocked their ways with spears. As expected, music and chatter stopped instantly. All eyes were on Salang and his men. Some had fear in their eyes, some smirked while some looked on indifferent.

The Betrayal

The Lord's smile was a cruel upward smirk. He got up and circled the men like a tiger eyeing his prey. "Bandits, you say? How convenient they spared those unsightly worms," he laughed and leaned forward staring at Salang, "Do you think I entrust my wealth to chance? Those bandits were mine. Their swords were my test. And you, Salang, failed. You begged, you groveled, you showed weakness. You shall pay for your failure."

The guards' spears pressed on them. Salang and his men trembled. It felt like their fate was sealed by Lord Hamsa's cruel decree. The chamber's silence was suffocating. To make matters worse, a short man from Salang's group pushed away the guards' spears and stepped forward,

"My Lord," he said, "Salang and his men deserve to be locked away and punished for their cowardice. But why not wait until the next full moon? Then you can make a spectacle in the market square. That will teach others never to wrong you."

Salang's eyes squeezed shut in hopelessness. Then came Lord Hamsa's gleeful laugh signalling his guards to take them to the prison yard. When night fell, the same short man appeared in front of Salang's prison cell. He quietly stood in the shadow until Salang noticed him.

Hope

That night, the short man appeared at Salang's cell.

“What else do you want from me?” Salang rasped and continued, “you betrayed us! Your spite will doom us all.”

The man stepped from the shadows. “Kiran?” Salang whispered. It was the healer from Niya. Salang thought he was lost to that tragic sandstorm but here he was standing in front of him.

“The seeds I placed among the worms will serve us,” Kiran said. “They are our shield against Hamsa’s treachery. If we act carefully, we can bring him down.”

Salang whispered, “How?” his voice hoarse with disbelief.

The Twist

At the change of guards, Salang and his men escaped, guided by Kiran through the Taklamakan desert. Each night by the fire, Salang gazed at Ulker, the Seven Sisters star cluster, wondering what plan Kiran held in his leather pouch.

On the full moon, Kiran smiled. “What is done cannot be undone. May the cruel ruler meet his fate.” Soon after, word reached them. Lord Hamsa had fallen. His silkworms were destroyed and his inner sanctum struck by plague. The seeds had been rat fleas, waiting to hatch. His empire collapsed with them.

Salang returned to Niya, rebuilding the village where his parents had raised him. A thought flashed across his mind while he busied himself around one day. ‘The desert bends, but it does not crack. My father’s words live on.’

The Legend’s Beginning

Together, Salang and Kiran carried the seed of rebellion, a proof that mercy and wisdom could outlast tyranny. The tale spread across the Silk Road: of Salang, the man who bent but did not break, and Lord Hamsa, the ruler undone by greed. The desert had swallowed many lives, but it could not swallow their legend.

Pomegranates and Buddhas

St. Paul's Convent School, Hiu Tung Hailey, Kwok – 16

In truth, I feared the Buddha.

His kind gaze worried me. Mother always told me that the Buddha would punish me for being a disobedient child. Something that was just so contradictory. I now wondered if he would accept my offering, the other half of my pomegranate, and forgive my wrongdoings.

When I first saw a pomegranate, it was wrapped in some mundane cloth. Its pinkish exterior was poking out from the canvas of white. Pomegranate, its name blurted out from the vendor's mouth with such gentleness, as if its crimson was bestowed by the Emperor himself. With a slash of a knife, the pink layer pried open and exposed its red seeds, blundering within thin white walls.

'Every seed foresees the birth of a new life.' He said as he took and placed each artefact onto the dwellers' hands. The singular petite seed felt fragile against my palm. *'A chance of fertility delivered to us from the West.'* He continued decorating people's hands with the seed. Chang'an suddenly became so small, as if all things drowned in admiration of the fruit and were smudged into the shape of a pomegranate seed.

'I got it from the hands of a Sogdian. A girl, dressed in orange, right before the caves of Dunhuang.' I chewed his words up and swallowed the seed whole, in hopes that my efforts in preservation would be appreciated by the Buddha Himself. In a little possibility, He would let the seed fuse with my flesh, and its juice would be of blood coursing through my soul. Pomegranate. I imitated the movement of his lips and tasted how its syllables rolled down on my tongue. It was then that the fruit had sown its seeds into the roots of my brain, and I had offered up my heart, unknowingly, just for their nourishment.

It was near the end of summer, and the leaves began to turn orange. I thrashed the needle into the white bundle. A repetitive sequence of killing to preserve the cocoon for silk. Perhaps every little worm I put to sleep complained to the Buddha about me, and a pang of guilt slowly surfaced. My thoughts wandered up into the clouds until a sharp pain woke me from my senses. Rather than inserting the needle into the cocoon, I did it with my finger instead. Nicked by the silver tip, a droplet of blood dripped from my fingertip and painted the carpet dark red.

Red, orange, yellow; Pomegranates, Sogdian, Buddha. The breeze gradually picked up and had a cold undertone. My mind alluded to the girl with the orange cloth. How would she get by in the cold weather? What kinds of fabrics protected her against the cruel winds? Would the pomegranates blossom and bear children of red jewels? In a sudden, my fingers ached for the touch of a firm seed, and I wished my fingertips weren't stained by blood, but by the juice of a pomegranate. Stuck in this cage of silk, I asked the Buddha again for a calling. Then again, I had no pomegranates.

More often than not, there would be this tingling of a thought, residing at the corner of my mind. 'Find the girl and see the Buddha.' How could I? When cocoons still needed needles, and Chang'an was still thriving through silk. Mother would be very displeased if I left behind everything just to venture into somewhere unknown.

I gathered up the finished silk and headed to the markets. The people always needed silk, precisely, to trade with the West. 'They adore silk,' I heard from murmurs of returning traders on crooked humps of horse-like creatures. I turned to my wounded hands, a symbol of years of pursuit in the craft. If I gave the girl my silk, could she tell the Buddha I did not intend to kill? If I offered up half a pomegranate, would the Buddha have perceived it as silk? I realised I could no longer be beside cocoons and agonise over the future.

I made haste to see the vendor and proposed a contract. Foolish like dull meat, Mother would have said of me. Yet it was just enticing to know your work would be of value to someone outside of here. This so-called home I referred to, bounded by four walls, could discard me any time the moment I did something wrong. Would she see my potential? More than just craft and profit? Would my existence alone bring her any value?

With bolts of silk, I forged a promise with the vendor. In three months, he would have taken me to Dunhuang. I never really listened to Mother about the rules in Chang'an: what should be done and what should not be. I only lived in that silk-filled room, stabbing and killing and weaving; weeping and hurting and aching. I really am a disobedient child, Mother. But please, let me be disobedient once more. After this, if there were to be an after, I would have amounted to something anew.

"Maybe this body of dullness would be formed into something greater, like the veils wrapped around pomegranate seeds." I thought as I packed the last of the belongings into my nang – my mother's writings, some water and dried bread, and a robe woven from silk. My longing for elsewhere hid away my fear of doing things deemed unacceptable.

I stood by the vendor as he secured the products onto the mammals', *camel's* humps. Mother, would you be proud? For I did something you dared not. Colour soon left my sight, and what remained was of muddish brownness.

Waves of sand soothed into my vision, with mountains rumbling across horizons. The air was mixed between the smell of tea leaves and paper, and sand, something comforting but not so pleasant. As Chang'an slowly disappeared into the size of a pomegranate seed, only the residue of sand lingered within, while vast lands of muted colours spread across. Li Yuan, the name of the vendor I later picked up, was riding a camel in front. Followed were ten of the same spectacle, only that I stood amongst the pack with amazement consuming me whole.

We walked and walked, and continued for weeks. Grains of sand prickled my feet, like the touch of cocoons on fingertips, just more on the rougher side. I saw my full loaf turn into small bites, and the faces of men change from calmness to being burdened with soreness. The desert felt like it was everlasting, reaching out into long lengths till it touched the sun at dawn. I was offered some dried nuts and sips of water from time to time, and Li Yuan said Dunhuang was near.

I believed it was near autumn, as I felt chilled air blow past during the night. It was awfully cold, and my skin became stern and frozen. I failed to warm myself, for every time I breathed out, a white mist came out of my mouth. It was all so similar, the caress of crisp winds and the dryness under my fingertips. It was just like being in Chang'an, only that I was surrounded by layers of sand and not layers of shelves stacked with silk. What would Mother have said? If she saw the view right now? I always hoped to enquire into her thoughts, but alas, I would never know, not in the past nor in the future.

It was still sand when, unforeseen, a tint of blue came into contact, then bushes of green and houses upon houses. It was like the Buddha felt merciful of the desert's emptiness, and he scooped out a hole of sand to pour in a lake of clear water, planting trees of luscious green to accompany the lone body. Covered from incoming storms of sand and brutal winds was the land that housed traders, Sogdians, and the girl. An oasis had appeared in nothingness.

At first I took careful steps, but steps became short sprints, and sprints became runs. I soon strayed away from the pact and was at the brink of the Dunhuang. No, it wasn't similar at all. It was different, so different from the air of sweetened fruit and touch of smooth silk and the loud crowds. It smelled of sand and felt like rough rocks and tasted like tranquillity. Maybe this was why the Buddha received many offerings.

Nature expanded miles upon miles; trees of vibrant greens felt ever so close in the land where nothing was apparent. I strolled further in admiration and enticement. The hooves of camels clanked onto the stone path. As I entered this land of sacredness. I saw men with wrapped cloth over their heads and men with nothing on their heads. Their clothing differed drastically, with the former dressed in all colours of nature – red green yellow – and the latter devoid of any, covered by splashes of ink. Their heads were of a curiosity too, albeit it was disrespectful to stare.

‘That person is a craftsman.’ He pointed towards the man with a covered head. The coverage, which I knew not what to call, was like a sack of flour with the top like a potato. He was holding an object, silver like my needles, but larger in length and thickness than my needles. He held down the tool against clay and held another to strike the stub. The sounds of his strikes echoed, with small spectacles of dust flying across the air. Another came by and held a stick layered with fine threads of hair, similar to a brush Mother used for writing but of a more crate-like attire. He dipped the brush into bowls of liquids, staining the white fur into blues, and dabbed the statues to give them colour.

‘That person is a monk,’ he signalled to the man with a bare head, greyish-green drabble beneath his shoulders and ending in bands of dark blue near to calloused hands holding a long branch. His elongated ears were punctured by metal, a large hoop the size of a mandarin. His robes weren’t long and reached right above his knees; beneath were light grey pants covering his legs. Deciles of white covered him as well; a cocoon-like rope circled around his neck, meeting the white of his carriage slightly. His carriage, or *something*, hugged his back closely. A frame constructed from sticks of wood and certain planks curled above his head, with red-like fruits secured by ropes.

‘Where is the girl?’ I waited for his sentence, preferably ‘There is the girl who sold me pomegranates.’ Every person I saw was of things so different to the normal man at Chang’an, their work, clothes and gestures. My chest tightened upon remembrance of the girl, and my hands shook in anticipation of our encounter.

‘There is the girl.’ I followed his gaze and was reminded of my first sight of a pomegranate. Beside her stood tall trees hanging down the fruits of fertility. The richness blooming in variations of red, with the one being most ripe standing beneath the sections of green.

She dressed in pale orange cloth embellished with floral patterns of pink and green. Long collar sleeves cupped her small wrists, hands holding pomegranates but green rather than red. The fabric was secured by a black belt and extended till right above her knees. Like the monk, greyish-yellow pants seethed underneath. Braided hair in

the colour of bimba fruits draped down to her chest, her small head covered by a long dome-shaped object, marked by florals alike in a lake of pink. In between thickened eyebrows like that of a rabbit was adorned by a red dot in the middle. It was just like the ladies in the Emperor’s court, only that she did not wear long silk orange robes nor have hair the colour of coal. She would’ve survived the winter, and it seemed it treated her well.

What a delicacy, I thought, to be able to witness something never spoken of in the entirety of one’s life. Perhaps that was why monks travelled afar, to seek the entirety of beauty? I must offer up a pomegranate to thank the Buddha for his calling.

‘These are not in season yet.’ She spoke with words I recognised. She talked in the language I grew up with, though certain sounds appeared in higher pitches than usual. She seemed not perplexed to see another girl in the midst of nowhere, as if this was but a common phenomenon normal to the human perception. She looked at me with a tilt of the head and went on with her tending.

I then remembered the robe and gave it to the girl. She seemed confused, but still I urged her to take the robe. She gave me a pomegranate in return, the reddest one that was available. Upon wearing the silk, she looked like a maiden in the imperial court, blending with the city of Changan. She seemed ecstatic then and pulled me to follow her somewhere.

We ended up in a cave, and I was met under the gaze of a thousand Buddhas. His podgy bodice was shaped into a sitting position, wearing the colours of red, blue, and white with a smile so devoid of menace and anger. Beside were two statues of monks, and continued were paintings expanding to the roofs, coloured again but with black and whites. Some held out both hands, some held out one, and some held out none. I thought of a thousand hands receiving offerings from millions. The crafts of man delivered through delicate details and patience. Engravings seen through the strike of their tools, every dot of red painted by the touch of their brush.

One of the paintings was of a figure with circular head coverage. Shoulders engraved with silver plates and wrists decorated with hoops of beads. A curly tail—alike thing swirled behind her back.

‘*Miwnay.*’ You said with such gentleness. You told me about her abandonment by her husband, and she was left stranded in this land of new tales. You admired her literacy and the anger swelling within. You talked about pomegranates and talked about the Buddhas.

‘The people here told me a story about a lady with a pomegranate. The Buddha received offerings from men of riches. Gold coins, foods, incense. He accepted them with only a single hand. Then a lady came and offered up half a pomegranate; embarrassed, she said it was the last of what she owned. The Buddha accepted the pomegranate with both hands.’

You pointed at the fruit held in my hands with fabricated words. ‘Pomegranate. You.’ I knew you had more words stored inside your chest, but you never took them out. Just like Mother, always tricking me, playing me with words you both knew I never figured out.

Perhaps you wanted to give me the fruit. Perhaps you just wanted me to look at it. But I hoped that you were thinking about us as pomegranates instead. Prized possessions praised for beauty, your smarts and my craft. Protected and valued, as if we weren’t simply mere seeds amongst hundreds more and discarding one would be a stain on one’s life. But I knew that you were the red seeds hidden deep within, undiscovered and of a myth. I was simply thin white veils straying in the far lands.

If I could, I would’ve offered you all of my pomegranates, but I only had half of one. Oh Buddha, would she accept it with both hands, like what you did with the poor lady? Would you accept mine?

In truth, Buddha, fear had left my heart since the very start.

An Escape

St. Paul's Convent School, Tsz Ki Katie, Choi – 15

The years of captivity changed Zhang Qian in ways he could not have foreseen.

Sent from Chang'an as an envoy of Emperor Wu, he had ridden west to seek the Yuezhi and offer the Han's hand in alliance against the marauding Xiongnu. He travelled with only a small retinue, carrying silk and letters—hopes of a new order written into the dust and blood of the frontier.

But the Xiongnu fell on them as they crossed the narrow ribbon of the Gansu Corridor. The attack was swift and merciless. Zhang Qian's companions were cut down, and he was taken north—deeper and deeper into the alien heart of the steppe.

The first year was the hardest: hands bound, every movement watched, a foreign tongue filling the air. Days turned to seasons, seasons to years. He learned the Xiongnu language, learned to ride their horses, eat their food, and endure their winters. In time he was given a wife, a woman who had also lost her home and lived quietly among the conquerors. Their bond began in loneliness and necessity, yet over the years affection—and shared suffering—wove itself into it.

Still, at night, when the fires sank low and the camp quieted, Zhang Qian mouthed the names of distant places as if they were prayers: Chang'an. The Wei River. The Yuezhi. He repeated his emperor's words and the vows of his mission. He had promised to return—or to die trying.

The years taught him patience. The Xiongnu were not demons, he learned, but men: fathers, sons, husbands. Yet their raids did not cease. Their arrows still found Han borders. And Zhang Qian's duty remained as sharp as ever.

So he watched, waited, listened. He learned which guards could be bribed, who drank too much, who slept too deeply. He noticed when horses were left untethered, when sentries at the camp's edge grew lazy in a long peace.

All the while his wife watched him with sad, knowing eyes. She saw the longing that never left him—the way his gaze always returned to the horizon.

Now, riding into the night, Zhang Qian's mind was a storm of memory and fear. The steppe looked endless, a black sea beneath the stars. He clung to the horse with knees long unaccustomed to the saddle's relentless bite, his body aching with every jolt.

He chose a direction he hoped was west, toward the river he remembered from traders' tales. There were no roads—only a faint sense of north and south, east and west, written in wind and constellations.

Behind him, he imagined the camp stirring: a shout, the rush of men, horses saddled in haste, bows snatched up. He pushed his mount harder until the cold burned his lungs.

Dawn found him slumped in the saddle, eyes bloodshot, limbs numb. He did not dare stop until the sun climbed higher and he had crossed a shallow stream, leaving as little trace as he could. In a small hollow beneath low, wind-bent trees, he let the horse graze and chewed a strip of dried meat. His mind replayed the final moments in the yurt—his wife's trembling hands, the way she looked at him as if carving his face into memory.

"You must live," she had whispered. "Even if you never return to me, you must live."

He slept only in fragments, half-waking at every distant sound, every shift of grass under wind. The steppe held dangers beyond pursuit: wolves, sudden storms, the slow certainty of hunger.

As dusk fell, he drank from the river and mounted again, moving westward—always westward. He searched for the constellations he had learned as a boy, the ones that promised direction when the earth offered none.

Time loosened and frayed. Each day became a contest between exhaustion and necessity. He rationed food and water, gnawing tough meat, sipping sparingly from his skin. The knife his wife had pressed into his hand never left him—tool and talisman both.

He saw little life. Sometimes wild horses streamed across the horizon. Sometimes wolf eyes winked in tall grass. He skirted the bones that marked old Xiongnu camps and kept away from distant smears of smoke.

At night the cold was merciless. He wrapped himself in a thick Xiongnu cloak and buried his face in rough wool. Sleep came briefly and left him haunted—Chang'an in one breath, the ghosts of his lost companions in the next.

To keep despair from closing over him, he spoke aloud. "I will not fail," he told the wind. "I am Zhang Qian of Han. I will see the willow trees of the Wei again."

The horse became his companion. He stroked its neck and shared what little he had. The animal never shied from darkness or slowed, even as its ribs began to show.

On the fifth day he saw distant columns of smoke and veered away, certain it was a patrol. He crossed a wide valley where grass grew high and thick and the air smelled of wildflowers. He rested there, letting the horse graze, watching clouds drift as if nothing in the world pursued him.

He remembered his mother's stories—the Yellow River, peach blossoms in spring. He remembered the halls of the Han court and the weight of silk robes. All of it felt impossibly far, like a dream from someone else's life.

Hunger gnawed at him, but he refused despair. He found berries in a sheltered hollow. Once he startled a hare and brought it down with a stone. He built a small fire, shielding it with rocks, roasted the meat quickly, and ate with his hands.

He thought often of his wife—her laughter, the way she braided her hair by the fire, the quiet strength that held her upright even in sorrow. He wondered whether she would be punished for his escape, or whether the Xiongnu would let her fade back into the camp's ordinary griefs.

Each night he searched for the North Star and used it to judge his course. He remembered old maps, lessons from his youth, and traders' tales of the Taklamakan—jade, gold, distant kings.

He remembered, too, Emperor Wu, and the promise he had sworn: to return with news of the Yuezhi. That promise was the thread he clung to when fatigue threatened to pull him under.

On the twelfth day, he crossed a broad river he guessed was the Syr Darya. The land began to change. Hills rose in the distance, dotted with small groves. The people he glimpsed did not dress like the Xiongnu. Their clothes were brighter, their faces unfamiliar, their speech a new music. He kept to the edges of villages, stealing only what he dared: an onion or two, a handful of dried apricots, once a crust of bread cooling on a windowsill.

Weakness crept into him—fever from exposure, exhaustion that sank into the bone. Once he collapsed beside a road and might have died if a passing merchant did not find him. The trader, from Dayuan, knew a little Xiongnu speech and made himself understood by gesture when words failed.

He gave Zhang Qian water and bread and listened with widening eyes. "You come from the east? All this way?" he said, shaking his head. "The world is wide, my friend. You must have a powerful reason to travel so far."

Zhang Qian managed a smile with cracked lips. "I serve the Han," he said. "I seek the Yuezhi."

The merchant lifted him to his feet and made room for him in his caravan for a day's journey. As strength returned, Zhang Qian listened greedily—learning of Dayuan's towns, Bactria's riches, and the shifting alliances of the western lands.

When they reached the outskirts of a walled city, he parted from the merchant, trading his horse for a sack of supplies. He spent his nights in barns, beneath hedges, sometimes in the shelter of a family that asked no questions. He learned new words, sketched what he saw, memorized routes and river crossings.

No matter what, he vowed, he would return to Han and tell his emperor everything. The road would be long and dangerous—but he knew now that “impossible” was only a word spoken by those who had not yet been tested. He had survived the Xiongnu, the endless steppe, hunger, and cold. He had been saved by strangers. He would not fail.

Years later, when Zhang Qian finally made his way back to Chang'an, the world had shifted. He was hailed as a hero: the man who returned with news of western kingdoms, the man who opened the path by which Han silk—and Han ambition—could travel farther than ever before.

Yet he remembered his escape more clearly than the cheers: the howl of the wind, his wife's trembling hand, the taste of dried meat and river water, the endless grassland, the stars that pulled him onward. He understood then, as he understood still, that his greatest journey had never been easy—and that its cost could not be measured only in miles.

And so Zhang Qian's story became legend.

The Rotting Fruits of Greed

St. Stephen's College, Lincoln, Chan Lik – 16

The Silk Road, one of the greatest routes to ever be discovered in human history, a road between magnificent countries that possesses the most exotic goods in the world, and a gold mine for merchants. I was awed by the vast products this route had to offer. A gratifying sensation that floods my body whenever I envision myself collecting abundant luxurious fruits. It felt as if a serene calling reached my soul, begging me to commence an enthralling adventure. My curiosity only sparked and blazed like an eternal flame. My one true goal in life has finally revealed itself, I was destined to become a merchant! To collect the most valuable fruits of the world! I proceeded to take every penny that my father had earned for the last 40 years of his life, equipped myself with the required gear and clothes, brought a rounded vase worth quite some value, and embarked on my journey to the East. That was twenty years ago.

In hindsight, I was blinded by greed. My thirst for wealth and opulence deceived me. In truth, it was not the extraordinary goods that made the Silk Road so remarkable, but something more captivating, something more intriguing about the vast stories offered by this route, that allows us to realise how our souls have been rotting like fruit. Now, allow me to tell you my tale of the Silk Road.

I began my journey in Constantinople, and sought to find my desired treasures. I navigated rocky terrains, endured the scorching inferno, faced the sharp winds and survived the unforgiving winters. I have stepped in front of Death's doorstep multiple times, narrowly escaping his claws. But my efforts and determination ended in vain, I was no where nearer to my goal than I was in Constantinople. My hopes slowly started to fade, that eternal flame in my heart slowly started to dim. How can my purpose in life turn against me? I was supposed to be collecting all the foreign delights I desired! I felt increasingly demotivated every step I took, there was nothing but dry emptiness in sight. Occasionally, I encountered groups of other merchants, but their possessions were meagre and lackluster, I could only walk away in disappointment, cursing this treacherous world for jeopardizing my dreams. After a few months, I was lost in a desert. I realised that I lacked capital and resources to continue my journey. I had used all my money for food and water, I even traded my rounded vase for some coins as a last resort. I would not be able to afford food and shelter sooner than anticipated if I don't find a stable source of income.

Eventually, my most dreaded reality had presented itself. I could not sustain myself for I had no rations nor money. I was perturbed by hunger for days, and barely walking as my legs quivered. I shoved bugs down my throat I found on the ground to survive, my muscles crying for the agonising pain to stop, my mind began falling apart. I could not concentrate, and saw everything in double vision, sometimes pondering if the things I saw were reality or pure imagination. I was trapped in this horrendous predicament, my body and mind were failing me. 'I have to go on!', I told myself. 'I have to go on!', 'I have to go on!', 'I have to go on!', 'I have to...'. Then something caught my attention. But it was the most absurd phenomenon I had witnessed.

There was a man, a scrawny, boned man. There was nothing exceptional about his appearance, yet it was what he was doing that caught my attention. Behind the man was a long, thick rope that was attached to a giant bag twice the size of him. I stared in stark shock. The fact that such a frail man was able to pull such tremendous weight left me bemused. Then a more intriguing thought occurred to me, a bag that big must have contained goods galore! Perhaps the holy grail of my journey! I darted to him as fast as I could, waving my hands in the air, trying to draw his attention. He noticed me, remained stationary for a few seconds, and collapsed.

Once I reached the man, I immediately supported him and got him sitting on the ground. Our eyes met, and I saw an exhausted, defeated soul through that miserable gaze.

'Sir, are you alright?' I inquired.

'Yes... yes... thank you sir.' The traveller responded with a dry voice.

‘How are you able to drag that giant bag? You seem to be in a rather weak state my friend.’

‘It doesn’t matter, I have to continue moving, I can not stop.’

The traveller attempted to get on his feet but ultimately failed. As he struggled to recover, I could not help but look at that giant bag, wondering if it truly contained my prized desire. But the traveller noticed my suspicious behaviour, and gripped my leg tightly, looking at me with a cautious and fierce glare.

‘What are you doing! Why are you staring at my bag? Get away from me!’ He cried acrimoniously.

I retreated, walked back a few steps. I knew he was startled, but so was I. I was not expecting him to have the energy to speak in such a strong voice, and it sent a chill down my spine. I recollected myself and approached him slowly, as if I was trying to tame a loose beast.

‘Please sir, I mean no harm, I was merely curious about what was inside your bag.’ I said calmly.

‘I... forgive me for my impetuosity. It’s just that... I cannot lose that bag.’

‘Why are you even here? And how long have you been roaming in this place?’

‘It... it’s a long story, do you have any water or food to spare?’ The traveller asked.

I shook my head, and it reminded me of the mystery of the traveller’s enormous bag. I looked at that tempting bag through the corner of my eye. I had to learn what it was inside. It had to contain those lavish fruits! I am sure of that! But how was I able to confirm my hypothesis without alarming the traveller? He was vigilant and would not let anyone near his treasured possession. It seemed impossible to complete this feat. No, there was a way! I could gain his trust! And when his guard is down, I shall seize him, then claim my prize! I composed myself, hid my thoughts of desperation to present myself as sane as possible. I proposed to him that he ought to rest, and share his story with me as he recuperates. I sat down with him and he began to tell his story.

‘It all started with my father, born and raised in China, who was one of the pioneers of the Silk Road. He was recruited by the Emperor to find new trading routes in the West, and walked side-by-side with Zhang Qian himself. After Zhang Qian returned to China, my father was ordered to continue his exploration Westward. But he was cursed with misfortune during his journey, for he had a fatal accident. He fell off a hill while trying to collect his fallen belongings and broke his leg. There were large wounds, leaving his leg vulnerable to infections. Eventually, the ill fate was manifested, his wound did not close and showed signs of rotting. Pus leaked through the revolting wounds and he was overwhelmed with pain. The physicians said that if his leg was not amputated, the infection would have spread across his body and killed him. My father therefore lost his leg and was forced to reside in Constantinople for he could not return to his homeland. And it was there that he settled down and gave birth to me.’

‘As a child, my father told me about his life in China. He was a peasant chef back in China and was in poverty. The country faced many invasions from the North, and the common people lived in constant trepidation of the catastrophes that the enemies would bring. They could ruthlessly murder anyone they pleased, steal their crops, and enslave the helpless commoners, ultimately exacerbating their already miserable lives. My father dreaded life there. The idea of war and uncertainty if he would have food the next day perturbed him. He was forced to embark on this journey to begin with, his sole purpose in the brigade was to cook for the explorers. However, my father fell in love with Constantinople, its people, its culture and its peace. He was no longer haunted by the thought of war and uncertainty. My father wanted to stay there for the rest of his life, that notion included myself. He devolved from an adventurer to a man petrified with the outside world.’

'But these stories did not create a sense of resentment to exploration in me as my father intended. It ignited my curiosity like an eternal flame! I was obsessed with the Silk Road! All the possible expeditions and rewards! I had to collect all the valuable goods I desired in the world! I didn't want to be imprisoned in this small, narrow corner of the world. There is this empty hole in my heart, an insatiable thirst for the treasures of the Silk Road! And it aches me knowing that that hole isn't filled. My father presented me with some of the fruits he had traded with other merchants during his exploration. I ate them all, and they were the most exquisite fruits I had ever tasted in my life. That resplendent colour, its rich, velvety taste! Yes, I reminisce about the moment I put that delicacy in my watery mouth. It was sublime, and I was in paradise. That was when I knew that my life would never be complete without accomplishing this one goal: to claim the most precious fruits of the world!'

'There was only one obstacle, I needed capital to support my journeys. But my father was appalled by the word 'merchant', it recalled many perilous trials and sacrifices of his travels. But it was not enough to demolish my will. I confronted my father with my utmost determination, demanding him to assist me in my pursuit of my fantasy. He was dumbfounded, calling me a disgrace, and criticized me for my "obscene" behavior. I was overwhelmed with indignation, and retaliated. "You are a coward!" I exclaimed. He was a myopic, weak, pathetic man who was afraid of everything. My father had been acting like a woman for my entire life! The argument intensified, and my father couldn't sustain the tension and fainted. Doctors later said that his body was previously greatly weakened by the amputation surgery long ago, and died from shock.'

'At first I lamented my actions. I knew that an argument was inevitable, but I did not expect the consequences to be so grave. My father's ashes were placed in an urn, and I inherited all his life's savings. But I soon realised, with my father gone, there was no one to stop me from my pursuit! So I collected everything with value, including my father's urn, for it is quite valuable, I can sell it for extra money if I need it. I equipped myself with sufficient gear, and embarked on my journey to the East.'

'Oh lord how lucky I was! The fruits that I so desired were a dime in a dozen! Every merchant I encountered so happens to have those prestigious fruits in abundance. I would never let anyone savour my precious treasures, not even myself. I admit that they were rather costly, I had to save all my money for purchasing them, and did not spend a dime on food or shelter. I had to feast on bugs that I found on the ground. But it did not matter, for my insatiable thirst had finally begun to be quenched. The empty hole in my heart is being filled with great satisfaction! And inside that very bag, contains all the prizes of my endeavours and my father's urn.'

That story felt oddly familiar, a sense of *deja vu*. I thought that I've heard of that story somewhere before. But no matter, my mystery had been answered! My endless search for treasure had finally met its end, my greatest desires all contained in that one giant bag. It was in front of me, all I had to do was take it!

The traveller was tired after the long story, and clearly lacked energy to move. He untied the thick rope that was attached to his waist, laid on the soft sand resting, closed his eyes and fell asleep. With his guard down, my chance had presented itself. It's now or never. My plan was simple: Kill the traveller, take the big bag, and enjoy the fruits of my labour. I searched for a sharp rock nearby and retrieved it. I stood directly above him, aimed for his head and raised my hand up high, ready to strike the slumbering traveller. I let out a loud cry, but that was my crucial mistake. I underestimated the physicality of this fragile man, after all he was still able to move the ginormous bag eating on bugs not meat. Just before I delivered the deadly blow, my victim awoke, used his leg to kick the ground, moving himself upwards and dodging the attack. My weapon missed his head, but landed on his thigh. I heard a painful cry, and realised my mistake. The traveller looked at me with hatred and anger, he saw through my greedy eyes, and understood my plot. A sudden surge of horror flooded my body, as if a sharp knife stabbed through my soul. I was frightened. I threw the rock away and dashed towards the untied rope, grabbed it and darted away.

The bag was a lot lighter than I expected despite its size, almost weightless, and I was able to move at my regular speed. I looked back at the fallen traveller after covering some distance. He was still chasing me, but his injured leg was of no use and he crippled with all his might. Repeating, 'Get back here you thief!' But each cry grew weaker and weaker. Eventually all I heard was silence. I wasn't sure if I had lost him or whether he collapsed.

One thing was sure, I was finally safe. And after a few more hours of travelling, I spotted an oasis in the distance. Immediately I headed in that direction, relieved to have finally found a place to rest.

Once I arrived, I bent down to refresh myself and drank some water. I was finally recharged and energized once more. The moment of truth came, I opened the giant bag and was instantly amazed. Fruits of all colours dazzling like diamonds! I poured them all out of the bag to appreciate my collection, the urn the traveller carried fell out as well, but it wasn't the star of the show. My hard-earned prizes laid right in front of my eyes, and I had never been so satisfied in my life. I grabbed a handful and raised my fresh gems high up in the air, celebrating my success, yet something unprecedented happened. As I lowered my arm, the fruits in my hand began to rot. The once radiant gems shrank and darkened. It usually takes a fruit a few weeks to rot to this condition, but this occurred in just a few seconds. I looked at the pile of fruits on the floor, and the same thing happened to them. All of my precious fruits had become worthless. I looked towards the location of the bag, but it was gone, so was the urn. I turned my attention to the pile of repugnant fruit, and they also disappeared in thin air. I was baffled, what devilish phenomenon is this? It has to be related to that mischievous traveller! Think!

'I knew something about his story was odd! It felt so familiar and...'

Then the moment of realisation descended upon me. The story that the traveller told, was my story. My encounter with the traveller never happened, it was just my hallucination.

Twenty years ago, I was a foolish and greedy young man. I was so ignorant, so desperate I had forgotten that the rounded vase I carried with me contained my father's remains. I ignored my health and survival just to save enough money to buy my desired fruits. I was so weak and vulnerable to the point I imagined myself accomplishing my mission by stealing and murdering. My greed had poisoned me, rotted my soul, turned me into an irrational lunatic.

I was fortunate enough to have survived afterwards, and lived long enough to tell my tale. But I was just lucky. Greed is far more dangerous and pernicious than we can imagine. It poisons the soul and makes you mad. It is crucial for one to reject greed. Or else you would be trapped in an endless cycle of desperation, unable to identify what is reality and what is not.

The Silk Road

Stamford American School Hong Kong, Lu, Cheuk Yi Jacky –

On January 16, 776 AD, Li Da and his party set out at dawn, earlier than usual, eager to uncover a magnificent secret. By imperial order of the Tang Emperor, they had departed westward in September to locate the Shule River on the Silk Road. Once the water source was confirmed, rear troops could immediately establish supply depots along the route, opening a new passage and reviving Silk Road trade that had been severed for 400 years. The team consisted of five men: Li Da as the leader, his son Li Ming, and three other companions. Anxiety had roused them from their camp long before sunrise. By noon, the resolute group had traveled 14 kilometers, pressing onward with high spirits across the desolate white snowfield. The most perilous part of their journey was already behind them—only the vast snowscape remained to cross, and success seemed inevitable.

Suddenly, Bao Lian, one of the men, grew uneasy. His eyes fixed on a tiny black spot in the endless snow. He dared not voice his suspicion: someone might have planted a marker here. But the others terrifyingly thought the same. Their hearts trembled as they tried to console themselves—much like Robinson Crusoe, who desperately mistook a stranger's footprint for his own on a deserted island. Deep down, they already knew the truth: Muhammad Ali's Abbasid Caliphate expedition, traveling eastward in search of the same goal, had arrived before them.

Before long, they discovered a ski pole planted in the snow, tied to it a black flag symbolizing the Abbasid regime. Around it were traces of a former camp—ski tracks and the paw prints of many dogs. There was no longer any room for doubt: Ali had camped here. It was unheard of, unimaginable in human history, that the only water source in this vast, untrodden desert—untouched for millennia—had been found twice in a single month. And they were the second party, arriving merely a month too late. Though millions of months had passed in the annals of time, this one delayed month felt devastatingly too late. For humanity, the first to arrive claims everything; the second, nothing. All their efforts had been in vain, their hardships rendered absurd, and their weeks, months, and years of hope bordered on madness. "All this suffering, endless torment, sleeping in the open—what was it all for? For these dreams, and now they are shattered," Li Da wrote in his diary. Tears gushed from their eyes. Exhausted as they were, none could sleep that night. Robbed of hope, they trudged onward to their destination like condemned men, a far cry from the joyful dash they had envisioned. No one sought to comfort the others; they merely dragged their feet in silence.

On January 18, Li Da and his four companions reached the Shule River. But as the second arrivals, nothing here dazzled them. He stared at the sorrowful spot with cold eyes. "There is nothing to see here, no different from the eerie monotony of the past few days,"—that was Li Da's only description of the Shule River. The only unusual thing they found was not a work of nature, but of their rivals: Muhammad Ali's tent, fluttering with the black Abbasid flag. The flag fluttered triumphantly, as if mocking them, over this fortress breached by human hands. Its occupant had left a letter, waiting for the unknown second party—whom he was certain would follow. In it, he asked that the letter be delivered to the Caliph of the Abbasid Dynasty. Li Da accepted this cruel duty: to bear witness to another man's triumph before the world, a triumph he himself had passionately pursued.

Dejectedly, they planted the Tang Dynasty's Dragon Flag—"the Celestial Empire's flag," arriving too late—beside Ali's banner of victory, then left this place that had "betrayed their ambitions." A bitter wind howled behind them. Li Da wrote in his diary with a foreboding: "The return journey fills me with dread."

The journey back was ten times more dangerous. While the trip to the river had only required following a compass, now they had to retrace their exact footsteps. For weeks, they tread cautiously, never daring to deviate, lest they miss the prearranged storage caches—where their food, clothing, and heating oil were stored. But blinding snowstorms obscured their vision, filling each step with anxiety. Straying from the path and missing a cache meant certain death. Moreover, they lacked the vitality of their outward journey, when abundant provisions and the warmth of their barracks in Chang'an had sustained them.

Once, the thought of their expedition as an immortal feat of humanity had granted them superhuman strength. Now, they fought merely to protect their skin, to sustain their dying bodies, and to return home without glory. Deep in their hearts, they feared returning more than they desired it.

Reading their diaries from those days is harrowing. The weather grew increasingly severe, with winter arriving earlier than usual. The snow under their feet hardened into thick ice, sharp as thorns, sticking to their boots with each step. Piercing cold gnawed at their exhausted bodies. Often, they huddled in place for days, losing their way. Only when they reached a storage cache would a glimmer of hope rekindle in their diary entries. Their courage in this eerie solitude is admirable beyond words. Most testament to this was Dr. Wang Ming, who continued his scientific observations even as death loomed. In addition to essential supplies, his sled carried 16 kilograms of precious rock samples.

Yet, human courage gradually succumbed to nature's overwhelming power. This harsh wilderness, forged over millennia, summoned cold, frost, snow, and storms—all deadly forces unleashed against the five bold adventurers. Their feet were already frostbitten and rotten. Rations grew scarce, with only one hot meal a day. Starved of warmth, their bodies grew feeble. One day, the men made a terrifying discovery: He Wen, their strongest member, had suddenly lost his mind. He stopped walking, muttering incoherently, complaining of unspeakable sufferings—some real, some imagined. From his ramblings, they realized the poor man had gone mad, perhaps from a fall or unendurable agony. What could they do? Abandon him on this lifeless ice? No. Yet, they had to reach the next cache without delay, or else... Li Da's diary gives no clue as to his intentions. At one o'clock in the morning on February 17, the unfortunate Imperial Guard soldier breathed his last. That day, they had just reached "Slaughter Camp," where they found the ponies they had butchered the previous month and ate their first substantial meal in weeks.

Now only four remained, but disaster struck again. The next storage cache brought fresh despair: the supply of heating oil was drastically insufficient. They had to ration this vital resource, conserving every bit of heat—the only defense against the cold. Through freezing nights, as blizzards howled around them, they lay awake, too weak to even turn the soles of their felt boots. Yet they pressed on. Among them, Jin En walked with feet that had lost their toes to frostbite. The wind raged harder than ever. On March 2, they reached the next cache, only to face another crushing blow: the oil supply was once again pitifully meager.

Panic seized them. From Li Da's diary, one can sense his desperate attempts to hide his fear, yet bursts of despair escaped his forced calm: "We cannot go on like this," "God help us! We can bear this hardship no longer," "Our story will end in tragedy." Finally, came the terrible confession: "May God protect us! We can scarce hope for human aid now." Still, they stumbled forward, gritting their teeth in despair. Jin En grew weaker by the day, becoming a burden rather than a help. One noon, as the temperature plummeted to minus 40 degrees Celsius, they were forced to slow their pace. The unfortunate Jin En knew, as did the others, that he would bring misfortune to his companions. He made his final preparations, asking Dr. Wang Ming, who was in charge of scientific research, for ten tablets of morphine to end his suffering if needed. The men accompanied the dying man for another arduous day. Then, the poor soul begged to be left in his sleeping bag, to separate his fate from theirs. But they firmly refused, though they knew it would lighten their load. With frostbitten legs, he stumbled on for several more kilometers until they reached camp for the night. He slept with them until dawn. When they woke, a ferocious blizzard raged outside.

Jin En suddenly stood up and said to his companions, "I am going out for a walk. I may be gone some time." The others trembled. They all knew what such a walk meant in this weather. Yet no one dared to stop him, nor reach out for a final handshake. With awe, they watched as Jin En—once a cavalry instructor of the Imperial Guard—marched toward death like a hero.

Now only three weary, emaciated men dragged themselves across the boundless, iron-hard snowfield. Exhausted and hopeless, they stumbled forward on sheer instinct. The weather grew more terrifying by the day. Each cache brought fresh despair, as if fate mocked them with barely enough oil to survive. On March 21, they were only 20 kilometers from the next cache, but a violent blizzard trapped them in their tent, threatening to tear it apart. Every night, they hoped to reach their goal the next day, but each morning, after eating their meager ration, they could only cling to hope for yet another day. Their oil was gone, and the temperature remained fixed at minus 40 degrees Celsius. All hope was lost. They faced a cruel choice: starve or freeze to death. Surrounded by a vast, white wilderness, the three men fought against inevitable death in their tiny tent for eight days. On March 29, they knew no miracle would save them. Instead of marching onward to their doom, they resolved to wait for

death with dignity in their tent, no matter the agony. They crawled into their sleeping bags, never uttering a single complaint about their tragic fate to the world.

As the fierce blizzard attacked the flimsy tent like a madman and death crept closer, Captain Li Da reflected on his life. In this profound silence, unbroken by human voice, he solemnly felt his deep bond with his motherland and all humanity. Amid the snow-covered desert, only mirages of the mind appeared—visions of those he had loved, bound by affection, loyalty, and friendship. To them, he left his final words. With frozen fingers, the Imperial Guard captain wrote letters to all he cherished as death approached.

Li Da kept his diary until his last breath, until his fingers froze solid and the brush slipped from his stiff hand. He hoped someone would find these pages someday, proof of his courage and that of the Han people. This hope gave him the superhuman strength to write until the end. His final entry, scrawled shakily with frostbitten fingers, read: “Please deliver this diary to my wife!” But then, sorrowfully yet resolutely, he crossed out “my wife” and wrote the haunting words above: “my widow.”

Back at the base camp’s wooden huts, their companions waited for weeks—first with confidence, then anxiety, and finally growing dread. They sent two rescue parties, but brutal weather forced both back. It was not until the Antarctic spring arrived that an expedition set out on October 29, determined to find the heroes’ bodies at the very least. On November 12, they reached the tent. Inside, they found the men frozen stiff in their sleeping bags. The dead Li Da clung tightly to his son Li Ming, who, it turned out, had survived his father by three days. Until his last breath, Li Ming had embraced Dr. Wang Ming like a brother. They recovered the letters and documents, then built a stone cairn to honor the fallen heroes. A simple black cross stood atop the snow-covered grave.

In Chang’an, the imperial capital, the Emperor suspended court to mourn the heroes.

Though a man may be destroyed in the struggle against invincible fate, his spirit becomes infinitely noble. Such are the greatest tragedies of all time.

Travel the Silk Road

The French International School, Choi, Charlotte – 7

A long long time ago, there was a road called the Silk Road. The Silk road was for traveling with horses and camels, walking and other animals and going from the East to the west!

The first person to go to the east was called Marco Polo. He wanted to travel to China. He rode his horse because he knew China was famous for silk. Back then, people didn't call it the Silk Road yet. So he went for many days and arrived to find some silk. He saw that materials were cheaper than his home so he thought that the silk could be cheaper. He kept searching until he found the cheaper silk, so he bought lots of silk to sell in Italy.

The Chinese realised that there was an Italian man there to trade gold and silk so he thought he could sell silk and gold to Italy so they were happy to help. However, some bad people wanted to steal gold and silk. Marco Polo's Chinese friends didn't want him to sleep outside so they went to royal property houses and the people guarding it preferred paying so they asked him to pay and after they had a good sleep. He went back to the road and they finally arrived back to Italy. While he was sleeping in China, he had a dream that was swarmed with people trading with him.

Now back in Italy, people swarmed around him, begging for gold and silk just like his dream. Marco Polo saw the line so he thought there was a famous person when he got close to the line he saw that there were selling gold and silk so he went out of the line to think did that person saw me and as soon as he saw that the person was chinese so he think deep and try to remember if there was that man and he remembered there was that chinese man so he knew he used the same road as him to get to Italy.

Kyojin Of The Silk Road

Victoria Shanghai Academy, Chan, Evan Yu Yan – 16

Chapter 1: Prologue

December 21st, 2100 AD, marks the day that World War 3 ends peacefully. A new era of hope instantly springs forward amongst the people, as countries share new technologies, cultural traditions and heritage with each other. This has enabled many more technological advancements to surface due to the collaboration of different countries and individuals. The newest, most anticipated invention of the 22nd century is the colossal bullet train, “Kyojin”. It is a massive, 30 foot tall, 25 foot wide and 2500 foot long maglev train that uses magnets to travel at extremely high speeds. Currently, it circulates the entirety of the former silk road, going from Chang’an, China, all the way to center of the C.S.E, the Confederate States of Europe, which formed after former country France’s conquest to expand its territory, which eventually ended in a joint peace treaty to be signed between surrounding countries in Europe, forming a mega country that has potential to rival the USA and China. Cities that the track passes flourish as a result due to a massive increase in trade in these cities. But outside these areas, mass expanses of barren, desolate land is left untouched between now rapidly developing cities. Yet, even in such harsh conditions where normally, it would be extremely difficult for people to travel by foot between cities, travelers can still be seen to be Walking, from city to city, for unknown reasons.

Chapter 2: Ming

32 Years after the “Kyojin” started running:

Waves of gold and red sparkle as the sunlight gleams off mountains and dunes of sand in the distance. The sand beneath my feet is hot, even burning, as I can feel the soles of my shoes being singed every time I set my foot down. My camel, however, seems to be unfazed by the unusually hot sun today, as it doesn’t set down its unwavering gaze towards the horizon even as I come to stare at its face.

“Are we nearly there yet? I’m meltingggg...”

My adopted daughter, Claire groans. Her high-pitched voice echoes across the sunbaked dunes. “We should be close to the next city,” I say as I raise my hand to block the sunlight.

Trudging through the desert, the heat is making the air hazy, so I have to squint my eyes to see what is up ahead. Suddenly, Claire jumps: “Look! Train tracks!”

I squint my eyes, and indeed, there are train tracks up ahead. Large, metallic tracks streak the desolate landscape, scouring the land in a straight line all the way to the horizon.

“What an eyesore,” I grumble. As I try to head in a direction going away from the tracks, I catch a glimpse of Claire bounding towards the tracks.

“Stop! Claire!” A hint of desperation escapes my voice.

As she turns around in confusion, a torrent of wind attacks my face. Squinting my eyes, I see a flashing, tall wall of metal and millions of faces before me, before it’s gone as fast as it appeared.

I feel lightheaded, and realise that I’m on the ground, sand seeping into my trousers.

“How did I fall...?” I wonder before dusting myself off.

“Wow! Papa, did you see that? That must have been the train those guys with luggage were calling the co... co-gin?”

My head is still ringing, yet Claire is full of excitement. I come back to my senses, the haze in my mind settling down.

“What were you thinking!? You could have gotten hurt there!” Claire rolls her eyes in exasperation.

“Don’t you ever... you can’t...” It felt like fog covering my eyes, but I stumbled forward and shoved Claire.

“Yes... Stop her...” A faint whisper crosses my ears. A shiver runs down my spine.

I whip my head around in shock, my eyes frantically darting across the sand, but no one is there.

“DAD!” Claire’s voice suddenly rings my eardrums. She looks at me hurt and confused, as if she’s inspecting a rabid wild animal.

“Why did you do that? What are you looking at?” She gets on her toes to try and peek over my shoulder to see what I could have been looking for.

“I’m... –I’m sorry Claire. I don’t know what came over me.” My mind is still foggy. I can’t bear to see her large, innocent eyes.

Claire sighs. It’s a heavy, deep sigh. “You’re always acting like you don’t know anything Dad. Why do we even walk? Why do we travel by foot? You saw the train. We could get to where we needed to go in a day. In a DAY, Dad. I could have time to get to know people. Actually, like, make friends.” She shuffles her trainers uncomfortably in the sand below her feet.

The fog is now wrapped around my face. A raspy sensation tingles my ears.

“Culture” A whisper from behind me suggests.

“Culture” I blurted out. “Why did I say that? Who said that? Why did I listen?”

I can’t hear Claire now. I have to move. My mouth feels obstructed.

As soon as I took a step, I felt both of the sinuses clear. “The fog is gone,” I thought.

“Hey! Did you even hear me?!” Claire pouts as she jumps to get my attention.

“Well, before you were here, I had a Dad. He was Your Grandpa. He loved going on these trips.” Talking about my Father almost made me forget how we struggled with money before. I decided to keep that to myself.

“Is Grandpa still here?” Claire asks.

“I... don’t know.” The last memory of my Dad was seeing him walking towards the train tracks of the *Kyojin*. It was all fog in my head after that.

“He might still be out there somewhere.” A short silence filled the crisp afternoon air of the desert.

“Well, let’s not waste anymore daylight. We can rest once we arrive at the C.S.E border.”

Chapter 3: Claire

We have arrived on the outskirts of the C.S.E’s rightmost border, after countless days of walking, camping and more walking, Ming and I have finally arrived. It’s a polite, tall glass fence with multiple posts every few hundred meters or so. There hasn’t been much guard force keeping watch here ever since the end of WW3, so Ming was able to quickly get us in with passports he administered all the way back in India. The city we stepped into was packed, nothing like the desert outside. The integration of nature and technology in the city was incredible. On a same side walk, trees could be growing on one side whilst holographic technology showcasing advertisements could be on the other side. Most of the buildings were only a few stories high, which let us see the deep blue sky above us. All sorts of people were around us. Walking down busy streets and alleys, while Ming was busy looking for the market while leading our camel carrying all our cargo with us, I spotted a large terminal for the train. Ming pretends not to notice it and walks the other direction. For some reason, Ming always seems to get super unfocused on me as soon as I mention the Train or anything related to it for some reason. He doesn’t look me in the eyes, he stares at the floor, into space or sometimes even closes his eyes for a bit. After I finish talking, he

always acts like he couldn't breathe, gasping for air. He even whips his head around, as if someone else is talking to him even when we're in the middle of the wilderness.

"Sometimes, I just wish for Ming to listen to me."

I hug Ming's arm as we continue walking.

I see him glance at me for a second and continue staring forward, but a smile forms at the corner of his mouth.

It's night. Ming booked us a hotel room after he sold some spices and fabrics he obtained all the way from India. The city is now surprisingly quiet, as only faint footsteps echo outside the window of our hotel. As I slip into linen woven sheets in bed. Ming comes over to say goodnight, yet his face seems troubled.

"Dad? What's wrong?"

As he sits down beside me on my bed, his face carries a heavy expression. The bed shifts and squeaks. The silence echoes in the darkness outside.

"Claire... I need to tell you about something." He speaks as if he's mourning an individual.

I stare back at him while I fiddle with the blanket sheets between my fingers, nodding for him to go on.

"Sometimes, when I'm walking, or when I'm talking, or even when I see that damn train station... I think I can hear him." He looks at my perplexed look.

"Grandpa. I hear his voice, yet there's no one there." Tears start welling up in his eyes.

"I don't know where he is. Now I can't even remember what he looked like. What happened when he left me." He looks into my eyes.

"Dad..." I try to begin to console him.

"No! I can only remember him walking to that damn train. It can make me talk. It can't let me see!" Ming abruptly steps up and goes to his room.

I can only stare at the ceiling now. What was he saying? I'm now very worried for Ming. As I stare into the darkness, I can only hope that Ming is alright. Suddenly, an idea springs into my head. Ming might not like it, but it might be for the best.

"I won't let you be unhappy by yourself, Ming."

Chapter 4: Ming

"Claire, why are we here?" A large tent supported by stilts stood in front of us. It's yellow, but something tells me that it may have been white before, but with time brings color. A large sign with laser engraved words shows: "PSYCHIATRIST."

"Claire, please. I don't need a shrink analysing my problems right now." I roll my eyes, yet something pulls at my heart.

"Come on, please try it Dad, it might help!" She is stubborn, and she pushes me into the tent.

As I shake the tent's drape off my head, I find the surroundings surprising. There are shelves, lined full with all sorts of medicine and apparatus. As I walk, I lead my camel to walk with me as well.

"How unorganized," I think to myself as I wander further into the tent. I spotted an old man wearing a lab coat, stained yellow as well. He notices me and squints.

"Are you here for a checkup?" He yells almost stoutly.

“Yes, sure.” I grab for a stool and drag it across the floor. The doctor seems to be an old man with an ultra-sound stethoscope around his neck. I can immediately tell he isn’t poor, with equipment scattered around his tent. He is peeling an apple using a small dagger, slowly cutting off the fruit’s skin in a spiral.

“Alright, let us start.” He sets the dagger onto a counter with a small clank.

“Have you ever experienced any form of hallucinations or heard things that aren’t real?”

I instantly tense up.

“Why’d you ask that as a first question? That’s pretty specific.” I try to retort nervously. The doctor stares into my eyes.

“Just off first impressions. Now answer the question.”

I can feel cold sweat forming on my brow. Suddenly, I feel something behind my ear: “No.”

“No,” I reply.

The doctor stares strangely at me for a second, then pulls out a thick, metallic electronic notepad for a second and scribbles something down quickly.

“Is there a reason you said No twice? In 2 different voices?”

My eyes widen in fear.

“You can hear it too? Doctor?” I stare at the old man in anticipation.

Instead, he doesn’t reply. He looks curiously at me and again jots down something in his metal notepad.

Next, he asks a few questions but I can’t hear him. The voice, the fog, is back, and is in full force. He tries to get me to answer questions, but the voice won’t let me. As he calls me mad, crazy, delusional, and shows me “medicine” so I can see the world as it truly is, the voice, the fog, tells me to deny it. I pick up the dagger on the counter and thrust it into the doctor’s heart. I can’t see anymore. I can only hear crawling, a cap being unscrewed, the pouring of liquids, and the death throes of a man. I run out, clutching my dagger, whilst dragging my camel, with it being startled by the end of the doctor. “I need to get somewhere else. Far, but now here.” I run desperately out of the city, to somewhere no one can see me.

I’m in a haze. As I finally stop to stop for a second, I can feel my bloody toes through my run-down leather shoes. I look up at the sky, ready for my father to command me to keep on going. I take a sip of water from my camel.

Pause.

The world goes quiet. The Haze. The fog. It’s all disappeared. The voice. There is nothing. I turn around in shock, shaking my head in desperation. Nothing, no voice.

“Why does the water taste a bit like medicine?”

Suddenly it all pieces together. Slowly, muscle by muscle, my legs crumble and I fall on my knees. It all makes sense. Yet how could it not? Yet how could it be so? I’m attacked by a memory.

My father lost everything. All of his stock, his material, his money. Like a ghost, like the husk of a man, on that day, he saunters towards the train tracks of the Kyojin. Not the station. Train tracks, he sets his feet upon. Staring towards the sky, perhaps the heavens, as if waiting for a miracle. That day, as he kneels on those tracks, a whirring is heard in the distance, and in a second, My father’s life ends to the Iron Titan, the *Kyojin*. That day onwards, the fog came. The voices. A scar, no, an open wound you couldn’t heal to this day.

I look around for Claire for comfort, but of course. It’s all me. It’s only me. Claire is gone.

As I stand again in desperation, in tears, in mourning, sorrow, I stumble my way towards the train tracks of the Kyojin. A thin metal wall with barbed wire has been erected, likely only after what happened before. I cut it open easily with my bloody dagger, and toss it on the ground. As I step onto the rusty tracks, the sun sets, illuminating a golden path ahead, all the way across the horizon. As I close my eyes and spread my arms, I take a deep breath to smell a world with fog for the very last time, before my death comes swiftly on iron wings.

Taqlar Makan

Victoria Shanghai Academy, Lau, Chloe – 16

spring, 1340

Baba brought home the desert in his clothes. Small grains of sand were tracked into the crevices in the earthen flooring as Baba returned from his months' long journey. This is the reason Mama keeps a broom by the door. "I just cleaned the floor, you know." She chided him, but Baba just smiled.

He returned from the west, bringing the cloying sweetness of honeyed-dates; he smells of dried mud, animal fats that lingered beneath his fingernails, and that distinct pungent perfume from the deserts. Baba hurriedly set down his basket, a cloud of dust blooming from around it, and he all but lunged towards us—his pride and joy, his two sons. A hand went around my younger brother and rested on his back, while Baba's other hand cradled my head.

We fell with a thump onto Baba's lap, sand escaped from the confines of his coarse raven locks flying into our eyes as he threw his head back laughing. "I missed you two. My treasures."

"Story time, Baba! I want to hear!"

"At your service. Ask and you shall receive. What stories do you want to hear?"

"I wanna hear about the animals!"

Baba's rumbling laugh vibrated through my chest, a full sound. He gripped us closer against his travel-torn tunic, now speaking in a whisper, "This time, I got close to Kashgar. I could see the green patches near the rivers, and all around it... The endless desert." My younger brother nodded fervently, eyes sparkling, ears panned wide to listen, almost like an elephant. Baba told me about elephants before.

"You know what animals were there? Really big cows. And they have lots and lots of thick fur." My brother gasps, "How much fur?" He looked at Baba while making different widths with his hand. "So thick they could walk through blizzards. Yaks! Yaks, they call them." Rambling on and on he goes. Leading us on winding trails just as he had treaded them before, lifelike and true, as if we had been the ones sitting in the front of the caravan as it rocks unpredictably on the road.

Baba took a strand of my hair from behind my ear and braided it into a small plaid, tucking it into my bun after he finished.

"Why can't we come with you? I want to see yaks, too!" My brother bobbed his head in tandem, making our rickety wooden chair creak under the pressure when he bounced up and down in sheer excitement. "Well, you have school, don't you?"

"But—"

"No buts."

But, I want to be brave like Baba.

summer, 1342

Traces of the desert clung to Baba even tighter this time he came back, like a second-skin that he couldn't shed. My eyes couldn't help but dart across his rugged features. Not only in the sand he treaded past the front door, hidden in the soles of his thin leather soles, the winds are etched into his skin, crows' feet at his sun-damaged skin as he beams a bright smile at my little brother. I didn't even have to look to know that he was already bounding towards Baba in rapid steps.

Plap-plap-plap— only a second later, and my brother propelled himself into Baba's arms. "Baba!" His laugh is like wind-chimes, clear and resonant, if only with a hint of maturity in his voice now. Mama rolled her

eyes again, and said her signature line, “I swept the floor not so long ago.” The same chiding tone, a roll of her eyes as she welcomed Baba home.

Baba’s trips are two years long at a time. I’ve more often seen him handing the wages of his labours to Mama than him looking me in the face. Only for me.

“Tell me stories again!” My brother tugged down on Baba’s travel tunic. Now, the tension of the seams alone could barely hold up his weight. The edges fray and the string unravels under a lifetime of use. Wear patterns were prominent around his left shoulder, the leather bleached bone-white and thin as paper, worn down by the constant weight of his pack. Right... Baba is left-handed.

My brother released his death-grip on Baba’s tunic and landed on the floor, albeit nearly tripping over his own two feet. I turned my head towards the soft clinking noise from Baba’s rattan basket as he fumbled around it. He gets down on one knee with more effort than would be needed for a man in his early-thirties, as if an elastic is drawing on his tendons. “Come here, Baba has a gift for the two of you.”

From his rattan basket, he brandishes two jade pendants, etched with twirling patterns of dragons and phoenixes. “For you.” A white jade pendant dangles from his hand. He places it in my brother’s palm, guiding his fingers closed over it and pressing them along the deep grooves of the engraving. “It’s so pretty! I like the colour.” Baba smiles, revealing a chipped tooth and yellowed hues within the chapped skin of his lips.

“And this one, for you.” He deposits the pendant into my palm as well. Celadon in colour, but with a viridescent vein of electric green striking through the middle. I run my thumb over the carvings, contemplating. “Thank you.”

Baba brings us both in for a hug. “Baba? Can you braid my hair again?” His hand rests with a familiar weight on the back of my head. “Sure.” I sit down in front of him and he takes the strands behind me ear, weaving it into a small braid. Though, this time... it frayed. His hands were shaking. He’s shaking.

Briskly, he pries himself off and walks further into Mama’s quarters. From the same rattan basket, he scatters small pieces of silver and some gold onto the desk. The thuds of these precious metals are dull, and so was Mama’s expression as she flicked her gaze towards them. She tosses the pieces around, weighing them by hand and feeling alone. My father’s hands are still shaking. I squint harder and barely notice the shrivelling of his veins. His skin was thinning, showing the sunken, plum-coloured lines on his backhand. Dry. Dry like the rivers in the places further west.

“Baba! Tell me stories!”

He told a story of the herds of sheep in Kashgar. I heard it, but didn’t listen. I could only pick up on the cough he tried to stifle on his sleeve, the sagging skin on his neck, new bandages that seem to materialise like the morning fog. “Why can’t I come to travel with you? I’m stronger now.” *No*, Baba shook his head.

But, I have to be brave like Baba.

autumn, 1344

Two years is a lifetime to me. An eternity to my brother. But to Baba? No. He didn’t count the days, years. He counted life in transactions. “Not enough,” I heard him say to Mama the last time he returned with a lighter sack than he hoped. I didn’t go to school that month.

This time, I kept count. It had been one year, eight months, and eleven days since his last return. It’s about time. I sat by the door, ear to the wall, and waiting with my heart racing but my body seated— coiled tight but forced to stillness. Listening. I press my ear closer to the wall, in hope to hear the signature *dok-dok-dok* that I could always recognise as Baba’s knuckles against the door.

This time, 'Baba' returned more as a passing rumour of himself. How could two years do the work of two decades?

He was a bundle of sticks held flimsily together by his travel-stained tunic, now patched and repaired a hundred times over. The robust thump of his footsteps now sounded like a dry scrape across the floor, the rustle of his rattan pack sounded like a crackling leaf. My brother still ran to him, as if it was muscle memory. I couldn't blame him. Hope is a stubborn muscle in a child. Baba came over to me, swaying like a drunkard on the streets at midnight.

From the depths of his basket, he drew not silver, not jade, but a sheathed dagger. Wrapped in worn leather, the pommel was a simple disk of tarnished copper, bluer than it was orange. He dropped it into my hands. The weight of a weapon in my hands was foreign, but we both knew that I had understood his meaning when we locked eyes. Though, his eyes resembled opalite more than the warm brown of yesteryear.

"Baba? Baba! Welcome back!"

"Yes, yes."

"What's that you gave just now?"

"A copper dagger."

"Why don't I get one?"

His face contorted into a sulking expression, voice lined with false betrayal. One look at my brother, and Baba laughed. It was a terrible sound—a bark that shattered into a wet, granular cough that had him keeling over. I steadied him, gripping his upper arm firmly; I felt no youth, only bone, and terrifying, febrile heat. "Where's your mother? I have something to give her, too." He tried to take a step forward, the sand in his soles scattering across the floor again. "She's in the back, just resting."

Baba looks at me for a brief second, as if waiting for me to ask a question with that hopeful expression of his. "Don't you want me to braid your hair?" I fall quiet for a moment, "It's fine." Baba averted his eyes, and I could feel his shoulders drop.

Once more, he sat down and started telling stories to my brother. I couldn't even bother to listen, he was only spinning outrageous tales to hide his pains. I scoff at my gift. A man's tool. He had never taught me to use a knife, he had taught me to follow a scholar's path. My father was stubborn as a mule.

"Baba."

"Yes?"

"Don't go on the next trip. I will go."

"No."

My eyes narrow incredulously. "Look at your state!" I gesture vaguely to the whole of him. He cocks an eyebrow at me. "No." He replies stoically, tone equally as firm. I doubt he could see my face nor expression now, with my brows scrunched and lips in an obvious downturn. "Why won't you let me go? You yourself should know when to stop. You should know."

The house is silent for a long moment, with only the crack of small pebbles falling against the floor in the air. "Do you not think that I'm strong enough?"

Baba won't let me be brave like him.

Baba was late. 13 days late. They never travelled in winter, “Hah! A fool’s errand. The cold steals the breath from your lungs. Even the camels do not want to move,” he would say. They would always come home before the first hard frost.

These few months, I couldn’t go to school, the silver for the tutor were the first to go. “Gege,” his voice lower, “why is Baba not back yet?” My brother had now grown past the height of my shoulder, I could barely see over the top of his head now. “I don’t know. But don’t worry, they probably just took another stop...” My mind mulls over the details, counting the days again, “or maybe a long detour. A *very* long detour.”

Days passed, bleeding into each other. I didn’t want to count anymore. Every day, I would comb Mama’s hair, threading my fingers through the greying strands. I saw her reflection in the mirror, and the life seemed to seep from her very being. But it did not go all at once. First, her eyes, they formed into bottomless black pools, absorbing light rather than reflecting it. She once had the roundest eyes, like black opal in the sunlight. Then, her cheeks, which hollowed beneath the skin until her expression turned gaunt. She stopped cooking. Most days, I would cook and feed her what she could stomach. And then—

Dok–dok, dok–dok. Mama nearly leapt off the chair and to the door.

No, I thought. The rhythm was wrong. Baba’s knocks are *always* three in quick succession. I won’t wish on hope that I didn’t believe in myself. Mama swings open the door in seconds after the knocking sounded.

It was Uncle Liang from Baba’s merchant group. “Oh.” The disappointment was palpable in Mama’s breath.

“Good morning.” His face was the colour of ash, and he wouldn’t meet Mama in the eyes. He clenched and unclenched his fists, holding them pin straight at his side. His throat bobbed as he swallowed, once, twice, and a third time, as if he was choking on words that he didn’t know how to say or push down. “I have news of your husband.” Mama’s breath hitched, holding back a tsunami by closing her eyes. We move to hold her hand and stand by her side.

Uncle Liang told the story in the flat, careful tone of a recited elegy. “We were halfway back to Dunhuang, but he had been acting unwell for the past few days. His cough worsened, he couldn’t eat, he wouldn’t speak to us. It was after a rest stop at the next caravanserai— I had even saw him going to sleep— but the next day, he disappeared. He left one note, saying ‘I have a great pestilence on me. Do not follow.’ I doubt we could have found him anyway in such a vast desert... I’m sorry.”

Mama went silent. She gripped the wooden door frame so tightly it splintered, nearly stabbing into her own hand. “He was a noble man. Winter nights in the desert are unforgiving, but I’m sure— I’m sure it would’ve been... quick. Painless. It grants a clean death.”

Her silence was a vacuum, sucking the very air from the room. We dared not speak. I heard the dry crack of old wood. Mama’s left hand— her grip tightened further, and a pale splinter pierced her ring finger. But she didn’t flinch, she stayed unmoving, standing still as stone. A single bead of blood welled around the splinter, dark as poppy seeds, and stubbornly clung there. So did I. No one moved.

Baba is a coward. He couldn’t even come home to face his family in his time of weakness. I hated him for not coming home. I hated him for leaving us. I wanted to be brave like Baba, but how could I? He was never brave.

I pity my little brother.

At only ten, he has to lead camels with me along the outskirts of the Taklamakan desert.

We were fleeing down the trail of Baba's footsteps. Two hungry ghosts chase down the distance to find the markets in Kashgar where trading silk could be worth more than man's labour in Dunhuang. Two hungry ghosts scrambling to feed themselves and a third. We were nearing the eastern road where the path splits around the Taklamakan desert, there are more who speak our tongue than those who do not.

At the very least, we had the backing of Baba's old friends in the mercenary group. They were kind to us, out of pity, out of generosity, I couldn't tell, but it is what it is. The sun grew white-hot against my wrinkling skin, even the air burned my lungs from the inside-out. Midday was the worst time. How did Baba do this...? The caravanserai in the distance looked infinitely far. The desert messes with your perception of space. Everywhere is the meaningless crests and troughs of sand dunes, save for the occasional shrub.

By the time we neared the rest-stop, it was already well-into the night. Temperatures plummeted without the sun's rays, and I found myself desperately wishing for the thing I hated most at midday. "Come here." I gestured my brother over with a flick of the wrist. "Sit." He did so without question, the weariness of the day clouding his mind.

His hair, unwashed for weeks, was in an uncouth tangle. Nevertheless, my fingers clumsily parted a small section of hair behind his ear and smoothed it out. "Do you not comb your hair? Tsk." His head lolled forward, and then back, finally snapping awake.

"What are you doing?"

"What Baba did." I began to weave his hair together, the motion stiff and unpractised. Baba was much better at this. *Over, under, pull tight. That's right...* In the end, it only resulted in a pathetic, fraying rope of hair.

I tucked the sad little braid into his bun. "I'm sleepy, Gege. Can you tell me the same story about yaks, the one that Baba used to tell?"

"Sure." I tucked him close against me, "You know what animals are in Kushgar? Really big cows..."

Hah... I became like Baba after all.

...

taqlar— ruins, *makar*— place.

taqlar makar, place of ruins.

When Roads Remember

Victoria Shanghai Academy, Lau, Fong Hing Angel – 14

897 CE, Gobi Desert, 110 kilometers to Dunhuang

Jun kept his face wrapped, but the cold still seeped into the crevasse between cloth and cheek. Its numbing caress seized his muscles.

To reach Dunhuang, one had to traverse the Gobi Desert and arrive at the edge of the Taklamakan Desert. Dunhuang sat between the two vast lands, an oasis where eastern and western routes converged.

The expedition seemed grand when he first announced it to his family, with its promise of newfound prosperity, but the journey made him realise one thing: The desert was indiscriminately cruel to all men.

Jun was sure that grains of sand now circulated in his bloodstream. Perpetual exhaustion was etched into his face, his lips shrivelled into clumps of coagulated flesh around his mouth, his saliva turned viscous from dehydration. The calloused membrane of his body flaked into leathery patches akin to a reptile's scaled skin.

It was only after dusk, when the sharp clarity of the sky softened into an ombre hue, that Jun sought shelter at a threadbare caravanserai. There were two Chinese travellers huddled around an unvarnished dining table—the entirety of the inn's occupants. He sat down across them.

The man looked up from his bowl of stew and nodded stiffly at Jun in acknowledgement. Beside him, his daughter sat hunched, her knees drawn up and her gaunt elbows caged around them. She was almost skeletal, bony fingers absentmindedly picking at a splintered edge on the table.

Her father nudged a lump of coarse bread towards her, but she twisted her head away as if it were poisoned. There was an inkling of resignation in her father's fatigued sigh. A hollow rumble reverberated from her stomach, yet the sound elicited no reaction.

Jun realised this had been going on for some time.

"I'm so hungry," She whispered, hands pressed to her heart instead of her stomach. She repeated these words like a sombre mantra.

Yet she refused to eat the meagre foods provided to her, no matter how desperately her father pleaded that she *had to* eat.

"I want to eat Mama's dumplings," The girl said forlornly, staring at the stale loaf in front of her.

Her father gripped her shoulders and shook her, eyes leaden with frustration. "Your mother is gone!" He bellowed, voice hoarse.

The caravanserai went oppressively silent. Jun averted his eyes and tensed.

"You must eat, Nǚér. I beg you!" Her father slumped to the ground, pressing his forehead against the back of her hands.

The dim light emitted from the oil lamp cast a shadow across her face, accentuating the hollows of her cheeks. Her expression remained impassive. Finally, she blinked, and a glistening tear slid down her face.

The girl did not look up, but Jun noticed her fingers fidgeting at the frayed fabric on her sleeve. The trivial gesture reminded him of his youngest child twisting the hem of his shirt. His heart ached at the resemblance, as if a cavity were corroding it from within.

That night, Jun could not sleep. He sat up, wincing as the rigid mattress creaked. Instinctively, he reached into his coat and touched the letter in his pocket.

His children's calligraphy had softened the rough paper, seeped into the creases and folds. He reread it fervently and could recite each line from memory. The ink was the embodiment of his purpose; he studied it as faithfully as sailors once traced their fingers along their maps, navigating their roads back home.

His eldest wrote the main body, each stroke deliberate and sharp, eager to showcase his calligraphy skills. His youngest added a line at the bottom, written endearingly with crooked characters and puerile impatience.

Baba, come back soon! We kept your seat at the table.

Wind rattled the walls, and the entire caravanserai seemed to tremble. Jun imagined his children asleep back home, their mouths slightly open, their hair in disarray. He imagined their mother smoothing a blanket over their curled-up bodies. He imagined the empty chair at the table and felt, briefly, as if he had abandoned a sacred duty.

—

At dawn, the father prepared to leave early. He coaxed his daughter to her feet, packed their possessions into a small bundle, and offered Jun a cursory nod of farewell.

Jun walked towards the pair and asked, "Where are you headed?"

"Dunhuang," The man replied. "There's...work."

Jun nodded grimly. He remembered the day of his departure, and how his youngest son clung to his thigh, tears and snot forming a wet patch on his trousers. Working in a foreign land, with its innumerable necessary sacrifices, could be detrimental.

He glanced down at the small parcel of food he had saved—his last portion of handmade Chinese pastries. He originally planned on savouring it throughout his lengthy journey, yet there was little hesitation when he crouched by the girl and held out the parcel.

Her eyes widened, then flickered with uncertainty and suspicion.

"For the road," Jun told her gently. "Eat when you can."

Her father's mouth opened. "Sir, you—"

Jun stood up, decisive. "I have my own children," he explained. The two men shared a silent moment of mutual understanding, one brimming with unspoken sympathy and grief. Home was so far away.

The father bowed and uttered his words of gratitude.

As Jun turned away and mounted his camel, he caught, from the corner of his eye, the girl taking a timid bite from a mung bean cake.

897 CE, Gobi Desert, 60 kilometers to Dunhuang

The last caravanserai Jun resided in harboured many languages.

A stark contrast from the previous desolate monotony, the inn bustled with vigour. Occasionally, he heard boisterous bursts of conversations erupting from other rooms, sometimes in sharp syllables he didn't recognise, others in a rougher drawl he could vaguely comprehend.

Laughter and the soft clink of bowls echoed from the dining area as Jun headed towards it. It was cramped with occupants; some sat on the floor, miraculously balancing dishes without sullyng the vibrant carpet with sauces. Jun settled unceremoniously into a vacant seat.

He carefully unfolded his letter, which was streaked with tender creases as a result of his excessive ruminating. What had begun as a comforting ritual had now become almost intrinsic to him.

Sitting beside him, a man with deep-set eyes pointed at his letter, "Jia? Home?" He asked, his accent tilting the word into a gruffer sound.

Jun gently smoothed a dog-eared corner of the letter, nodding slightly. "Children," he replied. When the man's expression morphed into confusion, he bent his arms and bundled them close to his chest, mimicking a cradling motion.

The man's face softened. "From wife," he said, drawing out a cloth woven with floral embroidery, the fabric worn from years of affection and use.

Then, he pointed to himself and said, "Farid."

"Jun," Jun replied.

Across them, a woman with hands stained from dye displayed her crafts of intricately pleated cloth. The exotic patterns elicited gasps of admiration around the table. Another brought out a handful of dried fruits, urging everyone to try one. Jun tentatively bit into the foreign pulp and was surprised to taste a pleasant tanginess on his tongue.

In return, he showed his own country's produce. Dried persimmons he grew and sundried in his own yard, and pouches of fragrant tea leaves. They marvelled at the bags, prodding and sniffing them as if they were alien treasures. The tea bags had been mundane and unremarkable to Jun, but seeing the wonder on their faces made him newly appreciate the artistry behind them.

"Green tea," he pointed to the bags. "Oolong tea,"

"Pu'er," he smiled at this one. "My favourite. It has a distinctive aroma and taste, musky like the air after rain and the soil of Earth. It's delightful with tangerine peels."

He mimicked a smelling motion and gave a gesture of approval. The others understood and picked the bags up, lightly smelling each one.

"Similar to oils," Farid plucked a small ceramic container from his bag. It smelled like spices and tickled Jun's nose, but felt refreshing.

When a strap came loose on one of Jun's bundles, it was Ayla who held up a needle and thread.

"Fix?" She asked, waving her hands in a sewing motion. Jun handed his bundle over with profuse thanks. Her needlework was efficient, her stitches confident. He watched her nimble fingers work with fascination.

“Where did you learn?” He asked, gesturing to her needle.

“Mother.” She replied, smiling faintly.

It was near dusk, and rays of gold spilled in from the window, illuminating specks of dust into photons of light. The sunlight softened their wrinkles, and for a moment, it seemed as if hope and youth had been rekindled. Farid glanced out of the window, a wistful expression etched on his face. He raised his arm to the air and pointed to a faraway region in the distance. The light made his skin shine like burnished bronze.

“Home.” The word was murmured in many languages, in many tongues, yet the longing was one and the same.

The individual was insignificant in the vast desert, but huddled around a table together in a small caravanserai, their words would not echo meaninglessly in the dark, but be heard and reciprocated.

—

The next morning, Farid and Jun set off for Dunhuang. Jun left a pouch of tea leaves for Ayla in gratitude and farewell, and headed to the oasis he had been dreaming about for months.

Lush greenery appeared in copious amounts as they approached the outskirts of the city. It was Farid’s idea to visit the Mogao Caves, where a plethora of dark mouths opened into stone. Inside, the air was dense with incense; murals of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas bloomed on walls.

A monk met them at the narrow entrance, the velvety folds of his robes gracefully draped across his shoulder. He bowed and greeted Farid in Arabic, then Jun in Chinese.

“Travellers,” the monk said, clasping his hands together and bringing them to his chest, “This is a sacred space for all. Rest here and replenish your spirits. Let your hearts catch up with your bodies.”

As he led them deeper, the hustle of the city dulled into an inconsequential hum. They arrived at a wide chamber with pristine stone walls, not a splash of paint or carving engraved on it. The monk’s hand lingered on the stone.

“This chamber was originally planned to house travellers like you from afar,” he explained. “We wished to share our teachings.”

“These stones are like paper, they carry many voices. They stand, eternal, against time’s eroding qualities,” he added, fingers brushing against a small fissure. “Across centuries, the road will leave more than footprints.”

Jun thought of his letter and felt the words settle in his heart, with a sense of grand enlightenment.

“Leave your marks if you wish, travellers,” the monk gestured subtly to a few carving tools scattered on the floor. “Your presence will be acknowledged.”

Carving the sacred walls of the Mogao Caves seemed blasphemous. Jun hesitated. As he turned to Farid, he realised the man already had a tool in his hand and a determined look in his eyes.

“People leave different kinds of offerings,” the monk told him gently. “Words are important.”

Jun felt a surge of passion rush through his muscles. He bent and retrieved a carving knife, clutching it tightly. He knew it deep inside his bones, he wished to contribute something that wasn’t merely transactional, something more than commerce.

Farid and Jun stood shoulder to shoulder, two travellers at the end of a long stretch of road, both worn and weary, both cloaked in exhaustion and dwindling optimism. Yet each man knew the purpose of the journey, so each man never meandered from their designated paths.

The purpose was to make home a better place, and to ignite a hope for the future that would not fade.

At that moment, Jun felt the strange grandeur of it all: they were not kings, or generals, or nobles, but ordinary men who had traversed the desert for the sake of trade, and arrived to create something greater than profit.

He began first, hands taut as he engraved strokes of Chinese characters into the hard wall. His mother tongue was a beautiful language, and there were a million sayings in Chinese that could not be fully conveyed with translations.

*We crossed deserts chasing silk and trade
Survived on goods and on borrowed grain.
Yet we live for voices, for the touch of names
For letters folded like small, warm homes.
We carry it with us, this budding flame
And realise that the world is never monochrome
When its colours are shared with another soul
For ultimately, all roads lead to home*

The stone did not bleed when he finished. His lines were shallow and did little to erode the obstinate rock.

Farid had carved his words in Arabic, intricate flourishes that looked like the current of a torrential river. Their texts stood side by side, small and negligible compared to the other murals and grand inscriptions. Yet their hearts were full, satisfied.

Farid turned to him, invigorated, a grin blossoming on his face.

“For tomorrow,” He placed a palm flat against the wall, as if feeling for a heartbeat in the walls.

“For tomorrow,” Jun echoed. The walls seemed to thrum with warmth.

2013, United Nations Headquarters

A room full of microphones hummed under bright, fluorescent lights. Before the podium, a diverse audience of multilingual, ambitious individuals buzzed with anticipation. A projected map flickered onto the screen, with annotations made in neon markers circling specific landmarks.

Delegates leaned towards one another, trading whispers of heavy jargon. There was an irony in the composed, clinical way they spoke, as if the admiration of art and culture needed to be confined within technical terminology.

On the screen, another photograph gradually appeared. It was the image of a few archaeologists standing inside a cave, their faces half-lit with sparse light from a torch, their gloves pale against ancient stone. Underneath, a caption read: Dunhuang, the Mogao Caves.

The speaker mentioned the next slide, then tapped her microphone.

A close-up photograph of the stone wall filled the screen, and the unintelligible lines carved into it became comprehensible words.

“There are many documents in Dunhuang,” the speaker said. “Paintings, embroidery, poems. Evidence of trade and devotion coexisting side by side.”

She paused, letting the room settle.

“And then we find this,” She read the carved words out loud.

Yet we live for voices, for the touch of names

Momentarily, the room transformed from a conference hall. There was a gathering of travellers huddled around a table, exchanging small tokens from their homeland and watching as their crafts became wonders in another man’s eyes. It was the warmth of laughter, the joy of conversing, the inherent human urge to help others. It was the worn folds of a letter.

“It’s a traveller’s reminder,” she spoke with increasing intensity. She faced them, the audience full of economists, businessmen, ministers, and students invited to speak about the newly initiated Belt and Road programme.

We carry it with us, this budding flame

“When we talk about roads and cargo,” there was a building momentum in her unwavering voice, “when we mention tariffs, and the importance of industrialism and capitalism, we should also talk about what keeps people and cultures alive. Ideas travelled with merchants and craftsmen, and it was murals, printing, and carving on walls that helped these ideas outlive the bodies that carried them.”

“The past shows us that the exchange can be more than profit. If we are reviving routes, let us revive this essential philosophy too.”

And realise that the world is never monochrome

On the screen, the carved words remained. One in Chinese, one in Arabic, harmoniously engraved into the same plate of stone. The travellers who created them had not known that this room would ever exist; they had not known that strangers from all over the world would lean forward and analyse their spontaneous words.

When its colours are shared with another soul

They had only known the edge of letters digging into their skin, the longing ache of distance, the sweetness of being understood without the perfect words.

The speaker’s hands brushed the screen, as if the troughs of the carved stone were tangible from beneath a screen.

For ultimately, all roads lead to home

“The word that appeared simultaneously on both engravings was, inevitably—” she stilled, then smiled fondly.

“Home.”

The Silent Trader

Victoria Shanghai Academy, Leung, Hin Ching – 14

The silence in our village is not an emptiness. It is a fullness. It is the sound of the looms. The deep, wooden thump—thump—thump of the heddle lifting, the whisper—shush of the shuttle flying left to right, the soft rasp of fingertips checking the tension of the warp. In Khiva—on—the—Sands, we speak with our hands. We talk in a thread.

My name is Lin. I have never spoken a word. Auntie Min, who raised me after my father vanished into the western desert, says my voice went into my fingers instead. She might be right. When I weave, I can say anything.

Our village lies in a green crescent between two arms of the Taklamakan, the “Sea of Death.” Caravans appear from the dusty haze like ghostly ships, and here people do not trade with shouts and haggling, but with cloth. A merchant from Samarkand will set down a bolt of cotton. One of our elders will place beside it a small tapestry, a design of flowering vines and clear water. The meaning is: Your cloth is strong, but it is thirsty. We offer good wells and shade. The trader from Samarkand might answer with a woven picture of a spool of thread and a date palm: We have more. Can you give us fruit? It is a slow, graceful exchange. It is honest. The honesty comes from the Thread.

The Thread of Truth is not a metaphor. It is a real strand, kept in the Heart Loom, the great ancient frame in the center of the village pavilion. It is spun from a silk moth that no longer exists. A ghost—moth, they say. It has a color that is no color, a sheer, luminous silver that seems to hold moonlight even at noon. Each season, a tiny filament of it is woven into the warp of our major trade tapestries. It does not force truth but simply makes lies impossible to weave. The threads tangle, the dyes run, the image becomes a confused mess if the weaver’s intent is false. It is the anchor of our world.

I am its guardian.

The morning the Thread was stolen, I knew before I reached the pavilion. The air felt different. The usual rhythmic thump of looms from the mud—brick houses was absent. Instead, there was a low, worried hum of people gathering, the sound of feet on sand, of hands signing frantically.

Inside the pavilion, the Heart Loom stood empty. Not broken, just... empty. The great warp threads hung slack. The sacred shuttle lay on the ground. And the small, mother—of—pearl case where the Ghost Thread was kept was open and hollow.

Auntie Min was there, her face the color of old ash. She saw me and her hands moved, sharp and angular. Gone. It is gone. The foreign man.

A memory from the day before: a merchant, tall, wrapped in a travel—stained chapan of coarse wool, his face hidden deep in a hood. He had not offered a tapestry. He had simply stood at the edge of the trading circle, watching. His silence felt different from ours. Ours was a language. His was a wall.

Chaos is a quiet thing here. It is a tapestry whose threads won’t hold. Old Man Karez tried to weave a contract for a salt caravan. His pattern are always perfect geometric pathways, came out as a jumble of crooked, ending lines. He stared at it, devastated. Mistress Ayla wove a welcome for a spice merchant. Her intended image of a warm hearth and a full bowl bled into a shape that looked disturbingly like a spider. The merchant left, offended. Without the Thread, our stories were corrupting. We could not trade clearly. We could not even archive our own history accurately. The village was drowning quietly.

I went to the Heart Loom. I knelt. I pressed my palms flat against the wood. I closed my eyes and listened with my skin. And there, caught on a tiny splinter near the base, was a single fiber. Not silk. Not our fine cotton. It was coarse, itchy wool. A dark, nondescript brown. The foreigner's chapán.

I took it to my own small loom, set up in the shade of my porch. I did not try to weave a thing of beauty. I wove a question. I used the strange wool as the weft, throwing it through my familiar, local warp. I let my fingers ask: Where did you go?

The image that appeared was not our oasis. It was a pathway. It led out through the western pass, through mountains that looked like broken teeth, across a wide river, and to a city that seemed to float on water, its buildings rising from the waves like pale stone lilies. I had never seen such a place, but I knew its name from the oldest trade patterns: Venezia, the end of the Silk Road.

Auntie Min and the elders came. They looked at my small, urgent tapestry, their eyes wide with fear. A journey of that length? For a mute boy? But who else could go? A weaver must follow the thread. An elder, her hands slow with age, signed to me: You must bring the Truth home, Lin. The Road will try to lie to you. You must listen only to the weave.

They gave me a strong donkey, a waterskin, and a bag of flatbread and dates. I packed my small, portable loom, my spools of dyed thread, a knife. Auntie Min hugged me, her grip fierce. She placed a small jade amulet in my hand—a simple cricket, for luck. Her hands said, Find the Thread. And find... what else you need.

I didn't understand that last part.

The world beyond the oasis was loud. The wind screamed across the flats. Sand rasped against stone. At the first caravanserai, a noisy, stockaded fort, the sound was a physical assault. Men shouted in a dozen tongues. Animals brayed. Pans clanged.

A trader, seeing my lost expression and my fine, if dusty, clothes, approached. "What's your business, boy?" he barked in broken Uyghur.

I opened my bag and showed him my loom. I pointed west, then wove a quick, simple image: a water cup.

"Ah, a weaver. Selling tapestries?" I shook my head. I pointed west again, more insistently, then held up my empty shuttle, trying to mime something missing, something sought.

He scratched his beard. "Looking for something? In the west?" I nodded. "Dangerous road. Thieves. You have money?"

I showed him a small tapestry I'd made. A scene of our oasis at sunset, the trees impossibly green, the water a deep, inviting blue. His eyes softened. "Pretty. I'll give you three silver coins for it. And a place with my caravan for two two-day rides."

It was a fair trade.

I learned quickly. My tapestries were my voice. A picture of a sturdy bridge got me across a ravine. A woven image of a scorpion warned a friendly family away from a nest. I listened to the world through my eyes and my fingertips, translating its needs and dangers into patterns.

In a market in Bukhara, I heard the first rumor. I was trading for a new dyestuff, a brilliant lapis blue. The dye-seller, a woman with hennaed hands, spoke to her assistant as she weighed my indigo. "...and he said the cloak made him feel like a king. That no argument could touch him. He was sure of everything, even his bad debts. He called it the 'Cape of Certainty.' A Venetian merchant is selling it."

My head snapped up. I tugged her sleeve. With frantic hands, I mimed a cloak, then pointed to my ears, urging her to go on.

She looked at me curiously. “You seek this cloak? It is said to be beautiful. Shimmers with a strange light. But it makes men... stubborn. Fools, some say.” She leaned closer. “They say the merchant is a quiet man. Keeps to himself. A weaver, like you, perhaps.”

My heart, a quiet drum in my chest, beat a faster rhythm. A weaver. I bought the lapis and hurried on.

The journey changed me. The silent boy from the silent village had to navigate a screaming universe. I began to see that words, for all their noise, were often like bad dye, they covered a weak fiber, they blurred the true color beneath. A man would shout “friendship!” while his eyes darted to my purse. A woman would promise “safety” while her hand rested on a dagger hilt. My tapestries never lied. They couldn’t.

By the time I reached the salty, damp air of the Venetian lagoon, I was no longer just Lin the mute. I was Lin the listener, Lin the reader of patterns. The floating city was a shock. Our village was built of earth, low and cool. This was built of stone and water, all soaring heights and wet, echoing canals. The noise was a continuous, liquid roar of voices, boat horns, and slapping waves.

It took three days of weaving small gifts for gondoliers and innkeepers to find the workshop. It was in a quiet corte, a small square away from the main canals. The door was old oak, worn smooth. From within came a sound I knew the steady, comforting thump—thump—thump of a loom.

I pushed the door open. The room was dim, lit by a single window overlooking a greenish canal. Dust motes swam in the slanted light. And there, at a large loom, sat a man. His back was to me. He was weaving a complex brocade, his hands moving with the motions of a master. The cloth on the loom was stunning. It was a deep, royal purple, but woven through with a shimmering, disquieting silver that seemed to move on its own. The Ghost Thread. It was here.

I must have made a sound, a breath. The man stopped. His shoulders stiffened. Slowly, he turned.

He was older than I’d imagined. His face was wrinkled. His beard was grey. But his eyes... his eyes were a familiar, deep brown. My own eyes, staring back at me from Auntie Min’s polished bronze mirror.

He did not speak. He just looked at me, and a storm of emotions passed over his face—shock, fear, *shame*. He knew me. And I, in that instant, knew him. My father. The thief.

He stood up. He was wearing it, the finished cloak. It fell from his shoulders in heavy folds, the purple and silver swirling like a captive galaxy. It was magnificent. It was horrible. It hummed with a low, psychic pressure I could feel in my teeth.

He finally spoke, his voice rough from disuse. “You should not have come.” The words were Uyghur, our tongue. They sounded strange, foreign in this damp room.

I couldn’t answer. I could only stare. I pointed at the cloak, then at my chest, where my heart was. I pointed back east, toward home.

“You don’t understand,” he said, and his voice took on a rehearsed, solid tone. “I am creating something new. This cloak... it brings clarity. It ends doubt. With it, a man can be sure. He can lead. He can forget... confusion.” His hand stroked the fabric lovingly. But his eyes, for a second, were terrified.

I shook my head violently. I pulled my small loom from my pack and set it on a bench. My hands were trembling, but I began to thread the warp. I took a span of the plain, honest wool I used for travel, and I began

to weave. I wove the Heart Loom. I wove the empty pearl case. I wove the village elders, their hands forming shapes of confusion and grief.

He watched, his face hardening. “They are trapped in the past,” he said, the cloak’s silver threads glittering. “I have moved beyond. That Thread was wasted there, maintaining... politeness. Here, it creates power.”

I kept weaving. I wove my journey. The desert. The mountains. The kind dye-seller in Bukhara. I wove the rumor of the ‘Cape of Certainty.’

“I am helping people be certain!” he insisted, but it sounded like a line he’d told himself a thousand times.

Then I began the final panel. I didn’t know the story, not really. But I wove what I felt. I wove a man who looked like him, younger, in our village. I wove a trade, an argument over a bolt of silk. I wove a push, a fall, a still body. I wove the man’s face, contorted in fear, fleeing into the west. I wove a baby, left behind. I wove Auntie Min’s sad, kind hands.

As I wove, the cloak on his shoulders began to react. The silver threads—our Thread—pulsed. They strained against the purple wool, like a captive thing trying to escape. The beautiful, coherent pattern of the cloak began to subtly churn. The lies it was built on—the lie of his innocence, the lie of his noble purpose were clashing with the true story emerging on my humble loom.

“Stop it,” he whispered. He clutched at the cloak. “This is truth! I am a creator! I am not a murderer! It was an accident... and then... they would have understood...” But his words were crumbling.

I wove the last image. I wove the Thread of Truth, a bright, lonely line, being pulled from the Heart Loom by a desperate, shadowed hand.

With a sound like a sigh, the silver thread in the cloak snapped. Not all of it, but its spirit broke. The shimmer died, leaving only dull metal wrapped in grayish purple. The illusion of certainty evaporated from the man’s face, leaving behind the raw, untanned leather of guilt and regret. He sank to his knees, the heavy cloak collapsing around him like a deflated sail.

He was just a man now. A tired, old, guilty man. My father.

He looked up at me, his eyes clear for the first time. They were full of pain so deep it was like a well. “Lin,” he said, and it was the first time I’d ever heard my name on his lips. It was just a breath.

I put down my shuttle. I walked over to the crumpled cloak. I didn’t look at him. With my knife, I carefully began to pick at the hem. I worked for an hour, my fingers precise. He watched, silent now, too. Finally, I pulled it free—the Ghost Thread. It was longer than I remembered, but it was dull, tired. It felt cool and sad in my hand.

I placed it in its pearl case, which I had carried the whole way. I packed my loom. I turned to go.

“Will you take me home?” he asked, his voice barely audible.

I paused at the door. I looked back at him, this broken weaver in a foreign land. I thought of the village, of the chaos, of the need for pure truth to restore balance. And I thought of the complex, painful, human patterns I had seen on the Road.

I shook my head. No.

But then I reached into my bag. I took out the last clean span of cloth on my small loom. Then I wove a simple pattern: the interlocking waves of the Taklamakan dunes, meeting the steadfast lines of the oasis trees. A balance. I placed the tapestry on the bench beside him.

It wasn't forgiveness. It wasn't an invitation. It was just a true picture of where he was from, of what he had broken, of what, perhaps, he could still remember.

Then I left, closing the oak door softly on the thump-thump-thump of the silence that was now his alone.

The journey back was easier. The Thread in its case was a quiet warmth against my chest. When I walked into Khiva-on-the-Sands, the chaos was still present, but it had settled into a weary confusion. I went straight to the pavilion.

I didn't need ceremony. I mounted the Thread back into the Heart Loom. I took the shuttle, and with a new weft I'd spun on my journey, a thread that held the dust of deserts, the grey of mountain stone, the blue of foreign dyes. I began to weave. I wove the story. Not just of a theft, but of a journey. Of a city on water. Of a cloak of lies. Of a man consumed by his need to forget.

I wove it all into a new master tapestry for the village. The Thread of Truth glowed again, softly, weaving its unwavering silver through the complicated, colorful, painful patterns. When it was done, the elders gathered. They saw the thief's face. They saw my eyes in his. A deep, sad understanding passed through them, silent as always.

Auntie Min came and put her hand on my shoulder. She looked at the tapestry, then at me. Her hands said, You brought back more than the Thread. You brought back a whole story.

I nodded. The village was quiet again, but the silence was different now. It wasn't the empty kind of silence. It was the silence that comes after a long story has been told. A silence that holds echoes, understanding, and the soft, relentless thump-thump-thump of the loom, weaving what comes next.

I sit at my porch loom now, the jade cricket warm in my palm. I am weaving a new tapestry. It is not of the past. It is of the green shoots on the mulberry trees. It is just today's truth. And for now, that is enough.

Nightbloom

Victoria Shanghai Academy, Sze, Yuen Hei Kristen – 15

Part 1:

Her frail frame is still and unmoving. Thin black wires frame her face, resting in the crevices of her cheekbones, a stark contrast to her pallid complexion. Her sunken eyes seem so weak, it doesn't seem likely she'll be able to open them again.

Wen Hua crosses another day off the calendar. His sister has been in this state for months. He remembers her rambunctious laughter as she used to chase after him in the streets, how her ponytail would bounce around as she ran, with a bright red ribbon in her hair as bright and bubbly as she was. He doesn't know if she still has these thoughts now, if she reminisces about the same days. All he knows is that he has to find a way to bring her back.

Part 2:

Beads of sweat form on Wen Hua's forehead as he scrubs dirt and grime off the wall. His arms are burning, and each stroke becomes slower than the last, but he continues scrubbing until he can see his own reflection in the cobblestone. The thought of payment keeps him going. Shiny gold coins that he'll add to his stack back at home. Maybe he'll finally have enough.

The homeowner steps outside for a moment and runs his hand along the walls, tracing the grout, but Wen Hua is meticulous in his work and leaves no spot unfinished. The homeowner cannot complain, reluctantly handing over three gold coins.

For the average person, three gold coins aren't a big deal. But for Wen Hua, these three coins mark his return home. He's been in Chang'an for months now, an unfamiliar city worlds away from his hometown in both distance and status, trying to make as much money as he can. The jobs don't pay much, but he works them every waking hour, all too aware of the massive deadline ticking closer and closer.

Slipping the coins into his leather pouch, the money jangles around his waist, a constant reminder of his imminent return as he rushes to the bazaar with a newfound spring in his step. This is what he's been waiting for since the day he set foot in this city.

Wen Hua pushes open the door, coughing as the dust around him gets disturbed. This store is located in such a dark and decrepit alleyway; it's no surprise that people haven't discovered it. He's never seen another visitor in here at the same time before. A tiny ray of light strays through the broken window next to the counter, illuminating a small blue flower that looks more vibrant every time he visits; the only solace in this decrepit place. The flower has a strong fragrance like that of overripe peaches, but with a hint of tanginess to it, as if it's been tainted by the sourness of a lemon. In any case, it makes the atmosphere much more pleasant and fills the room enough that one can overlook the dank environment.

This isn't the first time he's been here, but he's quite certain that it will be the last. An old man appears from the shadows, croaking, "I take it from that triumphant look on your face that you finally have enough this time, eh, son?"

Wen Hua nods. His eyes shine with a glimmer of determination. It's clear that he's been waiting for this moment for a long time.

"Well, here it is. The tonic. Don't open it until you get there, yeah? It loses effectiveness if it's exposed to air. I spent a long time cultivating this, and I won't have more prepared anytime soon, so you'd better take

good care of it. Just drink it straight, and its healing properties will come into effect almost immediately. I'll take my 400 coins now."

Wen Hua empties his entire pouch on the table, gold coins spilling out left and right, illuminating the whole room in a golden glow. The old shopkeeper grins, revealing his blackened teeth. He hastily hands Wen Hua the tonic and begins inspecting his new fortune.

Wen Hua handles the small vial of miracle medicine with extreme care. This is his sister's lifeline, after all. All he has to do now is get it home. The viridescent blue liquid sloshes around the vial as he carefully places it into his leather pouch.

Part 3:

After standing around in the sun all afternoon and waving madly at every passing carriage, Wen Hua finally manages to commandeer a method of transportation to bring him home. Whenever he had a spare moment from working all his odd jobs, he had already calculated the fastest path home: through the Silk Road. He's never been through the road before, but he learned from a travelling merchant that it branches off into many different directions. Of course, the only thing he cares about is how quickly he can reach his sister to save her life. Things like safety are an afterthought.

He feels every bump and dent in the road through his spine as the rickety carriage traverses its way through the uneven paths. The carriage is full of people in rags, all clutching on to their personal belongings as tightly as they can. He doesn't know how much time has passed since they left the city. All he knows is that the scenery looks the same for miles, mountains and trees stretching on as far as the eye can see.

Night falls, and the driver stops the carriage to camp out for the night. Wen Hua climbs down from the carriage, his legs stiff, the small pouch at his waist a heavy, comforting weight. He's immediately hit with a sweet, yet slightly tangy fragrance, one all too familiar. Basking in the smell, he follows the scent and opens his eyes to a brilliant blue field illuminated by the silver light of the moon. The flowers look almost ethereal here.

"Pretty, aren't they?" An old woman stands beside him, one of his fellow travellers from the carriage. "They only open under moonlight. They almost double in size when they bloom."

Wen Hua can't take his eyes off the flowers, almost as if he's entranced. "They really are extraordinary."

"They're called Nightblooms," she says.

He goes to sleep picturing a sea of blue.

Part 4:

Shouts fill the air.

Wen Hua's eyes fly open, and his hand instinctively move to his waist. The pouch is still there. He jerks his head from side to side, attempting to assess the situation, but the cloud of dust everywhere obscures his view. Disoriented, he stands up, only to be pushed back to the ground with his hands behind his back. There's a cold, sharp piece of metal pressed against his neck. He feels his assailant searching through all his pockets, turning them inside out, taking all of his belongings. Not that he has a lot. Until his assailant reaches the leather pouch attached to his belt.

"No!" Wen Hua shrieks, attempting to writhe out of the assailant's grasp. "I'll give you everything I own! Just don't take that—please, I'm begging you—"

The assailant pins Wen Hua down harder to the floor, his face so close that he's nearly inhaling all the sand and debris. There is a tight grip on his hands, and he can barely move. But he's worked for months to get this tonic, and he's watched his sister suffer for years, even before that. He isn't going to let his hard work go to waste in the blink of an eye. So he chooses to fight.

With newfound strength, Wen Hua thrusts his leg out at the assailant, landing a hit on their stomach. The momentary distraction is all he needs to get off the floor. But the vial is in the assailant's hand. Eyes flashing like lightning, Wen Hua charges at the assailant and tackles him to the ground, reaching his palm over to grab the vial, just for it to slip out of reach into the fray. He's not the only one getting targeted. The other travellers are busy fighting their own battles, clinging onto their last few belongings, the only items important enough for them to consider taking on this journey. The vial rolls around between sets of feet, dancing around the boots and sandals and clogs, before coming to a stop just out of Wen Hua's reach.

Crack.

Just like that, the vial shatters into a million pieces, blue liquid staining the ground. It was the colour of hope, bottled and paid for with every coin he owned. Hope for a future where his sister could laugh and smile again. Hope for a future as untroubled as the past. Hope that was now shattered.

Part 5:

Long after the bandits have left, Wen Hua is still sitting in the same position on the floor. Still in disbelief that his sister will be bedridden for the rest of her short-lived life until the day she no longer has the willpower to continue. The rest of the world faded into a low, buzzing hum in Wen Hua's ears.

He stared at the blue stain in the cracked dirt, fingers swiping across the dark patch, hoping to salvage anything possible, but the ground had already swallowed everything there was. A silent tear falls from his eyes. Defeated, numb, and exhausted. That's all he is.

He wipes his tears away with the back of his hand. There's a little bit of blue on his fingertips, but that's alright. It's not going to come off on his face. He can't stop his eyes from welling up with more tears.

Until Wen Hua smells a familiar aroma. Sweet. Tangy. Overwhelming.

He brings his fingers closer to his face and takes a deep breath. That's it.

Wen Hua has smelled this scent a million times before: the flower in the shopkeeper's dingy little store, or the Nightbloom field they were camping next to.

Wen Hua turns his head.

The field of Nightblooms is untouched by the violence. They seem even brighter now, luminescent under the moonlight. Their scent is the same as the one on his fingers.

Part 6:

With his leather pouch full of as many Nightblooms as he can carry, Wen Hua rushes back to his little shack to check on his sister. He left her alone for months, but he's finally found the cure to her disease, the cure that will hopefully bring back the lively girl who chased him through the streets.

He bursts through the doors of his sister's room, but the bed is empty.

The silence is deafening.

The leather pouch of Nightblooms hangs from his hand, suddenly useless. Their perfume is now just a sweet, cloying fragrance in a room that now only smells of absence. All his hope suddenly turns to ash in his chest.

He's too late.

The door behind him creaks, and he glances back to see his elderly neighbour stood there, face lined with deep pity. "Wen Hua," she said softly. "You're back."

He can't look her in the eye. "Where is she?"

"Three days ago. It was peaceful."

What can he do now? His whole life revolved around his sister. Playing with her when she was a kid, teaching her things when she grew older, and taking care of her through her disease. He was drowning in a vast, cold sea of grief.

There's a small red ribbon left on her straw mattress. It reminds him of the first time he got it for her.

"When I grow up, I want to see the world. I want to get out of this small town and see everything else there is to offer!" Wen Hua's sister exclaims as he meticulously gathers her hair in a ponytail. He wraps the red ribbon around her hair for the first time, a motion that he will repeat many times in the future.

Wen Hua looks down at the Nightblooms. And he realises, with a terrible ache in his chest, that his long journey was never simply to fetch a cure. It was to fetch an answer.

He was too late to save his sister, but there were others suffering from the same disease. Instead of bringing her back to life, Wen Hua had brought back an answer that could spare others the same fate.

He may have failed his initial goal, but his journey wasn't a waste.

And he had to keep going. For her.

The Prophecy of Two Tongues

Victoria Shanghai Academy, Yuan, Jing Han Hannah – 15

Cold metal clinking to the hands of two strange faces. Focus hardly shifting from each other's eyes, like they're trying to beat their adversaries in the finals. Trapped in a dungeon with just a single window. Just the darkness could engulf an armed giant. Li Wei, the Chinese Imperial Astronomer, and Yusuf, the Samarkandi engineer astronomer, are inclined to start a bombing raid. This is the 12th century, Li Wei was on a diplomatic mission to the Abbasid Caliph in Baghdad to deliver a celestial map and a calendar as gifts of prestige and for the exchange of knowledge. Yusuf, travelling from Samarkand to Baghdad, bringing texts and engineering designs to the House of Wisdom, seeking formal accreditation. Neither of these missions seems important to the Khan.

The silent guards with their synchronised military steps, one meter apart from each other. The slightest dry, hacking cough of Li Wei triggered them. Within a second, five identical guards surrounded him, their unblinking eyes filled with impassiveness. After all the pale lights and freezing nights that drifted through the window, a man, simply called the Khan, who led the Mongols, looked down. This man was not a giant in any sense, the only thing that made him look like a leader was the heavy boots made of leather. His eyes with unsettling stillness made Li Wei feel the instinct to turn away, submitting himself while he clenched his jaw. His uninviting smile hung on his face for almost a full minute, when he finally started speaking. "In three days, the earth is going to send a comet to the city of Samarkand. It shall not be a symbol for their victory that would lead to emboldening, and it shall not be an omen for our conquest. You need to forge it into a tragedy for Samarkand. You need to create a prophecy that would shatter them using your wisdom and announce it to the land," ended with a deafening voice that echoed off the walls of the dungeon. As the Khan left, Yusuf glanced at Li Wei, still unwilling to let him off, believing that his machines provoked the Mongols. The moon was brighter that night, with a strange, mahogany undertone on the edges, which quietly merged into the sky.

The night was cold, a single oil lamp was their only source of warmth, which scattered across the room and gushed away within a few seconds. Li Wei stumbled his way to the window, inspecting the landscape and the sky. While Yusuf collapsed on the cracked flagstone floor, consumed by the horror. His city is bolded in red, and he would never let the Mongols steal a piece from his land. Yusuf, is going to prove the prophecy right, the true prophecy where the comet was a blessing to Samarkand, and it would guide this city to triumph. This thought was a spark in the darkness. He quickly stood up from the floor and glanced around the surroundings. His eyes locked up at Li Wei's star map on the table. He paced to the table with footsteps of a feather, reached for the map and unrolled the scroll with his calloused, desperate hands. The dry, crackling noise of the paper made Li Wei turn from the window. Spotting Yusuf holding his life's work, his eyes widened as his muscles tensed up, lashing out while shrinking in disbelief, a trembling outrage splintered through his fear. "Bù!" he yelled, the Chinese word meaning no, piercing the silence. He dashed across the room and grabbed the other end of the scroll. Two of them started a round of tug of war, but neither of them had the nerves to clench their knuckles, as the delicate paper would crush into pieces. During this fierce and frightening process, a tug of war without real physical strength, Yusuf took a scan across the scroll. He noticed a series of convoluted notations close to the constellation Draco. He didn't recognise those square-like symbols involving different lines intersecting each other, but he did understand those mathematical forms. Yusuf slowly lifted his head to meet Li Wei's enraged eyes, then pointed at the sky where the comet would appear through the barred windows, then back to the mathematical symbols. He raised a clear question in the silent gestures. Both of them erased their anger, which remoulded into a sense of sobriety. "What does this say about the comet's path?"

The rest of the night passed in a silent hysteria. Yusuf looked at Li Wei. For the first time, he was not a rival anymore. They were two scholars who shared the same vision. To not yield but to fight with resistance and unshakeable power. Li Wei pointed at the other corner of the scroll, where there was a specific record of a "guest star" observed by his ancestors. Seeing Yusuf squeezing his face, he then mimed the smouldering trail that once

appeared in the sky with one hand, illustrating that star. Then, with the other free hand, he unveiled the aftermath. Fingers drumming rapidly in a downward motion, then a sudden catastrophic sweep with his arms that created a crispy “whoosh” in the air. At last, he pointed to the window where Samarkand and the Mongols set their camps. The idea was clear. Star. Water. Flood. Valley. Yusuf gulped, like he was trying to start a great speech to the overloaded information he had just discovered, then closed his mouth, speechless while still trying to process what he got. As they lay down but realised resting was impossible on the icy ground, with cold air leaking from the cracks of the walls. Li Wei held his work in the air, inspecting the densely packed symbols and notations. While Yusuf lay on the floor with his eyes widened, contemplating with a long-lasting ache, an astonished one.

The next time that they opened their eyes was until the day before the comet’s arrival. The sun was setting, almost below the horizon, emitting hues of bright red and marigold. Li Wei slowly lifted his upper eyelids, immediately the beaming light from the sky completely woke him up. “Wèi!” Li Wei shouted the character for “hey” in Chinese. Yusuf is drifting off with minimal consciousness. He looks up to Li Wei’s anxious face and sees the sky beginning to grow darker. His eyebrows quickly drew together, while the corners of his mouth pulled down. There was less than enough time for them to report their prophecy to Khan, or they would face lifetime imprisonment joining the Mongols. Although they were sure that this comet was not linked to a divine sign. The comet’s immense heat would cause glaciers high above the mountains to thaw. Then rush down into the valleys that would lead to a devastating flood. No one, not the Mongols or people in Samarkand, would breathe alive. There were three morally destructive choices Li Wei and Yusuf had to make. To let the flood wipe out everyone and everything. To warn Samarkand only. To warn everyone. Li Wei paced restlessly across the dungeon. He reached Yusuf and showed him the three choices. First, he waved one hand up and down, forming the shape of a wave, then made a gun to head gesture. The second option, Li Wei pointed to the direction of Samarkand and crossed his arms in front of his chest. At last, he spread his arms wide open to encompass everyone, and repeated the crossed arm motion. Yusuf looked at him, then, with a calm and determined nod, he held two fingers up. Li Wei squinted his eyes, glanced sideways at Yusuf and bit his lips. It wasn’t hard to tell why Yusuf made this choice. However, Li Wei tried to persuade him to pick option three with a “peace for everyone” impression. Unexpectedly, Yusuf nodded in agreement...

The last light of red in the sky bled into the darkness. In the silence of the dungeon, two men with entirely different tongues held the fate of millions of people in their hands, with a choice that no star map could ever solve.

Sails of Hope on the Silk Road

Wycombe Abbey Nanjing, Newson, Mary-Rose – 14

The wind was wet and cold as it blew on my face, stinging my eyes until tears started to form. I clutched my already tattered deel to my pitiful figure with sore hands, but the rain still easily blew through the holes. As I sat tied up on the trading ship, any shred of hope vanished leaving me in a state of depression and hopelessness. Pain shot through my stomach as I sat tied with my little brother, looking for any chance to escape. The smell of fresh bread wafted towards us as a man walked by carrying a crate. I held Zorzi's hand as we were both drawn towards it. Hoping upon hope that the merchant would be kind enough to spare us a piece. But our hope was quickly demolished as he looked at us menacingly. Frightened, I hurriedly pulled my brother back just as another sailor nearly collided with us "OUT OF MY WAY!" He shouted. His voice echoed across the vast sea so that all the people on the ship turned to us, making me feel uneasy.

"Don't worry Zorzi, we'll get out of this" I whispered to brother. I could see the fear in his eyes as he glanced at the growing crew.

"Can we go back home now?" He asked in a quavering voice. I swallowed hard as real tears started to form.

"Don't worry, we will be home soon," I replied squeezing his cold hand reassuringly as I shifted closer to him.

"Why can't we just go home?" asked Zori in a small voice. Though I heard him, I pretended to not notice and looked away. The lie I had once told him twelve months ago was starting to eat at me as every week passed.

"*We'll get home, maybe Costanza will find her way back to us by herself*" I kept repeating to myself over and over again.

We sat huddled together until it was noon but just like every other day, our situation was still awful. The merchants who kidnapped us came around one to give us our food for the day, forcing us to eat their leftovers like dogs. They mocked us in all their languages and though I couldn't understand what they were saying, it still made my blood boil. I soothed my brother to sleep after they went below deck and soon, I also grew tired. "A quick rest wouldn't hurt..."

I opened my eyes out of discomfort to find I was no longer on the ship. A girl, who looked exhausted, was singing a gentle melody beside me while she tenderly rocked two babies in her arms.

"Ah, Luka your awake. Come help me hold Zori and Anzola," said the girl as she handed the two babes to me.

"Father is late again, and Mother is still out scavenging. It would be best if they are asleep when they arrive,"

"Constanza?" I whispered in disbelief as I looked at the beautiful image of my older sister.

"Hmmm?" she said without turning around. Her long titian blond hair swayed softly still angelic even after so many years without a proper brush or cut. the memories that I had thought to be lost, came back to me as a suffocating wave. Costanza, my older sister was the most perfect daughter anyone could ask for. But she was kidnapped at the age of eight-teen by the very men we were with now. I should have known that was going to happen, she was gorgeous after all. But I still blame myself for not being able to protect her. She loved and cared for me and my siblings when mama couldn't. She stayed up all night if we were sick and still managed to work in

the morning. "Did you say something Lukie?" asked Costanza, tilting her head. Before I could reply, the world melted into a spiral then steadied again.

"Isn't it just gorgeous my fiol? Another lady asked to buy them for ten cents! Ten whole cents Luka! Just imagine what we could do with that money" I turned around in surprise at the sound of my ma's voice. Her eyes were shimmering warmly as she looked from the decorations hanging from the roof to mine. I remembered that look from long ago. She would always get excited when she talked about her art. Mama would walk along the coast of Genoa and bring back whatever pieces of fabric or glass she could find, using thread or grass to weave the garbage together to create the most beautiful wind charms.

"Mother, I missed you so much!" I cried out, but if she heard me, she pretended not to notice. Sobbing like a baby, I hugged her and closed my eyes.

I opened my eyes again to find myself back on the moldy ship. I was hugging Zorzi tightly as he slept shivering from the cold. The sun had long since set, telling me that it was time to move.

"Zorzi wake up! we have to go" I said to my brother, but he did not wake. "Zorzi are you alright?" I asked silently as fear gripped my heart. I gently put my head to his little chest and sagged with relief as I found his faint but steady heartbeat. Confused, I touched his forehead and yelped in surprise. His head was unnaturally hot despite the cold twilight air.

He's sick!

I recall that there was only one time when someone in our family has gotten this hot by a fever. It was what had caused Zorzi's twin sister Anzola's death. I can still remember her small cries full of pain, and Costanza's anxious face whenever she refused to eat.

"Don't worry Luka, she will be well again" I remember her saying to me before bed one night. But deep down inside, I already knew it was too late for my five-year-old sister. Things had just started to get better after the Genoese-Venetian war, but life had a tendency of turning things around when you least expect it too.

"Costanza?" mumbled Zorzi as he sat up slowly.

"No, it's me Luka. I know you don't feel well but we have to go...NOW" I whispered sternly despite my better self. Seeing my brother struggle to even stand pained me deeply, but if we did not leave now while the ship was docked, we might never get home again. The ropes that used to bind us fell to the ground with a gentle thud, long since cut. Large nails and broken floorboards cut against my bare feet as I ran towards the lifeboat, but all they did was fuel my determination. A watchman wearing complete black and was humming a cheerful tune as he strolled along the dock. From the outside, he looked like a completely normal man. But I knew he wouldn't waste a second to pin me down if he caught sight of me. After all, we were their prisoners. Looking around for the signal, I heard a giant splash as a large wave crashed into the side of the ship. Just as suddenly, a memory came pushing back at full force, knocking me off balance like the ship. I was back where it had all begun, all the pain and joy. It all started in a run-down house in 1296, that was the year I was born. One year after the famous Marco Polo came back from his travels, and two years before he was imprisoned after Genoa won the war against Venice. He wasn't that famous at the time, but my sister and him were two of the few people I look up to. Shaking, I turned to face the ocean and breathed in the salty air. Allowing the song of the sea to absorb into my mind and soul. I remember being able to hear the waves crashing onto the sand, while ship horns echoed between the buildings. I always loved the sea, and the thought that I was just a small speck on such a big planet blew my mind open. I dreamed of working in the popular trade routes and exploring the world, bringing back riches just like Marco to help my family. Even now I still have that dream, but It's already too late for my family even if we do get rich.

"But maybe not for my new one"

forgetting the signal, I turned to look at the land we were docked on and smiled slyly. The scandals had no idea that they were bringing us home by coming here. We were fully Venetian my blood and looks so going to an

Asian country was an obvious choice. Sighing, I remembered how everyone called our parents *popolani* and disgusting after they found out that their native home was Venice. Constanza told me that they were the reason why papa felt pressured to join the navy. Our neighbors laughed at him for wanting to fight, whispering amongst themselves, calling him a mad man. Some of the worse folk would spit and dump their trash and dirty water on us whenever they could. Shouting harshly that it wasn't fair we should be free when we were of Venetian blood. "No, please...please" I said though I didn't know what I was pleading for. Maybe for the memory to stop? My parents? for an escape? Wait...Escape! I snapped out of my trance and spotted the signal while cursing. How could I forget about the plan!? I hurled into the lifeboat with my brother before the watchman could see us and pressed my body to the wet wood. The shock of the sudden coldness woke me up as I stilled my rapid breathing. Five seconds later, more bodies dove beside us as the other rebellions and slaves arrived. shivering, I could feel the tension in the air. But their fear and uncertainty matched mine so perfectly that it made me feel more calm than afraid. To our relief, the boat was soon lowered by a mysterious man and soon, we were rowing to shore. I joyfully hopped out of the boat with Zorzi before it even hit the banks and splashed about in the cool water. My feet sunk into the wet sand, grateful for the solid ground after a whole year. Twelve months and four days, that's how long we had been captured. "Come on Zorzi, let's go home"

A bird chirped in a large oak tree as I starred dreamily up at the bright sky. Zorzi, who had just turned seven, was playing with some pebbles on the sandy street. Mama was walking around the house like always, scavenging for raw materials and papa was at work. Smiling, I looked down the street where Zorzi had just thrown a pebble and froze. Not far down the street, I could see a group of large men too close behind my older sister. She was walking fast, causing her to stumble, with fear visible in her bright green eyes. The men laughed cruelly and started walking faster until they were walking side my side. I held my breath as one of them grabbed Costanza's arm while another blocked her path. Zorzi started crying as he too saw them, but his cries were ignored by my mother who despised twins. I tried to cry out too, but no sound would come out. in the end, I watched as the men dragged my dear sister away, and nobody cared.

I woke up crying with Zorzi looking down at me worriedly. His brown hair covered his small face as he said something to the emotionless boy standing beside him. embarrassed, I wiped away my tears and scowled myself for dreaming about something from so long ago.

"Are you feeling better Luka?"

"Y—yes thank you Altan, just a nightmare" I mumbled as my best friend helped me up. It had been two months after we escaped from the scandals onto the coast of Mongolia and found our way home. Our adoptive family was very glad to see us again and we were praised well for the gems we managed to hide from the traders. Zorzi got better from what turned out to be a simple fever while I spent my days creating more ornaments to sell.

"Tell me again, how did you get captured?" asked Altan. His round face was blank and creaseless, but his voice still indicated that he was disappointed.

"Well...we were selling goods in Calicut with **Abra ax** for a prosperous few days. But while I was selling one of my ornaments to a Genoese man, he mentioned seeing a young lady make something similar back in Genoa. And as you know...we hav—"

"We have been looking for Costanza, and he offered to take up back to Genoa to meet her free of charge!" piped up Zorzi. Exposed, I hung my head low with guilt and whispered an apology. Altan shook his head with disappointment, making the shame unbearable. I knew should have known better than to trust a stranger I just met. The merchant's vague answers and stories were quite noticeably fake but despite all the red flags, I still followed him and brought my brother along with me. once again, I have ruined something so simple, just like all those years ago with Costanza. Soon after she was gone, we found out that Papa had died in battle. After that, Ma sent us to join a Silk Road merchant caravan in search of work, that was before we had been kidnapped by slave traders posing as spice merchants in Samarkand. And to think that all this could have been prevented if I wasn't such a coward.

"I understand Luka, but I hope you know how much trouble you caused us. Aab is not so understanding," Altan said just as the large Mongolian man entered the tent. His heavy boots thudded against the dirt floor as he

approached the shaking sixteen-year-old. The many rings and bracelets on his body clanked against each other as he walked, his scarred face looking more menacing than ever.

“Luka, you and your brother are wanted,” he said. His voice rang out thick and strong, making the three of us shrink back. I looked up at the man who adopted me and my brother with trusting eyes, my heart pounding wildly. Although he was scary at times, Burg was also very caring, and I knew he truly loved us. After all, he was the one who rescued us from the slave traders. After putting on my boots, I got up obediently and entered the main ger to find almost the whole extended family waiting for me. boli hats were on every man's head while gugu headdresses decorated the women. Panic coiled around my chest like a tight rope as I wondered what was so important to require a meeting so big. I looked to Burg for an answer, but the large man avoided my gaze.

“Luka...Zorzi, thank you for coming” said the great grandfather of the family.

“Of course, we are honored to be here” I replied while performing the zolgokh greeting.

“As we are to have you, but there is something we need to tell you and your brother. We have decided that your travels aboard are over, the risks are too great, and you mind too weak. You are only to travel by land from now on, and you are leaving tomorrow...to the city of Dadu.” He spoke. Murmurs of agreement coursed throughout the ger, utterly shocking me. I looked at my brother wide eyed and found him looking just as confused as I felt, it was all too...rehearsed.

“Tomorrow? But that’s so soon! What about Altan?” I asked, hoping that I was mistaken.

“He is to stay with the family, being the youngest son, he must remain home.” Replied great grandfather.

“But we want you to know that this does not mean we are rejecting you. You still are and forever will be a part of our family, we love you very much son. The reason we are sending you away is because there is a lower chance of you getting...distracted again. And maybe if all goes well, you may travel by sea again.” Said Burg.

An overwhelming weight, which I hadn’t noticed, suddenly left my body at once. I grinned stupidly and scolded myself for ever thinking such nonsense. These people truly cared about me and Zorzi, they were trying to help us.

“Ok, we will leave for Dadu tomorrow” I agreed.

The sound of music and smell of food, gently floated about the busy street. my brother, who was now nineteen, was calling out in Chinese to attract potential buyers. Chuckling, I started listening to a nearby conversation that two Chinese men were having. It had already been five years since we came to Dadu so I could already speak their language perfectly. Making eavesdropping child’s play.

“Did you see the new dresses they are making?” asked one of the two men.

“Yes, I did” replied the other “but they won’t utter a word about how they make them!”

“I heard only the ladies know, master Yang got so fed up that he is offering a fortune to anyone who can bring him the secret” said the first man. “*A fortune huh?*” I thought as the two men walked away. Smiling, I turned to look at my beautiful wife who was skillfully weaving the very silk the two were talking about. Two years ago, I had the very same question they had. Leading me to meet Wang Mei Xue who was a dressmaker. At first glance, I was drawn to her character and once she finally told me their secret, I decided to marry her. Although I knew I would miss my family back in Mongolia, I decided to stay in Dadu where I would continue working in the silk trade for the rest of my life.

The Dream of Sand and Silk

Ying Wa College, He, Tim – 16

Part 1:

In the midst of the dunes of the Middle East, a group of men travel westward, not for fame, not for freedom, but for survival...

A man is yelling in an alley. He flails around the rugged bag of silk to the direction of the crowd like a madman with a lamp, calling out, "Fine silk for 50 a piece! Fine silk for 50 a piece!" but no one in the crowd bats him an eye. The people in the crowd flow straight along the road like a rapid. The rich who could afford the costly silk have already embellished themselves from top to bottom with fantastic, velvety silk, and do not need to buy anymore. The poor could not even properly feed themselves, let alone afford the illustrious silk. The vendor continues to flaunt his product with all his strength; the drowning sun surrounds the man in a warm, muted light, revealing the droplets upon droplets of sweat on his head like capsules of transparent mercury. As the sun drops back into the ocean, the crowd clears, and the vendor has not sold a single piece of silk.

The vendor returns home beaten. He flips his pockets and pulls out his wallet. With a "pop" sound, he plucks it open, revealing an assortment of brown-greyish dull coins, not worth much. He sighs, walks to the usual place with him and his friends where they eat every night, and finds the familiar table, sat full with a circle of sullen faces. He takes out two copper dimes from his wallet, the coins clash with each other, making a clink, and orders for a cup of rice wine. He sits down at the table. The others at the table sat with an apathy, stone-faced, while silently eating and drinking.

The vendor breaks the silence, "Business getting any better for yall?" A tanned man with a muscular build and shaved head turns around. He minces his mouth and shakes his head gravely, looking back at the table. "How many sales did y'all make?" He asks again. "I sold one piece" "I sold two, but I had to practically beg the other guy, and he bought it out of charity." A man on the other side of the table looked at the vendor and asked, "How about you?" The vendor shakes his head, "No luck. No luck at all. Pockets are running dry." The tanned man speaks again, "Nowadays, no one is looking for silk anymore. Silk used to be the, like, newest thing and everyone would break their neck just to get their hands on a little piece. Nowadays, it seems that the market is just... dead. Too much silk, too little buyers." The others on the table nod in correspondence. The vendor replied, "Yeah, it just seems like every well-off household in the country have their homes stuffed full of silk and they can't be bothered to get any more, take up more space. I got my hands on so much expensive silk but I can't turn any of them into money, then they might as well be worth nothing." The vendor sighs, "I got money draining from my wallet like wine in a leaking keg, and I can't do anything about it.... God, how I wish there is a place where people actually want this stuff--"

"Actually, a couple of foreigners were near here a couple days before, no idea where they were from, but when they saw our tea leaves and food and silk, their eyes lit up like a man finding a piece of jade in the dirt."

"I was thinking, maybe we can bring our cargo over to these hinterlands and sell it there to people who actually want the stuff. This man, Zhang Qian is preparing an envoy to go westward for exploration. Perhaps we can go with him and sell our items to foreigners along the way?"

There is laughter and commotion among the group. "Are you insane? You would abandon your family just for this?" "You are going to die out there to the barbarians!" But the vendor knew that he was right. If they continued to stay here, they would just slowly suffocate as cash continues to fly out of their pockets and that they would soon starve, sitting on top of a pile of luxurious silk like King Midas, who was surrounded by gold and yet couldn't feed himself.

So, the next day as the sun peeked through the horizon, the vendor and the tanned man packed up their belongings and a huge bag of silk, and went off to join Zhang Qian's expedition to the west.

Part 2:

The Middle East is a very different place from the comfortable Central Plains of China. Where you used to see trees and bushes and limegrass and rice after every corner in Central China, in the Middle East, there was only an irritatingly yellow, suffocating blanket of sand omnipresent. The sand gets into the food, into the water, into every corner of the caravan. Wind, what once was a bringer of vitality, of comfort, of good fortune, has now turned instead into a carrier of coarse, unpleasant sand. The wind comes like a storm of knives, colliding with your skin, then biting, thrashing, abrading your skin to be full of little holes and cuts, converting your skin to be as coarse and rough as the great desert itself.

Water, what used to be an overly abundant pest in Central China, that would at times rise up and rebel, destroying houses, crops and infrastructure, is instead a “blue diamond” in the desert. The people in the envoy kept their water in little canteens, only drinking one or two little drops at a time, drinking water as a prize or incentive for the grueling labour under the ever-cruel sun.

Every day, the men must wake at 6 or 7 and begin their journey before the scorching midday. Some men had to repair the carriages. Under the sweltering heat, they muster all of their remaining strength to lift the hammer and slam it down, lift it again, slam again, each swing sending a torrent of sweat flying in all directions like shattered glass. Some men had to scout for water. They bury themselves in white robes and set off far and far away from shelter, braving the heat, using their telescope, looking for any spot of green oasis with pockets of water.

The heat exhausted people, it drained them of all the energy and moisture they had in and out of the body, turning them into walking mummies. The heat makes people make mistakes. As the caravan moved forward on a particularly hot day, a person had accidentally left a stray telescope lying next to the vendor and the tanned man's bag of silk. As the vendor sat there, tending to his belongings, a ray beamed down from the radiant sky. It pierces the lens, the lens focuses the ray, magnifying it like a stereo speaker, transforming the ray into a deadly, blazing laser. In the corner where the vendor wasn't looking, a flame was started. By the time the vendor noticed the abnormal increase in heat and the blackish-red spots of char on his bag of silk, the tiny, feeble flamelet had already grown into an all-consuming, ravaging flame. The vendor panics; he tries to tug his bag of silk out of the caravan, away from the fire's destruction, but the bag is already in flames. By pulling the bag further out from its origin, he had spread the flame, given it more fuel and space and air to grow, and consume. The flame extends its reaching hands and blocks the exit to the caravan like a sliding door. The vendor screams out for help and scrambles to find some water, but in the end, all he could dig up was a small, half-empty jar. The flames had now spread to the ceiling. Parts of the ceiling collapse, uncovering the radiant, beaming light of the sun. A stray piece of wood hits the vendor's leg, impaling and incapacitating him. The vendor screams out for help again. A crowd has gathered outside his caravan. They attempt to smother the flame with all sorts of materials, but to no avail. Seeing the flame slowly approach the vendor, creeping and creeping and creeping forward till it could absorb the whole carriage, the tanned man steps up, with a hammer in his hand. He swings and swings and swings at the carriage, each swing breaking more and more of the walls down. The others follow his lead, as they swing and swing and finally make a hole to pull the vendor out. As the vendor left the carriage, he begged the people to somehow, rescue his silk, his lifeblood, his whole life's wealth but it was simply too dangerous. In the end, when the fire stopped, most of the silk were a black blotted mess, a conglomeration of ash and soot and char.

The night in the desert presents another form of danger. The desert drops to a chilling cold, the polar opposite of the boiling morning and noon. Predators approach the caravan like a group of cats, approaching a lonely, unprotected nest of mice. Vipers and different bugs approach the caravan, looking to rob away any bites of scrap of food that the men could offer, and wolves approach the caravan, looking to feed on the men themselves.

Sometimes, the predators are not beasts, but men. In the dusk of dawn, a group of masked men ride in the dark toward the caravan. They pull out their daggers and schmitars, sneaking near the caravan like a cast shadow. When they are adjacent to the caravan, they strike, climbing onto the carriages, pointing their weapons at the people, threatening them to give up their valuables. Eventually, the noise of the commotion woke up some men

that were light at sleep. They picked up some tools at their disposal, quietly pulled themselves to their carriage doors, tip-toed out of the comfort of their carriages to avoid alerting the invaders. However, it was too late. Riding the cloak of night, the invaders left as discreet as they came, bringing away with them bags and bags of riches, silk, tea leaves, jewellery. What little silk the two of them had left, there was now even less.

As the caravaneers gathered outside their carriages to recuperate and discuss, the vendor sits across from the tanned man.

“How much silk do we have left?”

“I didn’t bother to count, but it’s probably around like one-tenth of the original amount, and I’m being optimistic.”

“That’s terrible. Absolutely terrible. You know, we could’ve sold the silk at probably one-third of the price back at home and it would’ve sold like hot potatoes in the winter.”

“.....”

“And who knows what would happen next, maybe next month a sandstorm would hit the area and we would find our little remaining batch of silk riddled with holes and covered with little scratches and all sorts of blemishes. Maybe next month, our caravan would crash into a pack of wolves and they would eat us all—“

“So what are we supposed to do? We are in the middle of nowhere, we stray two steps away from the caravan we die! What, you expect us to go back now? Walk the hundred something miles back to China where you can slowly watch as you sink deeper and deeper into poverty?”

“—What was the point of all this? The moment we began this journey it has been torture and misfortune all the way through, not a single good thing has happened so far! What if it was all for nothing? What if we die out here?”

There is a short period of silence.

“But now, we don’t have any other choice now do we?”

“.....”

“We’ll just have to keep going forward. We gotta do this, not only for us but also the millions of other vendors at home, struggling, pulling out all the stops just to make some crumbs of money to keep themselves from starving. Yeah? Just have to keep going forward.”

Just have to keep going forward.

Part 3:

When the men finally arrived at the gates of Constantinople, they were at the end of their wits. Their food and water had run out, their caravan looked more like a ragtag group of survivors than an expedition team. The team members enter the city like refugees, each of them beat up with dust and grime all over their body.

The vendor and the tanned man pull out the remaining little bits of silk left in the rucksack, motioning for the translator to tag along.

“How much you reckon we can get for this?”

“I mean, half of these pieces look like tattered cloth at this point. I’d be happy if they even buy this stuff.”

The three men walked into the trading hall, where an assortment of different merchants were. As they entered, the merchants stared at them inquisitively.

The vendor handed the silk to the translator.

“Show this to them, tell them it’s a high-grade textile for clothing and blankets and the like. Tell them we have a lot more of this at home, ready to be sold and of a much higher quality.”

The translator stared inside the sack.

“I’m gonna be honest with you, this silk looks terrible, these people may not even want it, don’t hold your expectations too high.”

The two traders nodded solemnly.

The trader takes the sack to the foreign merchants and presents the product. There is talking in an alien language, people nodding, arguing, and motioning. The two traders stared onward silently.

At last, the translator returned to the two men.

“The merchants loved the product. They are willing to buy the silk at hand for 4 pieces of gold and would like to immediately secure a stable supply to the material.”

The two traders stared at each other in shock, then their contorted faces slowly developed into a smile, as they embraced each other, showering in the bliss of success.

Part 4:

“—And that’s how we founded the Silk Road! It is surreal to me, to think that all this, all this success, this whole enterprise, all comes from a crazy idea that two street traders had.” The vendor sustained a proud smile as he glanced over the assembly of eager merchants and traders, their faces lighting up with inspiration.

“We were once just a couple of desperate souls, clinging to our livelihood in a desperate bid for survival. We traded silk for water, and desperation for a dream. But here we are! In our struggle for change and to stay alive, we have created something far greater than ourselves. This road is not just a pathway for goods; it is a bridge connecting cultures, ideas, and hopes.”

With the roar of applause ringing in his ears, the vendor realised that though the journey had taken them far from home, it had led them to a destiny richer than they had ever imagined, one that would echo through generations to come, from China to the edges of Europe.

“May our journey inspire others,” he concluded, raising his hands to the sky. “To dare, to dream, and to build pathways of their own. Together, we weave a pathway of opportunity and friendship that the winds of time cannot unravel!”

As the crowd erupted into cheers, the vendor felt the weight of his past transform into the promise of a bright future. The legacy of the Silk Road continues on, fueled by hope and collaboration, illuminated by the shared spirit of adventure and innovation that would forever guide their path.

Silken Saga

Ying Wa College, Meng, Yuan Cheng Karl – 16

Throughout history, humanity has never concealed its desire to explore and connect. Reverberations of horns and drums brought life to the once—desolate border of Chang'an. Here, several new groups of intrepid adventurers were ready to embark on a historic journey, one unlike any before.

Under the holy command of the Emperor of Tang, eight groups of adventures gathered from all over the kingdom would trek into the depths of the vast desert to sell silk to new customers in the far west, known as the start of the first Silk Road. The first group to finish the mission and return would be awarded the grand title “Pioneer of the West” and wealth and fame that one could enjoy for generations.

Sitting on the horse, Hwang felt a mix of nerves and excitement. The unpredictable climate in the depths of the desert concerned him, while the dream of transforming from an ordinary merchant to a national hero and the fact that his team was the most professional among the eight gave him loads of confidence. Next to him, Tjang, his old competitor, put on his scarf, gazing into the horizon like an eagle. As the final horn was blown, horses and camels along with batches of silk rushed toward the west.

Things were far from easy along the journey. Under the camels' hoofs lay an immense stretch of barren uninhabitable land. Clattering of caravan planks and cries of desert falcons were the only sounds accompanying them. The extreme dryness of the desert evaporated every single drop of moisture on their skin, and the sweltering heat roasted their exhausted muscles from inside out. So vast was the desert, all one could see was dune after dune. It was as if an impossible trial nature deliberately set, only to test the very limits of humanity. Soon, as expected, sandstorms came. The sky darkened and yellow winds swept the land. The originally sluggish teams were forced to completely halt to pitch the tents. Hwang panted heavily in the tent as his body found it hard to acclimatize to this desolate region. He stroked the gold coin inside his pocket, a first meeting gift the Emperor gave him, reminding himself there would be much more if he could complete the mission. In this austere manner, weeks and months had passed. Driven by unparalleled ambitions, Hwang's team managed to traverse the Taklamakan Desert, leaving all other eight teams far behind.

“We're taking the edge!” An adventurer pointed toward their back, where Tjang's team and the others were still struggling after them, like ants crawling in the sand.

Unbeknownst to them, even more tormenting challenges were lying ahead.

Soon the annotation on the map became blurry and the altitude started to rise. Little by little, they were stepping into an area unknown, into the clutches of death.

“Look! Such high mountains!”

“The map says, it's called “Pamir”, but many detailed signs are missing,” responded the cartographer. “It's so wide. Seems like the best choice is to get straight through. A detour would take at least five times the time.”

Hwang squinted his eyes and gazed above.

He gasped in awe.

In front of him, the land looked as if it was directly lifted up. The ground twisted and rose all the way up to an incredible height. Towering mountains penetrated the firmament like sharp nails, with their pointed caps laden with snow. Undoubtedly, it would be an arduous trek.

“Just now it was piping hot, and now it's gonna be biting cold!” An adventurer complained.

As the altitude rose, strange things started to happen one after another. One man fainted, followed by another. Many felt dizzy and the camel got too tired to walk, although they hadn't touched a trace of snow. It was as if a phantom had appeared in the team, silently suffocating adventurers and spreading terror.

“It's true! The Tibetan tale! Can't believe it's true!” said an old man. “They say, if people keep going higher, they will be cursed by gods!”

“...” Hwang remained silent. They were trailblazing a route no one had ever walked. Never had any of the adventurers taken this unexpected altitude—related phenomenon into account. They'd made dozens of preparations to counter the extreme heat and coldness, but facing this invisible nightmare, they were more than vulnerable.

“Thump!” A skinny young boy in Hwang's team collapsed. He breathed heavily with his mouth wide open, but it seemed to be in vain.

"The air...It's so thin...How could it be..." He panted, his chest rapidly rising and falling as he struggled to catch a breath.

"Drinh! Wake up! Drinh!"

Even the doctor among the adventurers was at wits' end.

The boy's face became paler and paler which eventually froze in the roaring winds.

Everyone stood in silent tribute to honor the explorer.

Hwang froze, his mind spiraling into a storm of turmoil.

To push forward, or to take a detour?

If I choose the former, more teammates will perish because of the rising altitude. But if I pick the latter and go around the Pamir Mountains, it'll be several times the original distance and we'll never be the first.

Vaguely, the promise he made to his family came to his mind.

"You are the strongest in our family. As muscular as a tiger and as sturdy as a bear. Perfect for traveling." A hunchbacked old man peered at him with turbid half-open eyes, feebly patting his shoulders. "Your potential is unlimited."

"Be the first one to reach the west and make a fortune, then your little brother can go to the best school in Chang'an and we'll never worry about the harvest next year."

"We...are all counting on you."

Yes, such is the harsh reality. People will only remember the first, while second and the others are often left ignored, as if they are nobody. The rewards for the "Pioneer for the West" are beyond imagination, while those for the second and the third team to reach their destination are nothing but consolation, let alone we would probably be the eighth if we take a detour. C'mon, Hwang! How come so many months of hardship will come to nothing! The destination is just there. Just keep pushing forward and conquer this abominable mountain! If there are sacrifices, what of it? Victory beckons!

Wait...wait! It's not right!

Hwang, is it you?

Is it your true self?

Is it because your eyes are blinded by the sand in the desert?

Look around. Your teammates. They are sitting on the ground, panting. Two of them are even lying on wooden stretchers, struggling to stand. Some of them are not born as tough as you. If they don't leave this place immediately, you know what'll happen to them, right?

They also have families. They also have their beloved ones to care for. At this very moment, their anxious families may be gazing in this direction, desperately praying for the safe return of their loved ones. How excruciating it would be if their farewells before departure were their last time to see one another. How can one pursue victory at the expense of innocent lives?

Wake up, Hwang. Time to make a decision.

"Listen, everyone," Hwang's throat tightened, and his words came out thin and unsteady.

"..."

He didn't want to announce it, but he knew he had to.

"The altitude is too high up here. It'll be extremely dangerous if we proceed forward. Unfortunately, we have to take a detour. We have to descend the mountain and go around the plateau."

Some let out a sigh of relief. Some frowned.

In a solemn manner, the team buried Drinh in Pamir and bade farewell to this forbidden sanctum.

Hwang hesitated for a moment, casting a final glance at the winding mountains behind him before forging ahead.

From this point on, he almost conceded defeat, but he had no regrets.

In the meantime, adventurers from Tjang's team had begun to ascend the mountain. Before long, they encountered exactly the same peril, and many felt dizzy due to the high altitude.

"C'mon, comrades! We're not even halfway through! Don't let fear weaken you! No one fights alone!" Tjang bellowed at them.

"But...but...captain, I think I'm really going to faint. Can't we take a small break?"

"No, of course not! Time is of essence. We must seize the opportunity!" Tjang glared at him like a tiger eyeing a mouse, his nose nearly touching the teammate's face.

“O...okay, captain.”

Before long, casualties began to mount in Tjang’s team. Some suggested retreating like Hwang’s team did.

“How outrageous! Some scaredy-cat dared to ask me if we could take a detour around the mountain like Hwang did. HE IS A COWARD! If we are stupid enough to do the same thing, we will be outrun by other teams and say goodbye to number one forever! Understand?” Tjang shouted with fury, spitting saliva into the air.

“Remember, comrades, we’re not on a vacation. This is the Silk Road. This is an honor!”

“It’s a pity that some of us lost their lives today, yet their spirit will remain eternal.”

“Never be afraid of death, for even if you die, you will die as a glorious warrior. Yet cowards will live on in humiliation.”

“Raise your blades, adventurers. We are not afraid of death! We have no fear! Keep going!” Tjang drew his blade from the sheath and pointed it toward the sky.

Tjang’s team marched onwards. Unaccustomed to the frigid zone, Tjang’s camel collapsed.

“Ljo, lend me your camel, please.”

“Captain, but...it can only carry one man!”

“Then you get off, I get on! You youngsters need to walk more to improve your stamina.” Tjang yelled rudely before climbing onto the camel.

“Captain, I can’t hold it anymore. The air is too thin up here,” an adventurer, Swon, complained.

“S...so am I.” Jep panted heavily.

“Drink this. It’ll grant you power.” Tjang pulled out a suspicious bottle from his pocket and handed it to Swon and Jep. “Trust me. Don’t be afraid. No one fights alone.”

It was none other than strong liquor in the bottle. Alcohol numbed the nerves of the two so that they seemingly had more energy to go forward. Unbeknownst to them, they were reaching their bodies’ limits little by little.

The next morning, Swon never woke up no matter how hard his teammates shook him. He lapsed into an eternal slumber.

“There’s no time to lament. Press on, warriors! Fear not. The victory is ahead.” Tjang hastily buried Swon before mounting the camel which didn’t belong to him. His dark silhouette loomed in the mountain mist, intimidating and unwelcoming.

Time flies. More than one year had passed. Hwang’s team sold the silk and took the detour again before returning to Chang’an. As expected, they were the seventh to make their return.

At the presentation ceremony, his team only received some money as consolation, while Tjang, his old rival was awarded the title “Pioneer of the West” alongside loads of pure, glimmering gold.

“Tjang,

the messenger of the Palace,

the connector of two realms,

the trailblazer of valor,

the contributions you made to our kingdom shall be remembered by history, and passed down from generation to generation, for all eternity.” The emperor praised him in person.

The crowd blindly cheered, almost bursting into a commotion. No one noticed the fact that only less than half of Tjang’s teammates made their return. No one cared about the grieving hearts of the families of the deceased.

The tale of a new legend is woven, yet soaked in the blood of countless innocent souls. Across the windswept plateau where they slumbered, the darker half of the story remained untold. The warriors were forced to confront the altitude, only to needlessly die for their master’s glory. Beneath the tundra their bodies lay entombed, forever forgotten, forever separated from their homes.

Hwang’s team gathered in a local inn. In dim candlelight, the ethereal dreams of nobility dissolved into vapor before his eyes. He blinked and looked around, realizing that most of his teammates were safe and sound. Despite “losing” the competition, his team had the lowest casualties among all teams. Didn’t it deserve more appreciation?

It was all worth it after all.

Centuries later, when it comes to the Silk Road, perhaps no one should ever remember his name, but the lives his decision saved would continue to thrive, generation after generation.

Creative Writing
Fiction

Group 4

The Silk Scarf : A Legacy of Passion

G.T. (Ellen Yeung) College, Ho, Chelsea – 17

Arid gusts of air easily filled up Hao's lungs, triggering a few intense coughs, but they didn't budge the steady pace of the trekking camel. Continuously, dents of hooves are left in a cycle of imprinting and erasing, as if trying to seek companionship by signaling its presence in this sandy void. However, all Hao could see was the immense wilderness that stretched beyond his periphery.

Surely, Hao felt the soreness from the tedious yet lonely journey in his bones, the harsh, radiant sun scorching every single one of his limbs merely added insult to injury; but never had the idea of going back home came across his mind, as it was too occupied with his possibly farfetched imaginations of the mysterious Western world yet to be explored. Besides, he wasn't going to disappoint his mother, right? Tugging the silk scarf around his neck tighter, the ghost of his mother's frail hands wrapping the material round his neck left lingering homesick, but soon was dissipating as a dominant urge of determination took over.

"I have dedicated my life to this fabric, now that my spirit is willing but my flesh is weak, please help mother to fulfill my dreams and bring it under the world's spotlight it has long deserved..." The tender yet earnest voice of his mother's once again echoed through his mind, seemingly enough to fill up the vacancy within the lonely desert. Firmly, he clutched the strap of his bulky bundles over his shoulder, and continued to look forward to discovering the unknown ahead on his bumpy ride.

For the first time ever since he left Chang An, he saw something else besides the sand clinging to his lashes—numerous trails of footprints leading to the same direction. And my gosh, was it truly a discovery sweeter than finding an oasis in such inhospitality! So just like Hans and Gretel, he followed each and every step attentively; and finally, he found his first stop.

Looking forward, a chain of densely packed tents crowded the area; and as he got closer, the mumbles started to rattle louder, mingles of the blown tarps' shooshing and vibrating melodies of pungi seeped into the dusty air. Curiously, he got off his camel and entered the market with his heavy bundles.

The hustle and bustle lit the place up with liveliness, crowds were frequently found in front of each alluring display of the shops. Many were wearing quilted cloth caps with colorful coats draped over their shoulders, sporting unique geometrical patterns that are quite striking, but a touch of silk could really elevate its beauty, wouldn't it? The string of thoughts was quickly interrupted by the eyecatching goods sold from different stalls. Be it succulent apricots, intricate ivories, dazzling sapphire rings or even cozy fur coats, the shops have it all. Despite the unfamiliarity of such items, Hao was rather exhilarated to come across new discoveries, as he found a possible opportunity to showcase his culture as well. Astonished, he was fully immersed in caressing the bear pelt, completely unaware of the hostile glaring from a skeptically hooded man.

"You with the scarf! Look behind!" An urgent and sharp voice managed to snap Hao's head just in time for him to stop a hand from snatching the fabric off his neck. At the drop of a hat, the thief's tattooed hand retreated from Hao's grip and he fled like a cheetah, leaving Hao with no trace to follow. While he was still quite discombobulated, the same voice rang again, but softer this time.

"Are you alright?" The soothing voice came from a girl with jet black hair and hazel orbs that glistened like citrine under the blaring sun. She was wearing an emerald gown under a piece of ornate garment draped over her body, which perfectly complemented her honey-like complexion. She was even accessorized with a crossbody bag covered in floral prints of a violet plant species.

"Uh, yes...um, thank you..." Still having his guard up, Hao gripped onto his scarf heedfully.

"You must be new here?" She pointed at Hao's scarf, and continued, "You've gotta be more cautious with that around your nape. Are you looking for something? Or do you need any help?"

Alerted, Hao squinted his eyes vigilantly at the incredulous solicitude of the lady. “What about my scarf...” He managed. “Don't worry, I don't bite. I'm just trying to help.” followed with a light chuckle. “All I'm trying to say is that material of yours...it's a new sight around here, and those merchants tend to go feral just to get their hands on such precious items.”

“You've never seen silk before?” questioned Hao. “Silt? Never. Hah, now that you mention it, you've got me intrigued about that “silt” thing you've got there.”

A jubilant spark exploded within Hao's chest at the realization— he would be able to share his mother's creation with the people around here! “I could show you more about it! And, it's sil-k.” His mouth empties before his brain could've stopped him.

Despite being taken back by the sudden display of enthusiasm from Hao, the lady still nodded and extended a hand. “I'm Nora.”

With belated embarrassment of his own eagerness, warmth crept up his now burning features, he ducked slightly to conceal the scarlet flush. “Hao...” he replied along with a gentle shake of Nora's hands.

“Follow me.” Nora said with a smirk, as if amused by the timidity of Hao. Both of them barely squeezed past the flocks of people that flooded the area like a tsunami, but eventually reached a decent-looking stall. Immediately, a rich blend of aromas filled Hao's nostrils, almost giving him the illusion of tasting the spicy sweetness drifting in the heated air. Stacked tidily, the gigantic sacks filled with grains sparked bold fragrances, with varying bags of vivid crimsons to muted taupes.

“My family sells spices for a living, foreigners tend to dig for “the wild Samarkand flavor ”, whatever that means.” Nora rolls her eyes jokingly. “So I've learnt how to make them from scratch, from herbs that you can only find here.” She walked behind the counter and pinched a few black grains from a bag. “Try this, she's our all-time best seller.”

Upon having a taste, the provoking spice of the peppery seasoning stimulated brimming tears and a choking wheeze.

“Too hot to handle? It took me three days to toast them dry, and afterwards I had to grind, sieve, blend and do all sorts of things to create that delicacy.” Nora said dramatically.

“Oh hah...I think I'll stick to weaving silk.” Hao muttered.

“Right, so are you going to show me what that's all about?” Nora suggested.

With that being said, Hao joined Nora's side under the shade and knelt down on the mattress to unpack one of his bundles. Inside, there was a wooden structure composed of various trapezoid frames and pedals, a humongous bundle of shiny fibres and an unfinished handkerchief.

Untying, stretching, hooking, overlapping, the delicate silk was threaded on the arm-length wooden pattern loom by gentle and repetitive movements. “I couldn't fit the actual machine in my bags, but this still shows how we weave silk back in China.” Hao muttered.

There was a line of silence, where the stomping on the pedals and the faint chatter of passersby were the only sound filling up the space; but the silence was not an uncomfortable one, more like a sense of serenity from a moment of appreciation. “It's gorgeous.” Sounding slightly breathless, Nora sat down criss-crossed besides Hao. “I bet China is a breathtaking place huh?”

“It is.” Hao replied, eyes still trained on the small unweaved edge of the handkerchief. “Oh how I wish I could visit such magnificent places as well... I just want to introduce these extraordinary spices to the world, leaving people awe-struck like how you did with this flowy treasure of yours.” Nora’s grin slowly faded and her hands were unconsciously fidgeting with her embroidered sleeves. “I know I sound insane and it’s unrealistic for some stupid spice to reach another part of the world, or at least that’s what they say...” the confidence in Nora’s voice dwindled, but she still managed to force out a bitter snicker.

The weaving came to an abrupt stop. A wave of resonance suddenly crashed down all at once. Despite Hao frequently showcasing a seemingly impervious armour of determination, doubts of this “mission impossible” had always been brewing in the back of his mind. What if he was the only one who is intrigued enough to appreciate the beauty of his culture? What if everyone thinks he’s just a lunatic? What if he would still be alone at the end of his journey? However, all negative screeches are now buried away, leaving a buzz of content by the newly found resonance shared with Nora.

“No, I understand. I want the world to see my blood, sweat and tears as well, and I—and I want to...” He sighs, bringing the white silk handkerchief to Nora. “...Bring it under the world’s spotlight it has long deserved.”

Nora’s closely knitted eyebrows unwinded and her mouth hung slightly agape, it was obvious how she was physically less jittery than before as she accepted the cloth. “Is this the reason why you came here?”

Hao gave an acute nod. “But it wouldn’t be truthful if I were to deny that I didn’t go on this journey to seek for a fortune. I do wish to gain enough so I’d return with enough money to grant my family a carefree life. That’s the least I can do to reciprocate their decades of efforts in raising me up.” he added.

“I believe you can do it.” Nora uttered and stood up.

“You could too.” Hao replied without missing a beat, tilting his head upwards to see Nora transferring herbs from the sacks to smaller pouches.

“I can’t. Even if I believe in myself, my family won’t approve, they think women like us should only contribute in the shadows. Us doing strict business is just a mere farce.”

Seeing someone facing a similar adversity as him, but is hanging at the verge of giving up, sent Hao an urge to tell her that she’s not alone; so he managed to muster up some courage, attempting to comfort Nora. “Hey...one day, one day everything will change for the better if you just believe enough. I almost gave up half way through my journey thinking I’d fail miserably, but I stayed. And it worked.” Hao got back on his feet as well, and walked towards Nora. “And if you want to, could I help? I can carry the spices with me and introduce them along with your name, then people might come looking for you, and that’s when they’ll realize talent is not decided by gender.”

Nora’s locked eyes with Hao, attempting to search for any glint of foul intentions. However, all she could see was genuineness; a gentle tug of her rosy lips gradually formed. “Really?”

An answer was just about to fall off the tip of his tongue, when abruptly, a swarm of hooded men surrounded the stall.

Whoosh! The strings holding the tent’s tarps were sliced without hesitation; the fallen,filthy cloth blocked every single route for escaping, leaving the two beleaguered.

While Nora kept her nonchalant composure, Hao’s heart rattled rapidly by pure fright, threatening to break out from his ribcage; trembling hands, skyrocketing pulse, jello-like legs, Hao swore he could taste the saltiness from his own sweat.

A slender silhouette made its entrance through casting an elongated shadow on the uneven, sandy surface. The person wore a piece of burgundy textile covering every inch of his body, contrasting from the pitch black disguise the rest of the clan was draped in, possibly symbolizing the superior position he was in. To his left, a familiar figurine pointed sharply at Hao; he was the tattooed thief trying to steal his scarf!

“Store’s closed today! Let’s make this simple.” The man in maroon pulled out a polished scimitar and pointed the honed blade at Hao. “You. Hand over whatever sorcery that’s on the neck of yours and tell us how to work that magic to make it. Or else, instead of wrapping that scarf around your nape,” he brought the razor close to himself to demonstrate the threat, “this would.” he hissed violently.

“But of course. If you tell us how to make this PROPERLY, we’d be generous enough to pay you a good amount of money.” With just a flick of his fingers, one of the members brought out a detailedly carved wooden case. Inside, golden solidus were filled to the brim and oozing out the box just like a bleeding wound.

Still shakened, Hao forced himself to swallow down the lump in his throat, attempting to ease his hyperventilation. Obviously, Hao had considered fleeing, but the low chances of survival dimmed all hope for those ideas. Chaotic thoughts moving in numerous directions eventually led him to a dangerous zone of his mind, as he also considered the offer made by the bandits.

Glancing towards the loaded box, he knew that amount was far more than enough to cater his whole family, and wouldn’t that be fantastic? Returning to the place he longed for, exchanging laughter across a table filled with scrumptious delicacies, getting to afford medicine to cure his mother’s strained hands...

“Bring it under the world’s spotlight it has long deserved...” His mother’s unforgettable words knocked Hao back to his senses, he knew giving in would just leave his mother’s stunning creation under reckless manipulation to act as a money generator for apathetic merchants.

He WILL protect this legacy until the day he dies.

“On the count of three, bury your nose in your scarf.” A stern whisper brought Hao back from his string of jumbled thoughts. “What? Why—”

“One, two, three!”

Nora lit a match at the speed of light and threw it into her floral crossbody bag. Then, immediately, while tossing the bag on the ground, she covered her face with the silk handkerchief Hao gifted her.

The confused yet aggressive bandits pulled out their weapons, ready to surge at the two of them due to the stunt pulled by Nora. Hao, who thought they were to be done for, closed his eyes completely shut. But in the nick of time, the bandits were suddenly fighting the air and collapsed one after another, eventually losing all consciousness.

The moment Hao managed to open his eyes, all he could see was a thick layer of smoke around the closeted space; but before he could process the blurry sight, he was pulled out of the tent by Nora.

Huffing, puffing, gasping, the both of them breathed like their lungs yearned for oxygen. After calming down, Hao couldn’t help but shoot a questioning gaze towards Nora, who was carrying both his bundle and her patches of spices.

She sighed. “Datura stramonium. It’s a flower which triggers hallucinations by its smoke when burnt. I got it from the Mongolians across the street, quite useful yeah?”

“Yeah...” Hao responded weakly.

“As much as I want to brag about that flawless escape plan of mine, I fear we have no more time for that.” Nora spoke. She shoved all the items in her hand into Hao’s bundle, then handed it to him. “Now for both of us, carry our most prized possessions and tell the world about their stories. These bandits are going to catch up anytime soon, go before they can find you.” she finished hastily.

“But they’d wake up and—and you’d be alone—”

“I’m gonna be alright. These heists are actually quite common ‘round here, my father would help with the situation.” Nora assured. “Thank you Hao, it was really really lovely to meet you.”

“Same goes to you too Nora, I promise to try my best.”

On that note, Hao strapped up his bundles and bidded goodbye to Nora, leaving to retreat his camel with one last glance back at his first friend made along his journey.

The gusts of air are still arid and the ride is still annoyingly bumpy. But now, not only does Hao have to protect the delicate silk scarf around his nape, but also needs to carry pouches of aromatic spices, just to bring their legacies under the world’s spotlight they long deserved as he treks through the borderless dune to reach his next destination...

New Tales Of China's Silk Road

G.T. (Ellen Yeung) College, Kung, Jayden – 15

After a loud zap, all he could see was a white light before becoming unconscious. The next time he opened his eyes; he was in an unknown crowded area that looked nothing like his home...

It's the year 2200, China is planning to launch their most extensive project yet, a high-speed monorail spanning the whole distance of the new China Silk Road. The government believes that this project is crucial for their long-term economic development and in maintaining a healthy relationship with the countries on the way. By then, the whole journey from one end of the Silk Road to the other can be completed in less than an hour, massively boosting the efficiency of trading between countries for everyone.

Meanwhile, scientists have discovered a way to "time travel" back in time and are planning to send people back in time to complete various research tasks on the old Silk Road, learning more about both it and the ancient developments of China in the Han Dynasty, as well as the first group of people to take this route.

Chen was one of the candidates selected to take on this journey. He would have nothing but a camera to record whatever he discovers. He may return via a transporter once he's reached Rome, Italy, one of the terminals of the ancient Silk Road.

With the blink of an eye, both Chen and Wang were launched back over 2000 years ago, in the Han Dynasty...

Immediately after he arrived back in ancient Xi'An, he was standing in front of a notice board regarding the brand new "trading route" linking China to multiple other countries in Eurasia. In the little slip he received back in the present day regarding his mission; it was stated that he would have to make stops at multiple countries including China to take photos of their ancient culture so that the people in the present day could learn more about the culture, economic trading and the way of living in different places along the Silk Road.

And so, the tedious and gruelling journey begins. Chen took a few pictures of ancient Xi'An, gathered everything he needed including food, drinks and a map then set off into the vast and open fields of wilderness on his horse. At first, Chen was amazed at how different China was in ancient times. Although it was just as busy as it is in 2200 inside Xi'An, it was completely silent outside of it. It brought peace and calm to his mind. The gentle chirping of birds and crickets was something that he could rarely hear in present day. The blowing of gentle winds and the brushing of horse hair really gave him chills.

As he wandered further and further away from Xi'An, he started to come across more and more traders, taking the same route and aiming to reach their destination. Chen went on and interviewed some of them and even secretly took some photos of their appearance and what they were carrying. Most of them looked like homeless people or even bandits with their long beards and were carrying large bags, mainly consisting of tea leaves, raw materials or medicine for trading at different countries.

Days fly by and life in ancient China was starting to become mundane. Wondering when the time will come for him to explore more about another country, Chen was desperate to move on from doing the same things everyday. Luckily for him, he had already passed the towering and hazardous mountains and was storming ahead towards the Indian border.

Right after he entered India, he headed straight for the nearest civilization. On the way there, he encountered several Indian traders who were carrying some spices like pepper and ginger, herbs and dyes, hoping to take the Silk Road to other countries. Chen immediately took a few pictures and took notice of what ancient India created. Soon, Chen stumbled upon a tiny village, where people lived in tiny wooden huts that were no better than a pile of sticks. There really was no technology back then... Everywhere Chen looked, he saw people working hard to produce spices and dye clothes in simple workstations. Chen couldn't help but feel for the people

in ancient India and cherish what he had in the present day. Before moving on, Chen took several pictures of the ancient Indian civilization, as well as a picture of a wooden palace, surrounded by temples and statues which are still a massive part of the modern, developed India's culture, 2000 years ago.

As he was leaving the small village, the sound of people screaming in the distance startled him. As he looked into the distance near a small forest, he realized that there was an ongoing conflict and people were battling in the distance. Turns out, due to internal problems and kings being afraid of getting assassinated, civil wars like that was very common at that time. Should Chen go near the point of conflict or should he stay back? He hesitated, but decided that for the knowledge of humanity, he would sneak up to the battlefield and hopefully take a few photos documenting the war. As a result, he came up with a plan, then scouted around the area to find the most optimal spot for sneaking up to the battle zone. He executed his plan perfectly and successfully snuck up behind a bush in proximity to the ongoing feud. Afterwards, he started to take photos of the people involved. Most of them looked like tribal people wearing capes and masks, fighting using only spears since more advanced weapons had not been invented by that point in history.

Chen couldn't risk staying in such a dangerous area for too long so quickly fled the scene, dashing away as hastily as possible and hoping that he wasn't being followed.

Suddenly, a loud roar screamed in the distance and before Chen could react, a gigantic wild wolf sprinted out of nowhere, looking to find its dinner. This left him absolutely astonished as only in ancient history can you get ambushed by a wild wolf like that. Just as he was about to be eaten by the hungry wolf, a lethal arrow was launched from the bushes, striking the wolf and neutralizing it on the spot. Soon after a Chinese man dressed in adequate clothes walked towards Chen. Chen felt like the man looked familiar to him, as if he had seen him somewhere before. It was not before the man introduced himself that Chen remembered who he was. "My name is Zhang Qian, dispatched by Emperor Wu of the Han Dynasty, taking this new trading route to look for trading partners from all sorts of countries. Sir, are you hurt?" He said. "Yeah, I'm fine... wait, you are Zhang Qian? The same Zhang Qian who was nicknamed 'father of the Silk Road'?" Chen replied in awe. "Silk Road? I am carrying silk but what do you mean by that?" Questioned Zhang. "Oh it's really nothing" Replied Chen after realizing that the term "Silk Road" didn't exist back then.

Zhang then brought Chen to his little camp that he set up nearby to rest overnight and that was when Chen made the crucial realization that following and documenting Zhang's journey could really make huge contributions for historical investigations in 2200. And so, Chen gathered up all of his bravery and asked Zhang if he could accompany him for his trip westward. With a smile, Zhang agreed and before the sun even rose on the next day, the two of them were already on their way, carrying bags of silk for commercial exchange and forming alliances with other countries.

On the way, Chen took tons of pictures in secret, both of Zhang and the stuff he was carrying. Zhang's mission was to get to the current land of Afghanistan, so they had to walk through what seemed like an endless amount of roads. Eventually, they developed a daily routine which was working well until one shocking day. On that particular day, the pair were just carrying out their daily routine near the now Pakistani section of the Silk Road when they spotted a group of soldiers in the distance. They did not look like Chinese soldiers and looked like they meant business. As the group of soldiers approached the pair, a cool shiver was sent down Chen's spine. He had suddenly remembered the fact that in the history books, it was stated that Zhang was once captured by enemy soldiers on his way to Afghanistan. These soldiers were the ones who had captured him in the original timeline! Before they could flee, they were blocked by the soldiers and were forced into a battle. Chen knew that he was now in this too, so he grabbed a spear and let adrenaline take over him. At that point, all he could hear was spears clanging and banging, soon followed by the horrifying screams of people. His mind went blank, completely focused on helping Zhang complete his mission quicker and avoid all the suffering that occurred in the current timeline. To his total surprise, the extra power he contributed was just about enough to scare the enemy away and change the events of history itself!

After that insanely close call, Chen and Zhang scurried through the homestretch of the trip from ancient India to ancient Afghanistan. Upon arrival, Chen immediately spotted signs of Buddhism. Everywhere he looked, there

were Buddhas which were in perfect condition, which was a rare sight in modern days. However, this is where Chen and Zhang bid goodbyes to each other as Zhang had reached his desired destination. Zhang thanked him for fighting alongside him when it really mattered and told him to stay safe. Chen gave Zhang his best regards as well. Before they parted ways, Zhang gave him a satchel containing some coins, as well as some of his finest silk he had.

Chen had read about ancient Afghanistan before so he knew that it was rich in natural resources and was a major trading hub in major cities. There were waves of people gathering around the place, looking to trade with different people. The place was certainly more developed than ancient India but was still on the rise. Chen only decided to stay briefly, though, so after taking photos of the trading centers and the Buddhas, Chen used the money he received from Zhang to replenish his supplies and headed out to continue his journey towards Rome.

The final leg of the journey is also the most tedious section of the journey as Chen would have to make it past the scorching heat of the middle east, as well as cross the whole of Turkey, eventually going along the coast of the Mediterranean Sea and arriving at Rome. To tackle this challenging route, Chen had to be both mentally and physically prepared for it.

Heading into the middle east, Chen felt like yellow was the only color that existed from all the sand he saw in the vast emptiness of deserts and plateaus on his way. Most of the time, his mind would be going "why isn't a train available?" Other times, he would be zoning out from fatigue. The only thing that would cheer him up was an occasional oasis that he would come by every couple of weeks. But his true motivation came from seeing other wandering traders taking the same route, embarking on the same journey on the earliest version of the Silk Road, looking forward to completing their rewarding missions. It made Chen believe himself and made him keep reminding himself that this was all for the future, that this was all for science. One day, he encountered an unexpected sandstorm of great power, but that didn't stop him from dodging it, enduring it and moving forward.

Soon enough, he was in the middle of Turkey, making his way to Istanbul, finally earning himself a well-deserved rest. While Turkey wasn't by any means an easy country to maneuver past, it was nothing compared to the absolute hellhole that was the enormous desert of the middle east. As a result, Chen arrived at Istanbul in no time. Since at that point in history, Turkey was part of the Roman empire, the buildings there have a strong resemblance of Roman architecture. Homes were made from mud-bricks and it doesn't really look like the modern Turkey at all. Everywhere Chen goes, he could see traders who took the Silk Road, arriving and instantly getting to work, trading their goods. Big cities like Istanbul have developed cosmopolitan cultures which are very diverse. Chen was utterly shocked by the sights there as he didn't expect it to look like this at all. He secretly took his camera out and snapped photos of everything everywhere, knowing that everyone over 2000 years later would still feel the same way as he does right now.

After a good night's sleep, Chen was going to end his amazing journey by travelling gracefully along the coastline of the Mediterranean Sea, enjoying the stunning views of Europe and thinking about what will be the first thing he does after returning home, over 2000 years into the future. As the gates of Rome slowly rose above the horizon, Chen looked at the satchel Zhang gave him. What an honor it was for him to meet such an amazing historical figure and even become friends with him! Chen didn't regret a single decision he made on the entire journey and cherished those who guided him on the way.

Once he entered the gates of the grand old city of Rome, his eyes opened wide as ever. The classic Roman buildings all lined up in a single file really looked like something from a fantasy movie and the famous Roman pillars looked like it was reaching for the skies! They were all sculpted precisely and immaculately and also housed tons of Roman Baths that emitted such an attracting odour that Chen could smell it even from afar! These are simply just experiences that could no longer be recreated in the modern day! Of course, Chen could not miss this opportunity and used the remainder of his money to purchase a session in the Roman Baths! Such a soothing end to this demanding journey! After he was done enjoying himself in an unforgettable experience at the end of the Silk Road, it was time for him to return to present day China to report what he had discovered of one of China's greatest creations, the Silk Road.

Chen took a few final photos of ancient Rome and its well-developed infrastructure, culture, and trading hub markets, then pressed the activate button on his transporter, leaving this fantastic, sacred city at the end of the Silk Road. What a journey! From where it was all created, all the way to the end of the road. Truly, every road does lead to Rome!

After another loud zap, Chen woke up back in present China exactly 10 years after he had been sent back in time to the Han dynasty. It felt like it was all a dream... Thankfully it wasn't! After some explaining from his fellow scientists, Chen discovered that while he was in a coma after he arrived back in the modern China, scientists made good use of his discoveries. Not only did his photos get used for decorating the stations of the newly-opened Silk Road Monorail, they also got utilized in history books! Based on his discoveries, scientists have also created a brand new version of the Chinese history book, where Zhang remains as "father of the Silk Road" and completed his first mission in under a month. Chen was credited as one of the book creators and received a certificate of bravery.

In the next couple of years, the efficiency of using the Silk Road should only skyrocket, with the government even aiming to make it more cost-effective than trading using high-tech planes. It will certainly be exciting to see what's about to come for China's Silk Road in the future! Perhaps even more new tales to uncover?

The Story of the Nameless

G.T. (Ellen Yeung) College, Poon, Kelly – 15

Sunlight burned into the sand, heating it until the fine particles occasionally gleamed and sparkled at the corners of your eyes. The coarse rocks that lined the roadside were scalding hot, while the tracks left by passing caravans were slowly buried— hidden beneath a fresh layer of fine sand, now vanished without a trace.

A strange tune could be heard, one meticulously crafted; unsettling at first, yet pleasant to the ear thereafter. It went something like this:

“For as far as the road stretches,
we merchants will follow the wind
till the end of time,
where we’ll leave our legacy behind
till the end of time...”

The tune was called “*The Story of the Nameless*,” the legends said. Names merge and dissolve with time; countless versions sung across the vast lands we call Earth. Yet what the bard sings, and what the people echo, will always ring true to their emotions. Just like how this mysterious melody carries an everlasting feeling, hidden within every note.

◇

"What's the meaning of life?" The girl sat lazily on the edge of the caravan, both hands gripping the sides tightly. The slow trot of the camels continued, a mundane, background noise that filled the quiet air.

"Answer that yourself." The boy tsked in annoyance as a gust of wind blew some sand into his eyes. "Damn sand. Damn weather. Damn sun."

"When's the next caravanserai?"

"At least two days of travelling." He sighed, audibly, irritation clinging to his every word.

"Well, the china is waiting to be mended. Can't have customers protesting. Again." Her legs dangled dangerously, her torso angled forward, as if she might jump from the caravan at any second.

"Mind your legs."

"Whatever. It's not that dangerous. Besides, I'm used to this," she said, pausing before continuing, albeit a bit cockily, "a professional, I'd say."

"Says the one who ended up in a coughing fit after some sand got into her throat. Which ended up stuck in her airway."

He reined in the camels for a split second, avoiding the rock that was jutting out in the middle of the road, then loosened the reins, letting them fall back into pace.

She bristled at the memory of rolling off the safety of the wooden floor, remembering how the sand had clung to her like a second skin, and how the dull sting of it had prickled the soft of her arm.

"It's been a while since we've seen other merchants," he said quietly, a flicker of unease passing through his eyes, which was gone the next second.

"Maybe we're going off track. Hah."

"Not funny."

"Genuinely though, what's the point of being alive?" Her knuckles were white from gripping the edges. "It's always just travelling. Endless piles of sand."

"Beats me."

"Would you be content if you were a rich emperor?" Her voice carried a note of genuine curiosity.

"Maybe."

"You'd be surrounded by concubines," she said, blowing dirt off her eyelashes, "with fabulous banquets to fill your stomach and silk clothes to cocoon you. You'd be safe and sound."

"I would miss bartering." His words held a hint of raw vulnerability he rarely ever showed.

"Hmm. Me too."

The girl smiled, a grin that rounded her cheeks, and began humming a tune, a nursery rhyme her mother had sung to her when she was young, back when every day spent by her was wrapped in warmth and comfort.

◇

The hustle and bustle of the market welcomed the duo—the faint hammering of metal against metal and the splatter of clay against wooden platters reaching their ears. They hooked the camels' reins to a nearby fence, shoved some fresh greens beneath their muzzles, then gathered the china that had, unfortunately, been broken on the way.

"Something is amiss," the boy said, furrowing his brow. "No wonder there weren't any merchants on the road. There aren't many here either..." His voice trailed off, and the duo began to take in their surroundings more cautiously.

"The sultan has struck again," the soldiers manning the passageway whispered fervently, "taxes have been tripled... We might as well be losing our jobs if merchants don't pass by anymore."

"Oh." The boy's voice felt small.

"Yeah." The girl stared at her worn sandals, the ones that had accompanied her since she was sent out to be a merchant at the age of six. They had been huge at first, but now they were comfortable, snugly wrapped around the soles of her feet. She started to wriggle her toes, as if the childish action could ward off the grim sense of finality that had settled in the air.

"Let's just get the ceramics mended." He heaved his bag of plates and bowls over his shoulder and made his way to the fixer they often saw.

"Long time no see, young'uns! Got yerselves some fine china today?" The fixer grinned; crooked, missing teeth and all, while creases lined her forehead and chin. Yet her smile was as warm and radiant as ever.

The girl nodded, the corners of her lips lifting slightly as she took in the familiar sight of the fixer. She turned her head towards the boy, watching him set the bag of broken china onto the floor. He opened it and began to bring out each shattered fragment, piece by piece, delicately. The fixer swiftly but gently took the fragile porcelain pieces and started doing what she did best—fixing.

"Young'uns, take care o' yerselves, ya hear me?" The fixer used a no-nonsense tone, her gaze serious and steady.

The young duo nodded quietly in response, their eyes tracking her every move, taking in how the intricate patterns of dragons and clouds came back to life beneath her old, skillful hands.

"Remember," she said, "when times are harsh, the fragments o' yerself that fell off deserve to be picked back up."

The duo, still lost in the way the patterns danced along the edges of the vase, the sides of the bowls, and the rims of the plates, nodded once again. They were too absorbed in the present, in the way shattered pieces were pieced back together and made whole again, in the way the designs were mended to intertwine comfortably, as good as new. Yet they failed to understand that fixed things always remain cracked deep inside, just like how the new layer of porcelain only fills the surface of the cracks in the china.

"Finished!" The fixer chuckled, then carefully placed the mended china back into the bag.

The boy pulled out three gold pieces, but before he could hand them to her, she stopped him abruptly.

"Young'un, don't waste yer precious coins. Just..." The skin beside her eyes crinkled as she smiled wryly.

"Remember me. A fixer in one o' the caravanserais."

He felt his hand tremble as he tucked the coins back into his pocket. The girl rushed to the fixer and wrapped her in a bear hug, tears shimmering in the corners of her eyes.

"I miss you already, fixer..." she said quietly.

"Ye gorgeous girl," the fixer said, a hint of pride in her voice, "ye keep growin' up, and one day ye'll see that goodbyes aren't the end."

The girl nodded sadly as she and the boy waved their farewells. The duo carefully carried the bag of mended china, as per usual, to avoid damaging them again. Their gazes were downcast, a cloud of solemnity hanging over them. The camels grunted as the girl unhooked their reins from the fence, while the boy gently placed the mended porcelain into the back of the caravan, where cushions lay to protect the fragile merchandise.

"Let's go."

The girl nodded in response, then crawled to the corner of the caravan, while the boy settled at the front, one leg angled at the camels' hindquarters to spur them on, while the other rested comfortably on the footrest.

"HALT!"

A loud voice struck their eardrums, and the camels reared up in terror. The boy did his best to calm them, then proceeded to peek out from beneath the shade.

"Yes...? Sir?" The girl stayed deliberately hidden as the boy answered; if it were an attack, she'd at least have a slim chance to escape the chaos.

"Thirty gold coins. Per head."

It was a soldier who had halted them, bushy-bearded and squint-eyed. The badge pinned to the left of his chest made it clear who he was— one of the Sultan's tax collectors.

"Two... four... six..." The boy counted out aloud. When he reached thirty, he placed the pile of gold onto the coarse palms of the soldier. He tried his hardest not to wince at the sum, nor to imagine how much silk they'd need to sell in order to earn thirty gold coins.

“You sure there’s only one of you?” The bushy-bearded soldier frowned at the boy suspiciously. The boy nodded calmly, however, a slight twitch of his eye gave him away.

“SEARCH!” The soldier roared, and four guards stormed into the caravan, thrashing and rummaging around for a stowaway. A moment later, one of them grabbed the girl by the scruff of her neck and hauled her onto the ground.

“Explain this.” The soldier glared furiously at the boy, while the girl sat on the ground, pitiful and silent.

When only silence followed, the bushy-bearded soldier sighed wearily, dismissed the guards, then shuffled over to where the duo sat.

“Listen, I’ll let you kids off the hook this time. Five gold coins for her. That’s twenty-five less.”

The boy nodded gratefully as he pulled out five more gold pieces from his pouch, relieved that the soldier still had some resemblance of humanity.

“I’d advise you not to head to this caravanserai anymore. Your gold pouch wouldn’t survive this tax war.” The soldier gave the young duo a bow, a common courtesy, saluted, then walked off, presumably back to his post at the roadside.

“Hey.” The girl settled down beside the boy instead of hiding under the piles of goods in the caravan. “Do you think we should just... stop?”

“Depends. This caravanserai is off limits,” the boy said, his frown deepening by the second, “and several others along the road would be too expensive to pass through.”

“Should we head back to China, then?”

The boy shrugged in response, then gently nudged the camels’ hindquarters to let them trot slowly. The merchandise in the back clattered about; the mess left by the guards still untied. But a more pressing matter weighed on their hands.

“Heading to the Turkish cities would be too risky, no?” The girl’s knuckles turned white from her grip on the wood.

“Yeah. And it’s about time we went back to where we started from.”

“Let’s go back, then.”

The boy pulled the reins and changed their direction, while the girl began humming her tune once more.

◇

“Do we have a home?” The girl’s voice was muffled, her face buried in a soft pile of silk.

“I don’t know.”

“I think our home is on the road,” she said, then drew in as much air as she could, momentarily deprived of breath by the suffocating silk.

“I hate the idea of settling down.” The boy felt an uncomfortable sensation prickling at his skin at the mere thought of a warm house, where everything is domestic, predictable, and fixed in a routine.

“Well...” She drummed her fingertips against the wooden floor in a rhythmic, almost melodic way. “Where are we supposed to go then, if we don’t settle down?”

“Don’t know.” He curled his hand tightly around the reins, clutching them with an iron grip. “Don’t care.”

“Yeah, sure. You totally look like you don’t care.” The girl was tired of asking questions that never had clear answers. “Let’s say we keep heading back. What then?”

“I don’t know,” he said, resting his chin in the palm of his hand. “Get a job in a shop or something.”

“That sounds... mundane. Boring.”

“We could always try it out.” The boy shrugged. “There’s not really much else we can do.”

The conversation died. All they could think about now was the terrible loss they were about to face. Negativity clung to them easily, and all hope for the future vanished in a split second. The girl felt her hair stick to her skin, damp and oily, but it was the closest thing she could call ‘normal’. It was the normal that both of them desperately craved and needed.

The boy glanced at her, noticing how her cheeks held a bronze glaze, and how she seemed to glow, warmly, sharply, just like the sun on one of the better days. But his thoughts were astray, miles away from how she was doing, what she looked like, and far ahead from the dull trot of the camels.

She met his gaze, head-on, knowingly. She was his anchor, after all. The one thing that kept him tethered to this life, to this earth.

They remained silent for the rest of the day, sometimes chewing on the dried jerky they’d brought, sometimes gazing out at the barren desert that stretched on forever. Soon, the sun set, leaving only dim clouds and a moon in its wake.

◇

“Hey. I see a small lake over there.” The girl pointed to the patch of water, if it could even be called a lake, then hopped off the caravan and ran towards this temporary refuge.

“Wait up.” The boy quickly nudged the camels, then guided them to a tree beside the tiny lake. He hopped off, tied the reins to the trunk, then yawned and stretched his arms, easing the tension that cramped his shoulders.

“It’s been centuries since I’ve seen water...” The girl trailed off, then dove in headfirst, uncaring of whatever dangers might lurk beneath the surface. Water splashed outwards in every direction.

“*Aman be...* Oh man.” The boy stared at the chaos she’d made and fanned out his shirt. The splash had soaked him through. “What if there are parasites?!”

The girl pointedly ignored him, swimming in wide, joyful movements, her arms flailing. Not in panic, but in pure, unguarded delight.

“Look.”

The boy’s eyes followed where she was pointing. A flicker of movement caught both their attention: perched on the edge of a branch was a desert finch, preening itself, its beak tucked between soft cinnamon feathers, which lined its small body. Neither spoke, too entranced by what was happening.

The bird tilted its head, its pitch-black eyes glinting. It hopped once. Twice. For a heartbeat, it seemed to look straight at them.

Then, with a flutter too quiet for the wind to notice, it rose, spiralling upward on invisible currents, until it was just a speck against the sky, then gone without a trace.

“It’s headed east,” the girl said softly.

“So are we,” the boy replied.

The sun dipped low, spilling amber across the dunes, and for a moment, the sand glittered; not with heat, but with something softer, like a peaceful memory.

Behind them, their caravan’s tracks stretched faintly into the distance, but the wind was already smoothing them over, grain by grain, as if the desert was tucking their journey away. As to where, nobody knows.

“Do you think anyone will remember us? That we passed by, here, on the silk road.” The girl asked, her voice barely louder than the breeze.

The boy didn’t answer right away. He watched as a puff of sand got swept off the ground by a gust of wind, and spiralled upward, just like how the finch had, catching the last light, before vanishing into the sky.

“Maybe not,” he said, at last. “But we remember. And that’s enough.”

She began humming the old tune, the one about merchants and wind and legacies that last till the end of time.

And as the stars blinked awake above the endless road, the two of them sat in silence, not lost, not found, yet still simply here, together, as the world kept turning beneath their feet and time continued, not pausing for anyone.

The finch was gone. The tracks would vanish by dawn. Even their names might be lost. No, not *might*. They *would* be.

But as she traced a slim crack in the mended bowl, the one the fixer had saved with golden seams, she understood.

This was the legacy. Not wealth or riches, nor ceramics or silk, but the choice to keep going, to pick up what has broken, to walk beside someone, to travel with them, under an endless sky.

And somewhere, faint on the breeze, the first notes of “The Story of the Nameless” began to play, a fresh start, perhaps, or a quiet ending.

“What the wind remembers,
is neither squashed hope nor displeasures—
for what gets carried on,
is a new dawn.
Where new paths get woven,
and journeys get left uncertain.
For now,
the duo walks;
to wherever their fates allow,
where home is found in the wind, the sand, and the sky,
not in places meant to tie.”

Road of Death

G.T. (Ellen Yeung) College, Tam, Charlotte – 16

His family called it Si Wang Zhi Lu, Road of Death. For as long as the boy could remember, tales of the treacherous trade route were shoved into his ear. A warning that, at first seemed like a way to scare him out of mischief, now ringing true. Nothing but death awaited here, with only the stars bearing witness to the slow and painful judgement enacted on the careless. Surely, this was the fate he had been handed for his ingratitude. Even against the roaring billows of the sandy wind, he swore he could hear the berating of his father, harsh words drilling into his already fatigued mind. “You deserve this fate”, his voice yells, “This is what you get for leaving us!”

Yet the boy continued to run, even feeling spurred into a hurry. Yes, he had made a grave mistake. The life he had led up to required a tragic end to make up for his wrongdoings. But then again, since when did he believe in predetermined ends? Running away from the city, becoming a stowaway on a silk bundled caravan, none of this would’ve happened had he not taken fate into his own hands.

And so this time, he will do it again, even if on different terms. He will not cower at his sins from behind the safe veil of death. He, Huosi, will carry on the knowledge he had learnt, and step towards a new life where he will never make the same mistakes again.

// 10 hours ago

The deep, mellow sound of a horn signaled the caravan to a stop, yanking Huosi straight out of his slumber. Before he could catch his bearings, a gruff voice spoke: “Ruchong, finally awake huh?” With a grumble, Huosi sat up straight and begrudgingly answered: “Yes, Jiafu...” Being called a worm first thing in the morning was certainly not the best way to start it, yet as things stood he had no choice but to comply with every word.

It had been a week since he made his escape from his wretched home city. He had taken his chance at a random caravan while the guards dozed off, burying himself under mounds of fabric worth more than ten of his lives. Somehow, with the shadows as his accomplice, he had managed to leave alongside the company of stinky camels and churlish traders. Even so, luck could only be on his side for so long. The next day, he had opened his eyes to the scarlet face of an angry middle-aged man.....

Despite the blazing heat of the desert, Huosi still felt a cold chill go down his spine at the thought of his first encounter with Jiafu. He gave himself a small shake, before leaping down onto the sand to help settle camp. According to small tidbits he had heard from the merchants, they were currently somewhere northwest of the Han capital, far away from the city he left. No matter how much he despised his old city, however, Huosi felt he would never get used to the environment here. No matter where he looked, all that could be seen was a vast expanse of golden sand. The miniscule grains somehow formed hills and valleys in its wake, slowly shifting into unrepeatable patterns as they were dragged along by the dry desert gusts. Occasionally, a

sad bundle of tumbleweed would meekly roll past the line of camels; a sorry excuse of vegetation in this desolate land.

Yet the actual worst part was the heat. Throughout the day, the sun would relentlessly bring down its scalding rays of heat, drowning people in an unshakable weary haze. The triggering

feeling of sweat trickling down the skin was truly unbearable. Every once in a while, Huosi could almost feel his brain sliding around in his skull, melting into a mound of muck from the heat. If only he could be at home right now—

Absolutely not, Huosi thought grimly. As trying as the climate of this region may be, he would never choose to go back there. After all, that prison of a home was what had pushed him to the limit in the first place. One slight thought outside of his father's expectations had always led to a chain of harsh orders, shackling him in place. "Don't you dare step outside...", "Don't do something so reckless...", and obviously, the classic: "...You don't want to end up on the road of death!"

Of course, Huosi couldn't help but do all three, and he had never felt more satisfied. Finally, he would be able to achieve the success that his family could never, all thanks to their nonexistent courage to try something new. While they worried themselves sick over morality in their tight little cocoon, he would be traversing across the world, gorging himself in endless amounts of coinage and luxury. Surely, that was an actual life worth living for, even if it came at the expense of family?

"Ruchong! Snap out of it and leash in the camels!" Jiafu's bellowing pulled Huosi out of his pleasing daydream, dragging him back to reality. As amazing as it was for him to make it this far, he still had a long way before becoming an actual trader. Try as he may, there was no denying that he was only alive due to Jiafu's mercy. For now, he will play along as an errand boy. He gave his arms a quick stretch before snatching a handful of hay from one of the wagons, luring the humped creatures to their resting spot of the night.

//

As the sun finally tucked itself beneath the earth's surface, dinnertime began. The depressing dunes came alive as traders shuffled about, sharing meals in their cliques and winding up a whirlwind of chatter. Overhead, flickering lanterns bobbed about in the nightly breeze, leaving dancing shadows on the sandy floor. One would almost believe they were moving to the music playing from one of the caravans; its pulsating melodies a pleasure to the ears of the weary. *Not much of a Road of Death*, Huosi noted. The saturation of noise and color had yet to rub off on him, but even so, the savory aroma of spiced stew was too tempting to resist. He willed himself to grab a bowl, and sat next to Jiafu at one of the circles around the fire.

"Ah, at long last! The star of the show!" Jiafu let out a hearty laugh as he gave Huosi a rough slap on the back. Painful was hardly enough to describe the impact, but Huosi forced a thin smile and gave a curt nod. While Jiafu and his companions had the appearance of what could only be described as brute like, the knowledge they carried of the world was undeniable. Huosi was almost certain he would be able to gain valuable insight on the trade secrets of neighbouring nations, so long as he sticks around for a bit longer.

Still, faking a completely different personality had never been his forte. "You don't need to act all close with me, you know. I'm just a stowaway you took in as an errand boy." The blunt words left his mouth before he could even stop to think. But Jiafu just gave a dismissive wave as if they meant nothing. "Stowaway or not, you are our family now, Ruchong."

Family, huh. It was as if the world was purposefully reminding Housi of his actions through every moment. But then again, did he even feel regret for what he had done?

With a frustrated sigh, Huosi drank a gulp of stew, feeling the liquid burn his throat before asking: "What is with you people's obsession with family, anyway? I never saw the appeal from mine."

A soft blanket of silence landed on the circle; the traders' expressions indistinguishable under the dim flicker of fire. Eventually, Jiafu cleared his throat and answered him: "Young man... some of us were never given one in the first place." His face shone with a hint of melancholy as he let out a sad chuckle. "These brilliant people, bringing a piece of their culture with them all the way out here, it's not just for wealth. For us, family is something we create with our own two hands, through rigorous exchange and trade. All such that we can fill the void in our hearts that should've been full since birth."

Perhaps encouraged by Jiafu's response, the other merchants began opening up about their past. Some were orphans of Han, a byproduct of the ongoing war. Some hailed from tribes up north, fending for their own for as long as they could recall. And in the midst of them was Huosi, someone who actually had a family and chose to throw them away.

But they never truly cared for me, did they? He nervously thought. Or perhaps, that was simply what he wanted to believe. Deep down, he already had the answer to his question: He would never know.

For instead of staying and working things out with them, he had chosen to run away forever.

How different was he from his father, who avoided and hid from his troubles, making it everyone else's problem?

Before guilt and regret could hook their claws onto his mind, an alarmed shout snapped Huosi back into reality. Immediately, everyone turned their heads towards the source of the noise, seemingly alert. It took but a moment for the traders to register the blood of one of their own, seeping into the sandy dunes. The poor man's body hung limp, held by the arm of a figure clad in black.

Bandits. And from the gut wrenching display of bloodlust, negotiations were most likely out of the window. It would almost be laughable how easy this ambush was for them, were Huosi not on the side about to be brutally murdered.

And no one would know, Huosi realised with a start. Out here in the middle of nowhere, taking out a bunch of traders was as simple as snuffing out a candle. Once the job was done, the bandits would take the loot to the nearest settlement and earn lifetimes' worth of money; the faces of the slain long forgotten.

Suddenly, a heavy piece of cloth was draped over him, causing Huosi to thrash in panic. "Shh, keep calm." Jiafu gave a harsh whisper, before tying the strings of what seemed to be a dark cloak around his neck. Huosi could only stand there in bewilderment as Jiafu tossed a satchel into his hands. "Head west to the X marked on the map. If fate allows it, we will meet you there eventually."

The hefty weight of the satchel burned at Huosi's arms, and along with it came a chilling understanding.

No. Not like this, not when I had finally—

"Go, young man! If there is a single bone in your body capable of not rebelling every word you hear! " Even as the clash of metal and cries of pain grew deafening, Jiafu's words rang loud and clear, piercing through Huosi's storm of thoughts. "Heed your family's pleas, just this once!"

Family. The family he had come to treasure over the past week, even if he had never realised

it himself. All of it was lost now, to the hands of the heartless and greedy. Once again, he would leave, and once again he would never be able to know whether it could've been something more. Could the universe be more obvious in its downcast of judgement?

Still, Huosi knew what he had to do. If there was one thing he could still salvage, it's the promise he was vowed to keep. He cast one last look at each and every merchant there, letting his gaze linger on their faces. He will remember them; the ones who had accepted all parts of him, including the imperfect. "Goodbye, Jiafu. Goodbye, my dear family....." With the whisper of a silent prayer, he swivelled and ran.

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The chilly air of the desert night burned his lungs as he bolted across endless sandy hills, The sounds of the massacre behind him had long since faded into obscurity, replaced by the whistling of a dusty gale. The once golden sand glimmered a faint, desaturated grey under the cloud-covered moonlight, as if the world was mourning his loss along with him.

The road of death..... he could somewhat see the vision now. All it would take, would be to just give up—sleep on the sandy bed, under a soft duvet of night sky, falling into eternal rest. His existence would then fade into nothing but ashes, welding into the mountains of grey and disappearing at the cracks of daybreak.

Even so, he knew that would never happen. After all, this place was so much more than just a means of cessation. Indeed, the lives of those who pass through are placed on a thin boundary, forced to balance on a fine thread of survival. Yet when those threads are woven together, the results are so breathtaking that no amount of wear and tear could take away from its beauty. This trade route was the accumulation of endless stories: both old and new; both good and bad. And the souls who lived to tell these tales, their identities sparkled on this tapestry of history just as beads would line the edges of a delicate royal garment. These assemblies of knowledge, culture and close connection were worth far more than some bronze discs passed from one hand to the next.

Perhaps Road of Silk is more fitting, Huosi somehow managed this whimsical thought as he continued his course across the dunes. In the back of his mind, the images of the bloodshed he had escaped from still appeared in flashes of anguish, but he forced himself to push on. He ran, and ran for far much longer.....

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The stall at the end of the road was said to belong to a young man. His roster boasted cultural antiques that were worth a fortune, yet money seemed to be the last thing on his mind whenever he bargained with fellow traders. *He's like family to us*, those merchants would call him, even if they had only met days before.

These words eventually fell on the ears of a hunched back elderly, one who somehow knew immediately who those words were for. With a light chuckle, he sauntered over to the stall and let out a hearty laugh at the baffled expression of the young man. "We meet again, Ruchong."

New Tales of China's Silk Road

HD Beijing School, Bai, Yue Yun – 15

Yin Bai, a girl who loves adventure. She always imagines some mysterious by herself, like “Time Travel”, “the Age of Dinosaurs”, and “the Paradise” ...

One day, she found a new theme called “New Tales of China's Silk Road” in her history class. She knew this theme would make a lot of interests for her. She became crazy.

Yin Bai has a friend named “Jack”. A boy from America and has the same age with Yin Bai. Unfortunately, Jack was trying to suicide. The reasons were odd and strange. In his version of the world, everything was “fake”. However, this was just his imagination. People who knew him thought he had a mental problem. Yin Bai was the only person willing to play with him.

In a dark and messy room, an old television was stuck on, making with “chuckle” sound. The wind was crying then blowing through the broken windows, which were covered with dead bugs and spider webs. These objects create an eerie atmosphere. A boy was sitting beside the window; he looks like a ghost and reading the book quietly. The title of the book is “Death”. That boy was Jack.

Suddenly, the wooden door was pushed open by a strong force. “Jack, I have an idea!” Yin Bai gasped and shouted

A conversation began, but it soon turned into a debate between the two teenagers. In summary, Yin Bai wanted to invite Jack to join her on a journey along “China's silk road”. Jack thought the idea was too irrational. Surprisingly, he agreed in the end.

But embarking on the real “Silk Road” was unrealistic. Treasures always seem to appear in random places. There was no plan, no pressure — only hypotheses and imagination.

The sea waves roared through the sky. Golden sunlight shimmered on the surface of the sand. Two figures, seen from behind, stood there. They were Yin Bai and Jack. Yin Bai looked extremely excited. She was laughing, singing, and twirling around vividly. On the other side, Jack stood quietly by and looking at the sea.

Suddenly, Jack jumped into the sea. It was strange as a dream. “Jack!” Yin Bai haven't had time to react yet. When two waves splashed, everything went silent.

After a long time, two people slowly opened their eyes. The boundless grassland which they were laying one gives them the illusion of “paradise”. “Sorry, Bai,” Jack said, his voice trembling with guilt. “I couldn't control myself. It's my fault, I...” Yin Bai raised her hand and cover Jack's mouth hardly. She said optimistically: “Stop saying that, Jack! I think we have just encountered some kind of space travel!” Jack calms down, he takes a deep breath and look around. “Where are we?”

“My sensation tells me,” Yin Bai replied, “we are on the route of the China Silk Road!”

An eagle hovering above the sky and flying through the clouds. Several yurts built on the grassland, with cows, sheep and horses eating around. The bell hanging in front of the yurt swings lightly when the cold winds blow. At the same time, Jack and Yin Bai realized that the temperature was too low for them. They were only wearing thin clothes and feared that they would freeze.

“It's getting so cold...” Jack shivered. “We'll freeze to death if we stay here much longer.” The atmosphere becomes silent by the eye contact between them, then they have the same decision, they run to the nearest yurt.

As they get closer, a white, circular yurt which adorn with horse's patterns appear into their view. Yin Bai lifted the heavy cover of the yurt and stepped inside first. A wave of warmth immediately covered around them. An elder dressed in traditional Mongolian clothing was sitting on a wooden chair. She watched them vigilantly: “Who are you?”

“We are so sorry for bothering you and entering without asking,” Yin Bai apologized politely, “but it's freezing outside, and we were scared we wouldn't survive the cold.”

The elder's expression softened. She invites them to sit down. Jack was quiet during the whole conversation. On the contrary, Yin Bai and the elder were having a lively chat. The elder shared with them the best and suitable route of silk road. She also gave them warm clothes, and some dried foods for them enough to eat on the journey. Before they leave, the elder treated them a meal of roasted whole lamb as a farewell gift.

The journey continues with the alternation between sun and moon. Jack and Yin Bai received lots of kindness, they relied on the helping from the local people then arriving at the Liaodong Peninsula successfully. They were walking on the bridge with the moonlight still. “Bai, I still can't believe that we encountered the space travel and set foot on the China Silk Road...” “Well, Jack, you have already said this thousand times,” Yin Bai shrugged. “Stop your thought provoking, it's time to get on the ship, hurry!”

The ship set sail for Busan in Korea. At first, the sea was calm and peaceful, there were even seagulls flying around the ship and waiting to be fed by people. But on the third night, the wind turned into a howling monster. Huge, dark waves crashed down with thunderstorm. A tsunami blocked the ship advanced, the sail keeps shaking, the ship will be destroyed and overturned at any moment. People panicked, include Yin Bai and Jack. The rain was so heavy to their faces and shoulders, the thunder was so loud to make their ears ring.

When the storm passed, the ship was already broken. They had survived, but just barely.

Finally, they arrived in Busan. The bustling, lively city was nestled behind towering mountains. “It’s an oasis...” Yin Bai surprised, but her voice was weak. Jack and Yin Bai were almost exhausted from the journey that they had no energy to experience the city life anymore. Instead, they followed a path that led into the forest on the Busan.

As they walked, the sounds of city faded away, the air becomes cool and fresh. They saw a wild deer drinking from a stream, further on, a red fox watched them with curiosity before running away. Trees are everywhere with chirping of insects. A cave, hidden behind a waterfall, appeared in front of them. Yin Bai and Jack entered in.

Suddenly, they fall through the white light, the things around them change with an unbelievable speed. In an instant, they found themselves back to the same sand beach which before the space travel.

Jack and Yin Bai tried to share their magical experience with others, but no one believed them. However, they don’t mind. In their hearts, they were already legends.

Now, they are waiting for the next chance to embark on another adventure, to solve the mysteries together.

The Echo of Silk Road

HD Beijing School, Chen, Tiger – 15

James could not remember how long it had been since the last trading team had passed this post house. He opened the door of the post house, the road that has been stepped by countless traders and camels is now lying there, empty and quiet, leading forward. He took a deep breath, no more fragrance of spices can be smelled, there is only endless quietness and aridity. This road witnessed the rises and declines of the trades between the ancient China and the western. World. Sandstorms erased the traces of the trading teams, but it can never wash away the history values this road held.

Back in the 2nd century BC, the emperor came up with an idea of developing trading routes to further regions. In 138BC, Zhang Qian was committed by the emperor as the leader of the trading team to the west.

In the last night before their leave, Zhang Qian, again, checked every baggage they would be carrying in their journey: bundles of silk glowed under moonlight, bronze vessels shined faintly, tea leaves gave off fragrance in bags. Thinking of being the first group of traders to discover the route to the west, Zhang Qian's mind was filled with different feelings: expectations and confidence, a bit fear to the completely unknown roads and deserts filled with danger, but also the sense of mission to break the limitations of distance for people in the future. He knew his mission was not only trading for money but also setting up a blood vessel that connects the two worlds, allowing the blood of different cultures to run together.

The next morning, they started their journey with people's blessings and hopes. In the first few days, they were filled with excitement and the hope to the following journeys, everyone was hoping to see the western world. However, the trip was not as easy as they originally hoped. When they entered deeply into the deserts, the environment became extremely harsh. The temperature could reach above 35 degrees during daytimes; sunlight almost burned them down. When the night fell, the temperature quickly fell below 15 degrees, the cold leached the warmth from their bones.

However, the real threats were brought by Xiongnu and the bandits. After one month of travelling, the team entered deeply into the wild deserts. Things originally seemed to go smooth until one night. After having a simple dinner, they took a break in a long and deep valley. However, when the people and animals were relaxing from tiredness, there was suddenly a rapid sound of horses came from the back of the valley, the sound could be heard from the ground. A group of bandits caught up from the back. Through the dark night, Zhang Qian saw a mob of black shadows moving towards them. As the leader, he was also scared, but he managed to calm down and organized the team members. "Pack up and run!" He shouted with a slight tremor in his voice. Jumping onto the camel, Zhang Qian lead the team forward. He sought for caves along the way for the team to hide, but there wasn't even a broken part on the two sides of the valley. The bandits were getting closer and closer; the road suddenly showed a few branches. Without time for thinking, Zhang Qian intuitively lead the team into a narrow path. Just as he was worrying where to go, a cave showed up on the right side. He pointed at the cave, beckoned the team to slow down and hide in the cave. Fortunately, the whole team was fast enough before the bandits reached the fork in the paths. The team held their breath, tried not to make any sound. Animals seemed to feel the tense atmosphere, they were all lied down, tried their best not to make any noise. Almost the same time, the bandits reached at the branches of the road, finding the trading team disappearing, the leader of them was super angry, he yelled at the fellow bandits: "How did you let them go? Go and FIND THEM!" Zhang Qian realized hiding in the cave is not a reliable way to be safe. Wind blew from their back; there seemed to be a path leading to the other side. Hope burned up in Zhang Qian's eyes. He grabbed a teammate standing next to him: "Feel the wind? There should be a path for us to escape on the other side, go and find it." After a minute, the teammate returned: "You are right, there's an exit on the other side!" After informing every team member, they passed through the narrow path which was unexpectedly smooth. After getting out of the cave, they found themselves on the other side of the stone walls: flat land leads far away, a clear spring showed up meters away from them. They seemed to see the savior of their lives. Due to the lack of water supply along their way, the team was almost dehydrated. They took out almost every usable container and filled them with the clear spring water. Animals in the team also came along and enjoyed the sweet water.

After having a quick break, they continued their journey. After a few days of smooth journey, it was close to the exit of the desert. However, when the team thought there will not be challenging problems in the future, a sandstorm hit the desert, giving them almost no time to react. Just when they were having a brief lunch, a gust of wind blew by. Zhang Qian raised his head; a dark yellow screen was moving towards them——a sandstorm. It was like a yellow wall as high as the sky, as it moves forward, things were rolled up and thrown to the sky. Almost the same time, the whole team saw it. Everyone started to pack up the baggage. However, there is nowhere to hide for the team. The team members each took one of the most valuable and fragile goods and put them in their arms to protect those goods from getting broken. The sandstorm quickly arrived, smashing the sand towards the ground. Some baggage was torn up and goods inside were blew everywhere. A few minutes later, the sandstorm stopped. The world was left with a mess. Things were blown everywhere. Most of the light-weighted goods were lost, most of the ones left were broken in various degrees. Only those held be the people were not largely affected.

This is the largest loss along their way. Almost half of the goods were ruined or lost.

Palsing for a few days, the team took some rest and checked the goods survived from the sandstorm. In the following months, the team kept travelling. They went cross countless countries, experienced various landscapes and climates, learned different cultures, also met people from different places and cultures. Finally, they reached the ancient India. In this mysterious place, they traded for spices, seeds and Buddhism. All the things they traded were completely new to them. After learning these brand-new knowledge, they returned with fruitful results.

Meanwhile, James still kept on running the post house. He felt like he could still hear the echoes of camel bells that could travel through centuries. He has seen the most glorious times of the silk road: the post house filled with traders from different countries, different languages talking together, people's faces were bright under the dim candlelight. The smell of camels, the fragrance of spices, the aroma of baked flatbreads.....The mix of the countless sounds, smells and views all mixed together in James' mind, that was the real boom of the trading through the world.

However, the wheel of history rolled over, people's lives were like pieces of dusts. In the further west, the Ottomans expanded faster than everyone has expected. The barrier of their army cut down the traditional trade routes. The sea became the new path of trading. People passing through the post house become less and less, it takes longer and longer time for the trading teams to bring back more information from the west. He still remembers the last trading team passing his post house. That was an extremely tired team. After a long sigh, the leader told him: "Man, there is no need for you to wait here anymore...Nobody will be there..." James stared the back of the team and stood there for a long time. What he saw was not only the departure of the last trading team on the silk road, but also the end of a legendary era.

James closed the door of the post house. Inside the door, limitless of memories and history replays again and again. Outside the door, it signed the end of the most magnificent history.

The Jade Cicada

HD Beijing School, Jin, Jin – 15

For as long as Kai could remember, the old wall in his Fujian village seemed to whisper. It wasn't a sound, but a feeling of distant footsteps and camel bells. Before his grandfather died, he gave Kai a small, green jade cicada. "It traveled the Old Silk Road," he whispered. "It remembers. Maybe you can teach it new songs."

By sixteen, the hum in Kai's heart had become a call he couldn't ignore. On the news, they talked about the Belt and Road Initiative—a new Silk Road of trains and ports. But Kai, holding his cicada, thought of the older road, the one made of people. He decided to walk west, to see if one boy could help connect a world that felt divided.

After much discussion, his worried parents agreed. "Take this," his mother said, handing him a phone. "And walk toward kindness."

The first part of his journey was through modern China. Truck drivers bought him noodles and said, "The road is not a path anymore!" He walked until he reached Xi'an. There, in a busy market full of lights and smells, he met Aya. She was a Uyghur girl with dark, watchful eyes.

"You walk for peace?" she asked, sounding unsure. "Peace is my grandmother making bread without anyone bothering her." She thought for a moment. "I'll walk with you to the edge of the desert. It is my grandmother's greatest wish, too."

As they walked, Aya drew pictures in a small book. She drew Kai's face, determined and dusty. When they parted, she gave him a sketch. It showed the two of them as a tiny bridge between different kinds of temples. "The Road is made of faces," she said, "not just miles."

In **Kazakhstan**, the world opened into a wide, golden steppe. He stayed with a family in a yurt, a round felt tent. To thank them, he helped fix their solar panel, which powered a single, precious lightbulb. The children loved his jade cicada. They gave him a small, carefully made felt horse. "For your journey," their mother said. The horse and the cicada sat together in his pocket.

In **Uzbekistan**, the cities shone with blue tiles. In Samarkand, he worked in a bakery below the ancient buildings. The baker, Rustam, had a son working on a new railway far away. "He sends money," Rustam said, "but I miss his voice." He gave Kai a large, flat bread stamped with a pattern. "Bread," he said, "always points your heart toward home."

Kai saw the new Silk Road everywhere—construction sites, new signs. But he looked for human threads. In **Azerbaijan**, a sudden storm hit a bazaar. Kai helped an elderly carpet-seller, Mr. Alizadeh, quickly cover his rugs. Grateful, the man shared tea and showed Kai a small, old carpet. "Each knot is a story," he said. He pointed to a faded golden thread. "This is the Silk Road. The connection." He cut a small piece with gold thread and gave it to Kai. "Connections are made by hand," he said.

The walking was harder than Kai ever imagined. In Istanbul, his phone was stolen. He was often tired, hungry, and lonely. One evening in a noisy Greek port, he sat on a pier, his feet sore. Huge container ships, like moving cities, passed by without noticing him. He felt like a speck of dust. He held the jade cicada. *Grandfather, he thought, I have failed. The world is too big.*

"That is beautiful," a voice said. A girl named Eleni, with paint on her jeans, was sketching the port. He showed her his treasures: the cicada, the felt horse, Aya's drawing, the bread stamp, the carpet piece. He told her his story.

"You carry a museum of kindness," she said, amazed. She took him to her family's home for a warm meal. That night, she painted. The next morning, she showed him. She had painted his jade cicada. From it, on a golden chain, hung all his other gifts, like charms on a necklace. It was a map of his journey made from friendship.

"The road isn't just out there," Eleni said, tapping the painting and then his chest. "It's in here. You didn't fail. You wove these people together."

Her words lifted his spirit. He continued, through **Italy**, **France**, and **Germany**. He worked on a farm for a bed, helped in a bookshop for a meal. His collection grew: a blue glass bead from Venice, a small knife from a kind old man in Switzerland, a flower pressed in the Alps.

Two years after he began, Kai reached the end of the land: a cliff in **Portugal**. The sun was setting over the Atlantic, turning the water to gold. On a flat rock, he laid out his circle of treasures.

He held the jade cicada. The lonely hum was gone. Inside him was a new song, made of all the voices and kindness he had found. He hadn't changed the whole world, but he had made real friends across continents. They had changed him.

The New Silk Road of steel and speed was behind him. But the Old Road, the one of human spirit—was now alive in his memory, in the scars on his feet, and in the quiet circle of gifts. The Road wasn't finished. It was right there, in his open hand. It was just the beginning, waiting for the next step, the next story, the next act of kindness. And for the first time, he thought he could hear the cicada's song soft, clear chirp, full of hope.

On October 24th

HD Beijing School, Li, Daniel – 16

October 24, it was a night of rainstorm. Two young man was running in the rain with a box of paper coated under their jacket in Hong Kong. Rain drop landed on the pitch road shocking every insect trying to survive through this night. That day was like nature's punishment to this world, it rained all night. They ran into a mansion near the Victoria park.

"Loda, quick, the papers is going to get wet, open the gate."

"What do I look like I'm doing now, give me a break man, keep thoughts box dry Kris"

Loda's father Conner, is one of the most powerful man in Hong Kong. Conner owns multiple ports, he secretly has a very close relationship with the most famous "blood diamond" mine owner, Peter Netheron. They run a taul ship of the underground jewelry business across Asia.

"Quick, quick, the gate's opened" Loda unlocked the gate to his mansion.

Entering his mansion, the first thing that catches the eye is a gate as tall as a towering tree leading into the interior. Bushed sitting on left and right of the walkway are finely cut, they gracefully welcomed Loda and Kris back to this elegant home.

All furniture heard the scurry of feet in the hall. They walked to the basement. Loda dropped the box full of paper on his work desk in the middle of the room. They lay on the couch and put themselves to the dreamland.

A pale morning light seeped through the fog, brushing the marble floors of the mansion with a faded silver color. The sky hung low and grey, and the air carried a deadly quite calm. Behind the garden at the backyard, the sea murmured softly, as if still half-asleep. Inside, everything felt still cold.

"Kris you up?" Loda asked

"Yes, what a night man, my back, ouch."

"Alright go and check out the paper work is good or no." Loda got up from his couch.

In the basement of the mansion, the air was cool and faintly smelled of paper and dust. Along the marble walls, countless photographs, newspaper clippings, and red strings formed a complex web of secrets. In the silence, the ticking of a clock echoed.

Loda and Kris have been know for each other for their entire life. They aren't brothers but act like one. Loda works at his dad's company while Kris is his secretary. Loda disdain his father because the blood diamond business.

"Loda are you sure you are going to do this? You know there's no going back if you do this right?" Kris walk up to Loda and tapped his shoulder.

"There's already no going back." Loda said using his deep voice.

A random day three month ago.

Soft sunlight flowed through the tall windows, brushing the marble floor with a golden glow. The air was calm, carrying the scent of fresh coffee and blooming rosemary from the garden. The quiet mansion seemed to awake with a sense of grace. Loda climbed out of his bed. He took his phone out and sat on his bed, scrolling Instagram and TikTok. The warm and misty waterfall tumbled, waking up the man of this house.

Loda walked into his giant closet room that is stuff with suits and cloth. He stood in front of the mirror, hanged his tailored suit on the hook beside the mirror, the soft gloss of his shirt got illuminated by the morning light. Each motion he did, buttoning the jacket, adjusting the cufflinks, was deliberate, graceful, and assured. Like a piece of art, he exude quiet confidence bombed the room.

As the lights in his closet slowly fades, we walked into the garage. Ford F40, Porsche GT3 RS, Mercedes Benz G63, several rare vehicle seat inside of his enormous garage. He randomly picked one of the car keys and activate one of his vehicle. It was the GT3 RS, the V8 engine roared wildly.

He drove to his dad's company, took the elevator to get to his office. This is his first day as a port manger. Loda looked at his desk, endless piles of files and documents stacked on his desk. He was at a loss. A woman walks in as Loda stood there.

"Good morning, Mr.Loda. Come and let me show you this place."

The day slipped by almost unnoticed, from morning to night. Loda sat in his office worked all day long unstop. His main job is to verify and sign papers for package they got and delivered.

At that moment, he noticed a strange package record. They had never received this package—at least, not that he was aware of. He circled the entry on the paper, gave it little thought, and went home. The next day, he asked his assistant about it.

"Hey, do you know what this is? We never received this package."

"It's probably a mistake," the assistant said.

"I'll go check the warehouse."

"I'll go with you," Loda said.

With that, he grabbed his coat and keys. The warehouse was wrapped in green vines, and rusted iron gates stood solemnly guard over the goods inside. They pushed open the heavy doors, which looked as if they might collapse at any moment. Inside, thousands of packages from all over the world were piled high.

"I found it!" the assistant shouted.

This package was strikingly different from the others. It was a black, nylon case, shaped like a safe, with an unfamiliar symbol printed on its surface. Loda took the package and brought it back to the company.

During dinner, Loda mentioned the package to his father.

"Dad, I found a very strange package record in the company files today."

Conner frowned.

"What kind of strange package?"

"It was a black safe. There was no record of us ever receiving it. Took me a very long time for my assistant and I to find it. I brought it home."

Conner froze. He stopped what he was doing, put down his chopsticks, and wiped his mouth.

"Come with me Loda." His father said.

"Wait, let me eat first."

Conner stepped out of the living room without Loda and went straight to the garage.

"Okey, okey I'm coming."

Loda sat in the seat beside his father, staring out the window. Dark clouds sits overhead, and heavy raindrops slammed violently against the ground, like God's helpless sobbing. Before long, they arrived at a black building. Its marble walls gleamed under the headlights, polished to a cold shine. Loda and his father stepped inside. The interior was filled with uncountable jewels like rubies, emeralds, sapphires, and diamonds. Loda stood frozen in shock. Though he had been born in rich, the sight before him still left him utterly stunned.

"This is the reason why we are rich kid. Not the ship. This." His father grabbed his shoulder and whispered to him.

"The largest jewles trade market in Asia. We own the largest transit hub in the world, kid. All of this you are seeing right now will be yours in the future, I just need you to learn, it's beyond your ability to handle all this."

Conner walked to a safe door and unlocked it. Full of beautiful diamonds reveals, some are clear as a crystal, some have mud stain on it.

“Blood dimond, Loda, do you know what is a blood dimond. Countless people would fight for a lifetime and still never come close to owning even one. These were not merely diamonds. They were passports. They were marks of immortality. With a single diamond in hand, a person could possess everything.” Conner looked greedily at the uncountable diamonds.

Loda froze, he is still in shock.

“Dad, you know what it takes to get thought diamonds right? People die, dad, millions.”

“That’s exactly. See Loda, you are just like your mom, you are too weak. You need to grow up.” Conner turned his head and stepped close to Loda looked him eye to eye.

That night, Loda did not say another word. Silence filled the entire bedroom, while helpless birds cried outside in the darkness. By the next morning, it was as if nothing had happened. He went through his usual morning routine and headed to the company for work.

Months passed in silence, until one night, heavy rain returned to the city.

“There is no going back” Loda said.

“I’ve already decide to turn my father in.”

“Okey, what should we do than, go to the police.” Kris said.

“No, the police is full of his stool pigeon. We have to do it unexpectedly. He got a trade two days later, we are going to mess his trade up. That’s when we could call the police and get him unexpectedly.”

Loda and Kris acted without hesitation. They split up and headed to different supermarkets. They were preparing something dangerous, something that could not be undone. Late at night, they watched videos online, studying in silence, and put everything together.

Two days passed in the blink of an eye. The night of the deal had arrived. Loda and Kris climbed onto the rooftop overlooking the exchange site, waiting for the right moment.

“When do we drop it?” Kris whispered.

“When the diamonds are revealed,” Loda replied.

“That’s the signal.”

Moments later, a shimmering crystal appeared before their eyes. Time seemed to freeze.

The bomb exploded and the deal was ruined. Everything became chaotic. People started to run, and the diamonds were never traded.

Loda and Kris quickly called the police. Not long after, police cars arrived at the scene. Sirens filled the air. The police arrested everyone involved in the deal. All the diamonds were taken away as evidence.

Loda and Kris stood quietly in the rain, watching as the night slowly became calm again.

Western Regions Carrying Qi Yunsan's Dream

HD Beijing School, Li, Yi Lin – 16

In this world, the only way to come into contact with foreign cultures, I think is through the Silk Road," said Qi Yunsan solemnly.

Qi Yunsan was the eldest son of the Qi family in the capital during the Qianlong era. Since childhood, he had been strictly controlled by his parents and his teacher, and had hardly ever participated in activities that little child often do, such as fighting crickets or shooting birds. Instead, he was confined to studying all day long. The Qi family had produced generations of scholars and military officers. His father, Qi Derun, was a third-rank official in the imperial court. His five uncles were all above the sixth rank. The continuous incense burning in the ancestral hall reflected the portraits of their ancestors in official attire behind them.

The Qi residence was bustling with excitement during the New Year. Along with the New Year, Qi Yunsan's birthday also arrived.

"Congratulations, young master! Happy birthday!" said Mr. Zhao, bowing and smiling as he approached.

"Oh? What's there to be happy about? Unless you persuade my father to give me a two-day holiday, there's nothing to be happy about!" Qi Yunsan shook his folding fan and stepped forward.

"Oh, I wouldn't dare. Everyone knows that Mr. Qi is strict in raising his son. If I were to persuade him, it would be a punishment to me !" Mr. Zhao's smile was a bit stiff, but he still kept bowing.

The sound of firecrackers filled the night sky over Beijing.

"What's there to be happy about? It's all just a crazy joke," Qi Yunsan was already fed up with such flattery and didn't want to engage with this person.

After walking away, he turned to his servant, Asen, and said, "Look at that sycophant. If it weren't for my father, he might still be farming in the countryside and be poor at the end of the life."

"Oh, young master, such a person should be slapped hard to vent your anger or thrown out to avoid bad luck!" Asen agreed.

"Countryside... outside..." Qi Yunsan was once again drawn into his past memories. He had hardly ever left the residence. Usually, it was either his father going to meet some official or magistrate or consulting some scholar. The bustling streets of the city, he had only heard about from inside the sedan chair, imagining one day he could walk on them and touch the goods beside the street. Even the buns that only short workers in cloth shirts would visit at the street corner seemed to have a strong attraction, as if they were pulling him out of the sedan chair.

"Mmm, if I could just go to the street... see what the goods for sale are like..." Qi Yunsan said.

"Yun'er!" A deep yet loud voice with a commanding tone rang out. It was Mr. Qi.

"Father," Qi Yunsan walked forward, looking straight at the floor without saying a word.

"The official beside me, Mr. Qian, has prepared a gift for your birthday. Don't you want to thank Mr. Qian?"

"Thank you, Mr. Qian..." Qi Yunsan began to thank him.

"Wait!" Mr. Qian smiled but didn't speak, handing him a box. Inside was a telescope.

"What's this?" Qi Yunsan asked.

"Of course, it's a Western telescope. With it, you can see much farther!" Mr. Qian stroked his beard and said with a smile.

The night was deep, and the residence was extremely quiet. Qi Yunsan's hand holding the telescope was colder than the red bricks and green tiles.

He lowered his head and stared at the telescope in the box. The brass body was polished to a shine, reflecting his slightly stunned eyes. The two ends of the tube were embedded with transparent glass, exuding a unique exquisite pattern of foreign artifacts, completely different from the jade pendants engraved with seal script and the wooden inkstones painted with clear lacquer in the study. It seemed to hide the light of another world.

"This is a rare item sent by Western missionaries through many hands," said Lord Qian, stroking his goatee, his voice brimming with pride. "Standing on the high pavilion in the mansion, one can see the shadows of the pine trees on the Western Mountain outside the city, and even the willow branches by the moat are clearly visible. It's much more convenient than our thousand-mile mirror."

Qi Yun San also wanted to give it a try. Standing on a high pavilion in the mansion, he held the telescope to his eyes and slowly adjusted the length of the tube as instructed by Lord Qian. The next second, his pupils suddenly contracted – the previously blurry and dimly lit area was now clearly visible before him: children were running around on the ground littered with firecracker debris by the steaming bonfire, and the lanterns on the street emitted a warm glow. Both the fine silk and the coarse cloth in the tailor's shop were clearly visible. Even the steamed buns he was dying to taste seemed to have their folds clearly revealed to him.

"Master, how is it? Can you see?" Asen leaned over, his face full of curiosity as he peered over, mimicking the use of the telescope with his hands.

Qi Yunsan remained silent for a long time, his hand holding the telescope trembling slightly, and his eyes felt a bit warm. He had lived for eighteen years, and the world had always been the four walls of his study, the outline of the family wall, the characters in the classics of Confucianism, history, philosophy and literature, and his father's stern gaze. In his ears were his mother's urging and the scolding of his tutor. But at this moment, this small Western object tore open a gap for him, allowing him to see the hustle and bustle of the world beyond the wall, the distant mountains and rivers, and the grass and trees, and those things he had only read about in books but never seen in person.

"Yes." Qi Yunsan put down the telescope and looked back at the night view of the capital city, saying, "I can see it. Very clearly, very clearly."

"Master, I want to see too!" Asen came closer and said in a pleading tone.

"Come on, just follow the method I just used. Don't break it." Qi Yunsan handed the telescope to Asen and kept a close watch.

The next day, Yunsan mustered the courage to ask his father about the Silk Road. "Father, I've read that the Silk Road carries goods and cultures between East and West. Is that true?"

Mr. Qi frowned, but seeing his son's sincere eyes, he replied, "It is. Caravans risk sandstorms and bandits to trade. But studying Confucian classics and preparing for the final exam is your duty—not dreaming about distant roads. That's not what I wish you to do.

Yunsan's heart sank, but he didn't give up. That night, he took the telescope to the pavilion again. Looking westward, he imagined the Silk Road stretching into the horizon—camels tramping on sand dunes, merchants chatting in foreign tongues, and exotic goods flowing like a river. "One day," he vowed quietly, "I will not just see the world through this telescope. I will walk the Silk Road myself, and touch those distant cultures with my own hands."

Asen, standing beside him, asked, "Master, are you going to the Silk Road?"

Yunsan nodded, his eyes shining with resolve. "Yes. The Silk Road is not just a path on maps—it's the key to touch my dream and see the real world."

Despite his use of financial resources to employ the fastest means of transportation, over a month has been taken for the travel. When Gansu's borders finally came into view, the air carried the faint scent of spices and the distant jingle of camel bells.

He settled into a small inn in the border town. The next morning, he wandered into the local market—where Silk Road merchants from all corners gathered. A Persian merchant sold intricately woven carpets, their patterns swirling like desert mirages; a Central Asian trader displayed glassware that glinted like captured sunlight, far more

vivid than the telescope's lenses. Yunsan paused at a stall stacked with dried fruits and aromatic herbs, their scents unfamiliar yet enticing.

"These are from Samarkand," the merchant said, grinning and gesturing to a pouch of saffron. "Brought all the way along the Silk Road."

Yunsan bought a small pouch of saffron and a roll of indigo-dyed silk, its texture softer than any fabric from the capital's workshops. He also picked up a hand-carved wooden camel, its hump curved just like the ones in his grandfather's pendant. As he clutched his purchases, he thought of the telescope back at the inn—all these treasures, like the device, had traveled the same ancient path.

That night, Asen already go on to bed. Yunsan tucked the saffron, indigo silk, and wooden camel into his chest. By lamplight, he traced the camel's hump, then looked west through the telescope. The road stretched endless, but for the first time, it felt like a new life. He thought deeper about the national communication and the sell of the products. By those imagination, he started to be motivated. He ride on to the camel's back by himself instead of Asen's help. The dry and slow wind blowing on his face. Thats the smell of the desert. The moon reach on the stunning dark blue sky, the stars are shining randomly beside the moon. Yunsan cannot control himself not to look at it. The bell on the camel's neck starts to bell. The camel walk slowly in to the desert, the quiet desert. Sometimes, Yunsan can heard some resident or businessman laughing and shouting at some place, talking about how much they earn.

A sweet air blows in to Yunsan's nose, someone is cooking. Yunsan ride the camel to find the source. Thats a native girl cooking goat meat and drinking milk tea.

"Hello, your food smells delicious, I had never heard about this kind of dish! "Yunsan said.

The girl quietly smiled: "You must have to try these. "

Yunsan was suprised, in that period, the girls will avoid to talk directly to the boys. There are some secret rules between the gender, that has been make a long time barrier to communication. This girl are very special one.

"Thanks! "Yunsan sat on the ground.

During the meal, the girl told some history to Yunsan: The silk road starts thousands years ago, people who live in the main part of the country sell the tea and silk using the traveler and businessman.They also come back with the art learning knowledge that been taught by people outside.

She also pick a clothe that have a difficult cut and design out from the room.

"Let's see this! This is my father's wear. Looks good?"

"Yeah, but I think it is our culture's wear, so who is your father?"

"OH, thats a sad story. My dad is a businessman that came to sell tea. He meets my mom here and after a week my mom found she was pregnant. My dad said he will be back to take my mom and her baby which is me away, but he never came back. The only clue of his come is this clothes."

"I'm sorry to hear that. So how is your life then?"Yunsan asked

"I have a happiness childhood, because my mom starts to be participating into the production of the local dresses. She earned some money for us and now I will be married with the boy in the nearby village. Every time I speak this to my besties, they all laugh and make jokes." The girl smiled and a blush appeared on the wheat colored cheeks.

"What is your dream for coming here?" She asked.

"Well, actually, I just need to finish the study that my dad prepared for me since I was very young. Then married and have a good job in the government like he wish. But I have my own choice, I want to see the world out side and learn interesting things by talking to people like you. I want to be free." Yunsan confidently speaks.

"Our western culture must be bring you know life! Good luck!"The girl claps and drink all the milk tea.

At the morning, Asen wakes up and he found Yunsan already go downstairs to the canteen. Yunsan grabs the baked pancakes and look out from the window from the noisy crowd. The best life is now waiting for him, the key in his heart started to open the door of the new world.

Silk Road Echos: A Piece of the Past

HD Beijing School, Lin, Chrysta – 15

Kashgar's old town wakes slowly. The first light falls on the window in morning, with the wind blowing the dust to every corner of the town. Pigeons coo from wooden balconies, and camels slowly walk pass throw making a long line, carrying huge bags of silk. Below a small shop stood at the edge of the town, where when you get in you'll smell the wooly scent of Aisha's family's carpet shop. Seventeen-year-old Aisha spent her hole day here on the big, soft carpet, handwoven rugs.

The outside of the shop is just covered with wood, but the first thing that catches your eye will be the colorful silk. Deep red ones made from the pomegranate skins, light purple and indigo blue traded over the mountains, many more. But the most precious thing isn't the colorful silk but Aisha's grandmother, Nura. She usually sit by the stove, her back still straight even though she's old. Probably to Aisha her grandmother will be the gorgeous woman she ever seen.

Nura's hand move in a kind of rhythm she learned from her own mother. Today, Nura were working like usual, her finger tangles in the silk, but Aisha notices they're trembling more than usual.

"Grandma, let me help," Aisha says. She jump up and walks over. Carefully, she takes the silk from Nura's hand. She than started twisting it to a neat ball so it won't mess up like a spiderweb. Nura can't help her eyes soften every time when she saw Aisha.

"This silk," Nura says in soft voice, "came from a merchant in Hetian decades ago. He traded it for one of my best carpets and said it was for emperors." She pauses and frown trying hard to remember. "I've been weaving the scarf for mounts. It's for Mr. Li in Xi'an. We were friends long ago, I believe he remember me. He collected Silk Road music when he traveled to different places."

Aisha become more concentrated, she only knows Mr. Li from Nura's stories, a man who brought her grandmother a recording of Persian flute player once before. But now, Nura's story became shorter each time she talked, and she naps more than usual in afternoon.

"The scarf is almost done," Nura says, pointing it to a small table nearby the carpet. There it lies, half wrapped in cloth. It has pomegranate blossoms and golden camels. Aisha pick it up, it just feel so light that she can barely mention it a silk without seeing. However, she can feel the weight from the inside, the weight of her grandmother's story. Than she decide to call it A Piece Of Past.

That evening, the shop closes early, Nura sit on her chair, waiting for Aisha makes the mint tea. "Listen to me, Aisha," Nura says, holding Aisha's hand. "I can't send the scarf to Mr. Li myself. I need you to go."

Aisha was shocked. Xi'an need three-day bus ride, she need to past deserts, mountains and place she only have seen on map before. "Me?" she quickly asked back.

Nura nods. "Mr. Li has something for me too. A piece of music he recorded years ago, it's a really great song than merchant sing during the Silk Road journey. I've wanted to hear it again...unless when I'm still alive."

Aisha looks at the scarf at the table, her mind were full of the normal life she has been living, it is undeniable that she want to go out. "I promise," she says.

Nura smiles—a tired smile. "That good to hear, I know you'll agree. Beside you can truly learn a lot, there might be some problems, but the hole adventure will be fun."

That night, Aisha fold the scarf to her backpack, she lies on her bed awake, looking at ceiling. Night is always quiet, which bring her so many imagination.

The next day, Aisha farewell to Nura in a hurry and goes on the train. She look out through the window hoping everything would go fine. As the train started moving, the clack-clack sound of the wheels filled her ears. She closed her eyes, listen carefully. In that noise, she thought she could hear things from Nura's stories—the bells on camels, the wind in the desert, maybe even a bit of that old silk road song Mr.Li recorded. All of it mixed together in her head, but unexpectedly, it made her feel fulfilled.

When she opened her eyes, outside is already afternoon, she know Kashgar was far behind. But she didn't feel alone. The scarf was in her bag, and the stories were in her heart. She packed her staff and took out the well-worn map that her grandmother give to her. Now she's been going further to the North, the town he's leaving now was called Kaya, she still need to arrive there at first and find a place to settle down. The house Mr.Li were leaving has quite a distance to the train station, so she probably also need to take car or bus even she arrive there.

Aisha knew it was her adventure. She didn't have idea on how this can be end, or if she'd even find Mr.Li. Two hours past, the announcement on the train finally reached the destination of the last stop. Kaya is way more different then what she expected to seen. The people there all seem enthusiasm, tall buildings, a subway entrance and crowds of people going to different directions. Getting off the train, she was going to look for a nearby residence to stay. Anura had already been making some label on map, there were even different restaurants. She successfully arrived at the residence before dusk and took a great nap.

The next morning, Aisha didn't linger. She follow the markings on map, took two buses and finally arrived at the entrance of a quiet alley.

The alley was narrow, the vines are hanging on the grey-brick wall. Standing at the door, Aisha began feeling nervous, she counted the door numbers again to check, and softly knock.

After a moment, the door opened. An old man with gray hair and glasses stood there. He wore a black traditional jacket and held a bottle in his hand.

"Hello, are you Mr.Li, I'm sorry to interrupt?" Aisha asked.

The old man nodded, his eyes wide a little. "Yes, and you are..?"

Aisha took out the scarf from her backpack, she gently handed it to Mr.Li in both hands. "I came from Kashgar. My grandmother are Nura, she let me to give this to you."

Mr.Li took the scarf, he fondle the scarf, "Nura.." he whispered the name, "I remember her, how is she?"

"She well, but just not... weaving that much," Aisha said.

"Please come in," Mr.Li open the door more and led her to a room filled with old things. On the wall ahead hung a large map of the Silk Road, red ink mark are in many place.

"She must still remember the sung, right? This was a gorgeous song. I recorded it and promised to let her hear the full indian one day." Mr.Li walk to a old recorder.

The music began to play, it was the same melody Nura song to Aisha, instead this was a more hole version one. The rhythm are warm, mixed with the ancient tradition, scarf and camel bells.

"This is the song she always want to hear but can't remember clearly."Aisha says in a smile.

"Yes, you can bring this to her." Mr.Li replied. "Now she can hear the song, the song neither of us has forgotten."

New Tales of China's Silk Road New Tales of China's Silk Road

HD Beijing School, Li, Jia Yi – 15

The Gobi's midday sun burned like a hot coin, turning the sand into golden waves that stretched as far as the eye could see. Lisa, a sharp-eyed archaeologist with a notebook in her belt. Next to her, Ken, a photographer with a camera over his shoulder, took pictures of old stone half-buried in sand. Their guide Jimmy, a wise Kyrgyz nomad with a face affected by the wind, sand and the traces of time, led the way on his camel, and his eyes fixed on the faraway Pamir Mountains.

"We're almost there!" Lisa said, clutching a folded map in her hand, "I have read some books that said, behind that Vally, is was important rest place for trades carrying silk from China to Samarkand. "

Lisa stepped forward, eager to look at faint stone marks on the path, but the sand under her feet suddenly get away. With a shouted, she fell into a dark, narrow hole. The silk slipped from her hand as she dropped, Ken tried to catch her, but he also lost the balance and fall into the hole. Jimmy yelled but the edge of the hole crumbled, and he landed with a heavy thud next to them.

For a moment, the hole was quite-only the sound of sand falling from above broke the silence. "Is everyone fine?"asked Lisa, Ken nodded, his camera is cracked, Jimmy checked his leg, it's twisted but not broken. "This trap is old-probably built hundreds years ago to catch wild animals."The hole was about ten feet deep, with sand and sharp stones. "My phone has no signal""shall we shout for help?" "Not a good idea, the valley is far from towns."

As the sun set, the weather becomes cold and still, but Lisa's dark red silk still bright in the dark. "My grandmother made this silk,"she said softly. "She always told me silk is a bridge between people. Traderses carried it across deserts, and it bring strangers together."

Night came, the temperature dropped fast. They began to find for help, their voices hoarse from the wind, just as Lisa started to lose the hope, she heard the sound of course hooves in the distance. "Someone is coming!" They shouted together, and the horse hooves got closer, soon, torchlight flickered above the hole.

"Hello? Is anyone there?"a deep voice calls down. It was Alden, an old man from a nearby Kyrgyz village, he is leading a group of young men on horses. They were checking the area for lost travelers, just like their ancestors had done for many years. When they saw the three trapped in the hole, they put down the rope woven from wool, "hold on!"Alden shouted. When they climbed out, Alden patted Jimmy's back and spoke in Kyrgyz. Jimmy translated:"He says we are lucky, there will be a sandstone tomorrow, we should been stuck here for days." The patrol helped them get on horses, and rode through the night to the village.

For the next three days, the villagers took good care of them. Women treated their injuries with herb creams, while men told stories of life on the Silk Road-how their ancestors had guided caravans, and how silk was once traded for horses and spices. Lisa, Ken and Jimmy shared their own stories too: Lisa talked about her work as an archaeologist, Ken showed photos of China, and Jimmy spoke of his travels across Central Asia.

One evening, around the campfire, Lisa unfolded the deep red silk, it emitted a deep red glow under the firelight. "This is for you," she said to the village's weavers. "It's Chinese silk, this was made by my grandmother, thank you for saving us." The weavers held their breath and carefully stroke the smooth silk. "It's was beautiful," said Zarina, an old weaver with silver hair. "We haven't seen such good silk in a long time." Lisa smiled "So let's share our skills with each other. You reach me how to weave, and I 'll demonstrates Chinese silk techniques."

Over the next one week, the village become a place of sharing. Zarina and other weavers taught Lisa and Ken to spin wool and dry it with local plants. Lisa showed them how to make the detailed patterns of Suzhou silk. Ken took photos of them. Jimmy helped Alden fix the village's well. "This is what the Silk Road was always about." said Alden, watching them laugh together. "Not only just reading things, but also sharing knowledge and friendship."

When it's time to leave, the villagers gathered to say goodbye, Zarina gave Lisa a small woolen rug-woven with Kyrgyz designs and the Chinese phoenix pattern from the silk. "A gift." She said, "friendship is like silk-

strong but soft, it connects people even when they are far apart.” Alden gave Ken a leather camera case, carved by hand with pictures of camels. “Please take more photos of our land and share our stories to the world.”

As they rode away. The desert wind carried the scent of sand and sage, and Lisa could almost hear distant bells from centuries ago—merchants and travelers, connecting strangers though the Silk Road to become friends.

“We’ll come back.” said Lisa, the sun rose over the Gobi, painting the sky pink and orange. The three rode on, their hearts light with memories. The trap has been a disaster, but it had led them to something far more precious—friendship that transcended borders and time, like the silk that brought them together, their bond was strong, enduring, and woven from the Silk Road’s true spirit: curiosity, kindness, and the courage to reach out to one other.

New Tales of China's Silk Road

HD Beijing School, Lu, Qian Qian – 14

The mountains stood on the boundary of sky and ground, overlooking the world . The sun blazed down without mercy, and the heat pressed heavy on the skin.

“Stick with us ! Here is the place to rest! ” A sound came from a Chinese caravan, who had being trekking for almost 3 days. emerge on the blurry edge o the desert — with a huge merchant troop and countless amounts of goods.

Here is in 206 BCE, A huge group were on a long journey to the European countries, and they just passed by the Great Sea Road which a historically section of the ancient Silk Road .

Over time, three merchants at the end of the caravan were gradually left behind. "What kind of goods are we carrying now? They're heavy like hills! “asked Felix, the youngest teenager who was grown with on emaciated body. “Ugh...Green tea, silk, compasses, herb...that’s innumerable.”

said the elderly called Tarim.

"Hey," yelled Thomas, "We'd better follow the troop first. I can't find out the path they walked through." The trails was extremely hard to figure out — they were already taken away by the wind. Then the desert seemed becoming original again, like there’s no existent ever discovered it. Simultaneously , three merchants noticed how serious the situation was.

They started being stuck in the Gobi. The landform of this site was complex as a puzzle, making them feel almost burnout. “Probably there thousands of paths in the mystery.”

The supplies of water and food were running low again , dusk descending and fluttering on the sky, covering the sunshine continuously. Camel’s steps grew heavier and heavier, so they decides to hide in a cave beside the rock wall in order to take a rest .Thomas ignited the torch, told other two merchants to stay in place, and stepped into the cave, hoping if there’s something to hunt for surviving .Strong storms swept across the empty land outside like a starved beast, screaming and yelling, resounded between the walls.

After ten minutes finding , a line of symbols had appeared, lit up by the flames. “That’s weird.” Thomas muttered to himself, then he started looking for this mysterious site on the map. However, there’s no clue to prove the existence of this sign.

Unexpectedly, he heard a cry of agony —sounds like Felix’s voice. Thomas ran towards the entrance of the cave without hesitation .

Two hundreds meters away from Thomas, a giant serpent coiled around Felix’s body, s ticked out its forked tongue. Thomas suddenly got shocked by this horrible scene, and lifted up his carrying pole, trying to attack its head . Unfortunately, the serpent grabbed away the pole from Thomas’s hand with a lightning speed, then lunged at its prey frenziedly, getting closer and closer to Thomas. Meanwhile, an arrow sliced cross the sky and stroked the serpent on the neck . The snake fainted on the spot, and gradually loosened the coils around Felix.

Nevertheless , the snake had bitten Felix’s arm and leg with its sharp and poisonous fangs, which caused intense pain on his body, making him even couldn’t speak a word. “There’s nothing can help him with the wounds !We haven’t bought any herb. “

“I believe I’m able to save you.” The people at their back said. Tarim turned around , then he saw a man with deep set eyes and prominent nose. A huge caravan stood behind him, as a reason of he is the leader.

“I’m Lin from Italy, we’re just on the way to the western countries to transport goods. I have some ideas which might be helpful for you.” The man introduced.

After a complex process cleaning and wrapping the wounds , Felix felt the pain was gradually fading away. Three merchants finally were amazed by the method they had never seen before .Therefore, Lin said that they were willing to give some other medicines which can be used to treat diseases. “For real?We are exactly appreciate! As returns, you can choose some traditional goods from our country if you like .” Stated Thomas.

During that night ,they sat on the ground and lighted the campfire, discussing the histories and traditions from their countries. Tarim hoped this moment could freeze and they would never leave this “paradise”.

The weather turned sunny next morning, the three merchants took leave of the European caravan, and continue their journey again.

Two Doctors

HD Beijing School, Mu, Jing Xing – 14

It was a good day. For this place, a good day means that there is a bright sun, but not too hot or too bright; it should be a warm and cozy sun. Usually, the abundant sunshine would make the road sludgy and muddy, but today the ground was unusually solid and strong, and he walked on it. He wiped off the thin sweat on his brow and raised his head toward the sky. The day was fading. “Has it gone so late already?” He asked himself.

He groaned. A Chinese friend he had just made told him that night would again condense the vapor. He hoped that this fine weather would last throughout the entire week.

He could have taken a nice walk before dawn. The day was far longer than the night, so he didn’t need to worry about the nocturnal beasts. He could wander around the village that looked like a butterfly released from its cocoon. This was all thanks to the Chinese envoy. About a year ago, he had set up this trading post, and in merely six months this tiny spot had become an international business center that was visited by Chinese, Arabs, Javanese, Bruneians, and people from all over the world.

He had been a doctor before the arrival of the Chinese. The Chinese doctor’s therapy differed vastly from the methods he had used. He had been amazed by the bizarre herbs that he saw every day but had never used. Therefore, also giving some credit to his own language talent, he became a private translator for the doctor (he had learned Chinese in two months). An hour ago, he had been in the doctor’s clinic, and this was the reason why he had missed the golden hour of the day.

That was a pity, but as soon as he thought of his indirect assistance in saving a doctor’s life, all that pity vanished instantly.

And now he was heading home. He would never go out at night. As we said, there were beasts at night, and moreover, there were robbers who coveted the silk and china of the residents. However, a strange noise attracted him. This place was always quiet. The newly established China Market was far from here, and he didn’t think that pirates and robbers would prefer this desolate village to the prosperous town where the merchants lived. Something must have happened. It seemed to be the sound of a man choking, but not a normal choke; it was a choke that was painful; a choke seeking help.

“There is a man who needs help,” he thought, “and as a doctor I should check what happened.”

So, he sought the source of the voice. It wasn’t a hard journey, because not far from where he was standing, a crowd had already gathered, forming a circle that encompassed the whole square.

“Let me through please, I am a doctor. I am a doctor. So, let me through please.” He repeatedly spoke to the crowd as he squeezed through the bodies like a lamprey swimming through a small crack. Thankfully, although not everybody heard him, some people did their best to make a way that let him through. After a long chaos, he managed to enter the center.

Now he knew what the issue was.

“He is my dad!” A desperate sound burst out from the crowd. All the villagers moved to the side. The son knelt down beside his father, his hands fell on the father’s neck, and tears were running down. “Help! Oh please, help for earth Mother’s sake!”

By the son’s side, a shabby old man lay on the ground, hands stretched open powerlessly, and his head lowered reluctantly. White froth was dropping from his mouth, which had wet his scruffy clothes. He was one hundred percent sure (this is just an analogy; they didn’t know percentages in the 15th century) that he had cured a patient with the same symptom, perhaps more than one. Anyway, our doctor knew what it was. Phlegm, or mucus, was stuck in the old man’s throat. This was easy; he used to give them sugarcane juice.

But at this moment, he hesitated.

“What would the Chinese doctor do under this circumstance?” he asked himself. Well, he had never seen the Chinese doctor use sugarcane. In the clinic, there had been patients who had the same issue. How did the doctor treat them? Oh yes, he gave them some fluid from a secret bottle. That couldn’t be sugarcane juice. What was that? Perhaps offering the old man some sugarcane juice was wrong; he might kill him inadvertently. Now he hesitated. He didn’t know whether he should trust his experience or the Chinese method, which must be more professional and secure.

“Let me through please, I am a doctor. I am a doctor. So, let me through please.”

The sound penetrated the crowd, dashing into his ears. It was the Chinese doctor. Obviously, someone had gone for him. He stepped back and observed. The doctor simply asked where the patient was and rapidly made his diagnosis.

“Mucus,” murmured the doctor.

He searched in his bag and took out a bottle. His index finger and middle finger supported the old man’s jaw like a brace, and the transparent fluid in the bottle was poured into the open mouth. The old man choked again, but this time the sound had signs of life; this time the sound was lively and hopeful.

He let out a deep breath. He was happy that he hadn’t acted rashly like a bull in a china shop. Now it was all solved.

“What is the liquid?” The next day, he asked the doctor in the clinic.

“What liquid?”

“The liquid you used yesterday.”

“That? I never told you before?”

“Yes.”

“Oh, well, I bet that you know what it is. What is your therapy?”

“Sugarcane juice. But isn’t that the wrong way?”

“No, it isn’t.”

“What?”

“Let me tell you what is in my bottle. It is sweet water.”

“What?” He gasped in surprise. If it was just sweet water, it meant that using sugarcane juice was also the same.

“Yes,” the doctor paused for a while to laugh, “actually you know a lot, and sometimes I learn things from you. You don’t need to hesitate. Not all therapy I use is right.”

“Really.”

“This is why you came here, to learn? But I have learned a lot from you, my dear sir...”

“Well, I came here by the Silk Road. I mean, though it is called a road, I think it is a bridge personally. It is a bridge that connects the world. There isn’t a thing that one culture is better than the other; all is mutual, like I learn lots and lots of herbs I didn’t know here. It is the same for the merchants: we sell you china and silks, and in exchange we buy spices and other goods from you.”

“It actually offered me a bigger view of the world.” He paused. “Tomorrow I am going to leave.”

“What? Leave? But to where?”

“Well, another place linked by the silks.”

He looked out of the window; out there the sea was glistening, like blue silk, and gleaming under the sun far away.

The sun is bright.

New Tales of China's Silk Road

HD Beijing School, Wang, Daisy – 16

A longtime ago, a boy, named Ethan, lived in a small village. Endless barren land, large stone stood on the plain, with a trace of yellow grass. The sky and horizon merged into a uniform picture, disrupted occasionally by withered trees. A small village located within this deserted place.

Ethan's parents left the village for work, yet has not came back. Despite grown up without his parents, Hebert act as a supporter in the case, provide a lot of help. He was a old man who managed a grocery store in village.

The most noisiest spot is when every residents rush into the grocery for discounted eggs in the morning in this calm place. Ethan was one of them but not for buying, because he do not have money. Hebert would grab Ethan some candy from the glass jar placing at the cashier desk, driven by his innate affection for kids, though he was busying at working. Each candy wrapped by different plastic candy paper, shined in his hand. But do not mistake its flavour for its appearance, candy itself all made by general sugar. The boy always consumed those candy carefully, watching the pattern casted by plastic candy paper under the sun. Often took hours. Then, usually the time the last customer stepped out the shop.

Hebert stand behind the cashier desk everyday, his face crinkled in smile. Smiling at everyone no matter how much they spent, showing his welcome and respect. Hebert was actually enjoy his job in a sense of fulfillment for satisfied everyone's demand and most important, talk with others to distract him from wondering this desolate place he live.

Therefore it was reasonable for him to allow children staying at store after accessible time. That child was often Ethan, as other children's parents took them home.

Time pass peacefully like this, along with shiny candy paper and old Hebert. Until Ethan was fourteen years old.

Wheel was roaring, stirred up dust, a cart emerged from the end of dirt road, directly broke into the village. Many curious residents heard the sounds and went out. They huddled beside the road.

Several people went off the cart, dressing in a material Ethan never seen before nor the language they spoke. They shouted, with several wood boxes in their arm. Indeed, this method effectively gathered every single people from every corner of village, even customers in Hebert's store went out.

Those strangers stopped at the center of the crowds, mysteriously opened the box. While they made any movement, their sleeves reflect the lights, showing a strange but beautiful colour. A strong, fascinating smells burst out of the first box, several categories dried, dried plants lied in, separately inside delicate small bowl with cyan colour, matched the feeling after a downpour.

However when Ethan walked into Hebert's store, he can even heard his footsteps echoing. This utterly silence swung at his head, shocked him, making him glanced back at Hebert. Because there was never this silence in the grocery store. He found Hebert gaze trembling as he was looking at the crowds. His mouth opened slightly then closed, as if he wanted to say something but finally gave up. His sounds stuck in throat like a big, rough stone. His smile slipped away from his face, however replaced by a layer of sweat, sprawled through the wrinkle carved on his face. Thus Hebert carefully sat down, as there was nobody in his store, a scene which Ethan never seen in his life. He wiped his hands on his shirt, cleared his throat softly, yet kept his eyes fixed on the people outside. As if this might relieved the awkward. Hebert did not notice that Ethan was in the store. The boy felt like there was a big stone stuck inside him too. This scene and feeling recalled his memory of watching fishes frozed in the ice, like if there was an unspeakable barrier divided them from others.

Hebert was finally able to sense again, and noticed the boy in the store. He pretended nothing happened and handed Ethan some sweets. Ethan replied him with a unnatural and worldless smile. He wanted to leave in hurry but suddenly paused and turned back with a shade of hesitation on his face. 'Don't worry, I will help you.'

sitting beside the road, sounds of singing and chattering, smells of spice seeped into the boy's mind.

Anger forced over sanity, his mind was ignited. Those arrogant stranger disrupted our life without permission and no apologize. Even their language sounded sharp and completely absence of any emotion. Could they really feel the intense frustration or embarrassed as them? Ethan decided to retaliate against those brutal people.

Under the cover of night, he sneaked into the merchants' warehouse. Taking advantage of the guard's nap with his face covered, he made off with several boxes.

The racket from the village waked Ethan up his from his sleep. He stumbled to the window, rubbing his eyes, and froze at the sight outside. The person who'd been guarding the warehouse last night—the one he had stolen from—wasn't some adult guard. That was a boy, roughly his age.

he clutched a crumpled piece of sketche of items he lost in his trembling hand, rushing from door to door in hurry. He cried in a dialect Ethan couldn't understand, his voice filled with urgency. Every time someone opened their door, he pointed at the direction of the warehouse and mimed the shape of boxes, his eyes brimming with unshed tears that finally spilled over.

That earnest, helpless look in his eyes gnawed at Ethan. The way he sobbed, not in anger, but in sheer desperation. Ethan's blood became cold. Boxes He stollod back were now a dead weight under his bed, pressing down on his mind with every passing second.

First time he fixed his eyes on those who spoke in language he could not understand, tears left stains on the child's shirt, hot tears move down his cheek. Ethan realize, for the first time that they were not aliens, on the contrary, were sensitive humans, with the same body heat as him.

'Was this done by you?'

A voice appeared after everyone gone.

That was Hebert asking.

Ethan did not replied.

'Don't worry, I 'm not here to scould you. 'Hebert said gently.

'I get you. you want to protect us, protect our tradition. Despite of these changes, I did not gain anything, but they are good for the village. '

'In fact, when I was young, I was a person who against stable and dull lifestyle. '

while speaking, he focused his attention on the leaving merchant outside window.

However, there wasn't such a fantastic group of travelling merchant, as not brave enough I was, I ended up staying here. If you want to apologize to that boy, just bring those boxes with you and follow them.

This was the reason Ethan began his journey, for the purpose of being forgive. However such feeling were no longer there. He soon discovered wonferful aspect of the world outside.

Land was no longer lifeless, grass grow like a soft carpet, spread across thr ground. Camels being decorated by jewels and merchants dressed in silk travelling slowly. Ethan has heard a story of sea during the journey. Though he hadn't seen that beautiful blue, he believe that the sea must be as blue as the sky and one day he will arrive their.

Later, carrying the crafts given by Hebert, he traveled farther along the trade route he had once misunderstood. He sold these beautiful items to people who had never seen these before. Everytime he saw the lights shining in his customer's eyes, without saying any words, he felt these smile made all his works worthwhile.

Where Silk Meets the Wind

HD Beijing School, Yan, Alisa – 15

1

Dear Father,

The winter in Chang'an is getting colder, and I can only imagine how much chill the Kochkor grasslands must have; your back pain must act up more there. I've woven this silk waist warmer with your favorite pearl pattern, it's soft and warm, perfect for when you ride camels around Kochkor. I've already asked someone at Chang'an West Market to pass it to you on their way to Kochkor, so you should get it soon.

Grandpa often talks about your stories during Silk Road. Don't forget to bring back the fermented horse milk you promised. I'll take good care of the silk shop.

Stay safe, and come back soon.

Your daughter,

Alin

2

Dear Friend from Chang'an,

My Chinese isn't really fluent, but I will try my best to express my feelings. I was so surprised when a caravan brought me this silk "warm waist" today. It must be a thank-you gift from the Chang'an envoys I guided to Kochkor last month; they kept saying they wanted to repay me for showing them the safe mountain trails.

I tried it on right away, and it's like wrapping my waist in soft cloud! Kochkor's winter rides are bitter, and the cold wind used to make my back ache, and this will keep me warm when I'm herding camels at dawn.

I'm sending you two small things in return: a felt hat I wove myself, our Kochkor winds are truly sharp, this hat will shield your ears from the chill when you walk through Chang'an's streets. There's also a small bag of Kochkor's famous dried apricots, we dry them in the summer sun, and they're sweet enough to chase away the cold, as I hope so.

I don't know your name yet, but I'd love and are really interested to hear more about Chang'an. Is it common for people there to have silk with beautiful patterns I saw on the envoys' robes?

Gratefully,

Temir (from Kochkor in Kyrgyzstan)

3

Dear Temir,

Your words made me laugh so hard, such a mix-up....But your Chinese is pretty good! How have you learnt it?

The delivery person must have mixed up the packages. Sorry for the confusion. First, let me introduce myself:

I'm Alin, from Chang'an in Zhong Yuan. That silk "warm waist" you got wasn't from the envoys, it was supposed to be for my father, Lin Zhen. He's a merchant who travels to Central Asia, and right now he should be resting at a post station in your area. I wonder if you've ever met him? He's always wearing a blue silk robe and loves chatting with camel guides about the road.

Your felt hat and dried apricots arrived yesterday, and the apricots tastes amazing. They're sweeter than the dried dates we have in Chang'an, I've been eating one every time I sit down to write. Thank you so much for them.

I'm sending you a map of Chang'an West Market with this letter, I marked my family's silk shop in red ink, its right next to the camel post, so if you ever come to Chang'an, you'll find it easily. Oh, and you asked about Chang'an's silk patterns—yes, our shops still have lots of beautiful ones, the linked-pearl design is only one of the types I cherish, patterned flowers and camel bells are also gorgeous. Maybe I can send you a small silk piece someday.

You mentioned Kochkor's grasslands, are they really as wide as the wheat fields outside Chang'an? In spring, our wheat fields stretch as far as the eye can see, but I've never seen a grassland.

To be honest....I'm happy this mistake led us to become friends.

Best,

Alin (from Chang'an's West Market Silk Shop)

4

Dear Alin,

Your letter reached me at Kochkor's post station last week, such a relief to hear you're not just caring for the silk shop well, but also keeping up with your weaving. I need to tell you about the silk waist warmer you sent: I didn't get it at first, and I couldn't help worrying that it had gotten lost in the camel caravans.

But days ago, a kind Kyrgyz young man named Temir found me after asking around the post station and nearby camel teams. He said the warmer was misdelivered to his home. He even speaks some Chinese, which made our chat easy. He handed over the warmer to me.

Don't worry about me; the journey's been smooth, and the other merchants and I look out for each other. Oh, and about the fermented horse milk: it'll spoil on the long trip back, so I got you a small woolen carpet from Temir's tribe, with little flower patterns, you will like it.

I'll write again when I reach the next post station. Keep weaving, but don't work too late

With all my care,

Father

5

Dear Alin,

Finally, I know your name! I found your father, Lin Zhen, at Kochkor's post station just the day I received your message. I gave him the silk waist warmer, and he laughed when he heard about the mix-up. He said you've always been good at weaving, and now I see why. The waist warmer is softer than the wool we use for felt hats. So about Kochkor's grasslands and my life in the tribe... The grasslands here are wide, but not as flat as Chang'an's =wheat fields. There are small mountains everywhere, and the paths between them are tricky, with places where quick sand can trap camels, most times you will get lost if you don't know the stars distribution. And for what I mostly encounter at the tribe, I guide caravans (like the Chang'an envoys I told you about) through these paths. I also fix camel saddles, silk and tea are heavy, so if a saddle breaks, the goods might get damaged.

Riding camels at dawn here is amazing. The sun comes up over the mountains, and the grass looks golden. The wind is cold, but if you wrap your coat tight, it feels nice. I wish you could see it someday, you'd probably draw it on your silk.

You might send me a small silk piece, right? I can't wait! I've never had a piece of Chang'an silk just for myself. I'd keep it in my yurt.

Thank you for asking about my life. It's fun to tell someone from far away about Kochkor.

Kind regards,

Temir (from Kochkor's tribe)

6

Dear Temir,

I'll definitely try to draw it on silk when I have time, but without seeing it for real, I'm worried I can't get the image right. I wish I could experience it myself someday, to feel that cold wind and see the sun come up like that. I've never touched a camel. Father always says they're too big and stubborn for me to get close to, so I've only watched them carry silk at the market. I can't even imagine what it's like to sit on one and walk through the grassland.

I tried weaving the camel bell pattern I told you about. It's not perfect, but I'll send a small piece soon. Do you really think sewing it on your hat would look good? Father wrote last week, he said you helped fix his camel's saddle. Thank you! He also said Kochkor's autumn grass is gold. Chang'an's wheat turns yellow, but not like gold, right?

Best for wish

Alin

7

Dear Alin

The silk sample is soft! I showed it to my mother, and she sewed it on my hat's edge. Turns out it perfectly matches. Now my hat has something from you on it.

Autumn grass is gold, like the sun on the ground. I rode camel at dawn yesterday, took a dried apricot, thought of you.

Kochkor's not calm recently, tribes often fight over grass more. I have to check paths twice a day now. Grass feeds our sheep and camels, this year's little rain made grass scarce, and no grass means no food to live through winter. Next month, a caravan will head to Chang'an. I told them if they saw a girl at the west market silk shop, please tell you my regards to you.

For the best

Temir

8

Dear Temir,

I've been asking every passing merchant at Chang'an West Market about Kochkor these days, I've heard that a man the tribes are fighting over grass more and more. My heart tightened when I heard that, Please, don't go near those conflict spots, and stay safe. I've been worrying about Father too. Is he doing well at the post station? Has he had enough warm food? And when will he leave for the next stop? You mentioned before that you're good at guiding caravans through tricky paths, will you be the one leading his team? I know if you're with him, he'll be safer, and I'll sleep better at night.

Do you still have the small camel bell pattern silk I sent you? If you need to wrap something warm, it's thin but soft enough to tuck in your bag.

Write back when you can, even just a short note. I'll be waiting by the shop, looking out for the next caravan from Kochkor.

With all my care

Alin

9

Dear Alin

I'll be safe. No worries. Your father's fine, he's helping me fix camel saddles these days. We'll leave when the next safe path opens, and I'll guide him well. I still have your camel bell silk, it's in my bag, just like you said.

Temir

10

Dear Temir

Glad you'll guide Father. Come back safe, both of you. I'll wait for your news at the silk shop.

All my regards

Alin

11

Dear Alin,

Kochkor's peace has broken, two nearby tribes fight over grass and water, and we got tangled in it yesterday. We passed by when the conflict started. Temir saw the chaos, rushed over to shield the carts from flying arrows.

I'm unharmed, thanks to him. But the fight spooked his camel, it ran off into the grasslands. Temir himself took an arrow to the arm, though he wrapped it tight with his felt scarf. After the tribes scattered, he said he had to find his camel and left our team. We've asked around the post station and nearby tents, but no one's seen him since, only heard he might have gone toward the old Silk Road station.

Don't worry over me, but do keep an eye on the shop. I'll send word if we find Temir.

Your loving father

12

Dear Temir

It's been a month with no letter from you. I asked the caravan, and they said you didn't send anything. Father's new letter came yesterday. He said you got hurt protecting his Chang'an caravan from tribe conflict, you got hurt and they have no news about you. My hands were literally shaking when I saw it...how could I stay calm? Are your wounds okay? Do you have enough medicine? If you saw this message, please write back, even a short note. Please.

Alin

13(1 day after)

Dear Temir,

I can't let anything happen to you. After consideration, even though I know father and mother will disapprove, I'm joining a silk caravan to Kochkor, to find you and I won't give up, no matter how tricky the paths, no matter how long it takes, I'll find you. I've packed Grandfather's hemostatic powder, the soft silk waist warmer (it'll wrap your arm gently), and all the silk I weaved for you but had no chance for you to see.... Please hold on, Temir.

Alin

14

Dear Temir,

Today's the third day in the desert, and I finally understand why Father always looks tired after his trips. This is harder than I ever imagined. The desert sun burns so hot as my clothes stick to my back, sweat filling my body. Every step sinks into the sand, the time on the camel is also uncomfortable, but most time I walk, because goods need to be carried. By noon, my legs shake so bad I can barely keep up with the main group. I've never walked this far before. Last night, I sat by the campfire, and images faded in, of how you ride through grasslands and deserts easily, No matter how sore my feet get, no matter how thirsty I am, I won't stop. Just...don't give up on yourself.

Alin

15

Dear Temir,

After days, I finally arrived to the land you've spoken of for months. The weather is harsh and colder than Chang'an, the sky is gloomy, wind cuts through my coat, and the grasslands stretch on endlessly. I'm asking every herdsman I meet about you, holding up the felt hat you made me as a sign. I'm wandering around the old Silk Road station area now, hoping to catch a glimpse of you or your camel. Please, if you're nearby, let me find you soon.

Alin

16

Alin's boots crunched over the dying grass, as she pushed open the old station's creaky door; and there he was. Temir leaned against a crumbling wall, his injured arm clumsily wrapped in tattered cloth, face pale with fever but still some conscious. His eyes widened when he saw her, voice weak and hoarse: "Alin? How... how did you get here?" She didn't answer, searching in her bag for the hemostatic powder and silk waist warmer, gently cleaning his wound before wrapping it tightly. Then she laboriously settled Temir onto the camel, heading it to the tribe.

17

Dear Alin,

I still can't fully wrap my head around how you found me, one minute before I was drifting in and out of fever, thinking of that I might not have the chance to see you by person anymore, and the next second, you were there. I thought it was illusion...I saw your previous unseen letters sent to the tribe. As I read through one by one, my gratitude and warmth fills my heart, not a word can express how grateful I am seeing you came all this way for me.

I wanted to apologize for being a burden when you tried your best to haul me onto the camel, and for making you face the cold grasslands alone. It must have take a lot of courage and hard decisions...

I am a coward, as I realize. I hide, because I don't want to make trouble for my relatives, my tribe and others who have hatred, and seeking for me. But now, because of you, I have the power to go through it.

I owe you my life. Now that I'm healing, I'm already planning. We'll meet again, whether in Chang'an or Kohor, ride camels at dawn, or wander with you around Chang'an, letting me know the place you call home. And I'll never let you go through these paths alone again. Thank you for not giving up on me.

All my thanks and love for you,

Temir

18

Dear Temir,

I have gotten back to Chang'an.

Father fussed over me for three whole days, scolding me for running off secretly but still hugging me tight. The silk shop is just as I left it, peaceful.

I still often think about the day at the old station, your pale face, and the way you whispers my name, was like a dream. The silk waist warmer I wrapped around you remained with a little of your blood, I washed it carefully, and now it hangs in my weaving room, it's a reminder that we found each other.

When will you come to Chang'an? But I still look forward to meet you again at the tribe, since I've heard that the tribes have made peace, and it's getting warmer. I've woven a new silk piece for you, with tribal tents, wage golden grass and rising suns, the dawn you promised to show me. I'll wait for you at the west market, by the camel post, with a map of all the best spots in the city. I'll wait, as the wind fluttering through my rooms curtain sends my hearts for you.

Thank you for waiting for me. Now it's my turn to wait for you.

Best, with love

Alin

Sand and the Moon

HD Beijing School, Zhang, Jin Chen – 15

The emperor of Tang summoned her to perform at court.

She would be reminded of that night months later when gazing at the moon. The night when she snuggled up to Mama, who had left for years, when she had been a girl. Walls are always made of sand in her hometown, Kucha. It could not be completed without the music of pipa, which was like a water drop, whose waves rippled through the void, spreading away with birds. While, the moonlight was like tranquil mercury flowing through the hair of Mama's... The night, the nights.

Yeah, pipa, she said to herself, I need to do something.

A porter was missed in the sandstorm the last day. There was no way for the caravan to find him, just like no way for him to get back to the team. Finding a dry body was not rare for the camel teams, so did them. She crossed the camp with bare feet silently, squeezing through camels slightly, looking for her pipa. Fortunately, she touched the pear-shaped body of it, its smooth wooden surface, and six metal strings. It was there, entirely there, and always there, actually.

"What's it, Lutea?" She heard somebody calling her, and recognized who he was immediately in the blur of morning.

Guards in the caravan were not few, but Palk was not the same as those hairy and blood-drinking beast. He was quiet, gentle, with rare black hair, and, it was said that, had some special feelings to Lutea.

"Nothing Palk, nothing." She answered, "Horrible weather yesterday, wasn't it? Hopefully the biting sand can be as gentle as your wife!"

Just as what's predicted, they didn't meet any sandstorm in the following days, and didn't meet the missing porter, either. On the way, they passed two more towns, signing that they could stay overnight in inns. But most of the time they had to camp out in the desert. The desert night was piercing cold. What was also there was only a pale moon and drifting sands. Sun, then moon, on the same dunes.

The moon was full again, shining upon the ancient road. The Kucha entertainer—perhaps named Lutea, or perhaps merely be called Lutea by her master—stood alone in the yard of an inn beside the way, gazing at the same moon that hung over her homeland.

She had just finished a whirling dance, earning cheers and a few silver coins from a Sogdian merchant caravan, few people knew she was also talented in that. The money was not hers, it would all be given to her master. The feel of the six-stringed pipa still lingered on her fingertips, but there was no instrument beside her now—only a small brass bell tied to her waist, tinkling softly in the night breeze.

She remembered, on a full moon night about a year ago, outside Pilang Old city in Kucha, her master had traded forty bolts of fine silk to a Sogdian merchant in exchange for her. The price was far lower than the legendary "one hundred and thirty seven bolts of silk" paid for a male slave, for she was just a thin, frail girl back then. After years, her playing skills had been so famous that from the emperor to the slaves, everyone in Tang empire knew that there was an entertainer in Kucha who was blessed with striking beauty and extraordinary skill on the pipa. She didn't know, the merchants in Chang'an entered a bidding war to purchase her; She didn't know that, the emperor issued a jade decree, commanding that she be bought to him. Her master had said, "I will take you to Chang'an, where gold and music fill the streets." And so, she became part of the caravan.

The sky in the east was dead and silent.

The sound of the courtyard gate of the post station being forced open broke through the darkness, sounds like a watchman's clapper. Hazily, she remembered being herded outside the yard along with everyone else in the caravan. Almost immediately, the sound of cupboards being overturned and trunks being ransacked erupted from inside the building.

The guards were the first to kneel. Their weapons confiscated, they huddled behind her like frightened mice. This time, Palk was no different from the rest.

The men wore matching armor and carried tall banners emblazoned with a large eastern character she did not recognize. They seemed less like bandits rather than...regular soldiers. But in the pitch-black night, who could truly tell?

After they were gone, with the moon hanging lower than the courtyard wall, the group finally crept back into the main hall on trembling legs. The innkeeper and his wife had resisted fiercely —their blood was now a stark splash against the high wall. Everything was gone, taken as spoils of war, including that six-stringed pipa—the one that should have belonged to Lutea's mother but had been bought by her master.

No one wept. There was only a chilling silence, punctuated by furtive, flickering glances. Without almost any discussion, the decision was made. The guides picked up their knives again and pressed them against Lutea's throat. The message was clear: leave, or die. The food and fresh water were gone, the caravan had to lighten its burden. She glanced around, with a kind of numb cold, still trying to ask someone for help. She realized that Palk avoided her gaze, lowering his head, to fidget with the knife hilt. He had once said that when she played the pipa, it was "as if moonlight had found a voice." Now, that voice and the faint light that once flickered in his eyes were extinguished together.

In the first pale of dawn, she gathered her skirts and left. They were supposed to be past Liangzhou already, yet she turned her back to the rising sun to walk. The sun arced over her head and sank again below the horizon, until she felt like a drop of dew, utterly evaporated.

She had been walking this road for nearly a year. From Kucha to Dunhuang, then to Liangzhou, and lastly nearing Qinzhou. She knew that if she walked forward rather than got back, just ahead, beyond Longshan, lay the Chang'an of her dreams. The camel bells, the wind and sand, the shouts of unfamiliar tongues, the beacon smoke from frontier towers alone the way... all have woven themselves into the fabric of her life.

The moon climbed to its zenith, bright and clear. She remembered the small piece lapis lazuli pigment—flaked from a mural in the Kizil Caves—that her mother had secretly pressed into her hand at night. It held no warmth, yet it felt more reliable than any promise ever made. Mother had said it was the colour of the sky, and the night sky above her now was no different from the one over Kucha.

She began to hum a Kuchean melody, wordless. In its notes flowed the snowmelt from Tianshan Mountains, the winds of oasis, and a fate she could neither name nor explain. She knew that Chang'an was not home. But where was? Perhaps home was right here—on the ceaseless journey atop camels, on the road woven from silk and dust, in this moon that had shone over Kucha and would soon shine over Chang'an. At that very moment, the sky above Chang'an was ablaze, lit by towering flames and the ambition of An Lushan's.

She walked into the sea of sand, feeling herself grow lighter and thinner, about to dissolve into these boundless, repeating grains. A single grain of sand, returning to the desert. The moon listened in silence, spilling its light across the repeated dunes and eastward alone that long, long road leading toward the future.

The Mysterious Mission on the Silk Road

HD Beijing School, Zhou, Beverly – 17

“Li Yan, are you confident enough to investigate the truth behind the disrupted transportation of goods along the silk road? Remember, do not let anyone except him know your purpose.” Emperor Taizong said. “Your Majesty, I obey your command.”

In the late spring of the 17th year of the Zhenguan era of the Tang Dynasty, the Silk Road was flourishing, especially in Chang’an. However, several tribal conflicts disrupted the peaceful trades, and the number of foreign merchants in Chang’an dropped sharply. The emperor aimed to tackle this problem, reactivate cultural exchange, and secretly investigate the blocked routes. So Li Yan, a young captain of the Anxi Protectorate, was ordered to escort special "gifts" to Persia with servants Qiu, Yue, and bodyguards Lian, Heng.

Biting wind hissed, forcing tears down everyone’s faces. Heavy boots left deep footprints as they crunched through snow. The Silk Road stretched from Chang’an to the distant Persian Empire, the journey wouldn’t be easy because of several towering mountains and the ‘Kael’ desert. In the first three days, the group walked in deep silence, in order to save their energy as possible. For Li Yan, however, it’s a tough mission. He fixed his eyes on the box, holding it tightly by his arm even when sleeping.

“Master Li, I roasted the last potato we have for you, I wish you could have it to prepare the journey tomorrow.” Servant Qiu walked gently into Li Yan’s campsite, “Master?” Qiu put the potato beside Li Yan and take the box from Li Yan on the camping mat. “Who’s there!” Li Yan shouted, quickly drawing his sword and pressing it against Qiu’s chest. “It’s me, Qiu. I just want to give you the food, my Master.” Li Yan put down the sword. “Master, what’s inside this big box, why is it so light as if it is empty?” Qiu in a whisper to avoid others outside from hearing. “If you are smart, then don’t ask this question again.” Li Yan shot Qiu a warning glance, “You pretend you know nothing.” Li Yan turned around and strode outside the campsite.

A shrill, piercing whistle sounded from the bush, followed by a huge shadow. Two bodyguards Lian, Heng stepped in front of Li Yan, drew their sword, braced for battle. Nevertheless, Li Yan detected that the five assassins seemingly had no intention of robbing the fortunes—they want the box. “No fatal wounds. I want them alive!” Li Yan fought while shielding the box. Soon, the five assassins were tied up with hemp rope by the guards, having no strength left to resist. “Who gave you the mission? Who told you we are here? Tell me if you don’t want to die.” Li Yan interrogated them alone in the campsite. “Spare me. I tell you. I tell you! Qiu is the spy among you. It was her who leaked your route!” One of the assassins screamed, “The person sent us here is...”

In a sudden, all the assassins were killed by the poisoned-needle attack. Li Yan immediately ducked behind cover and notify the approaching danger to servants. By hearing the sound of fight outside, Li Yan deduced there were more than ten enemies

“Nice to meet you, Master Li. My intention is clear,” A burly man with fancy clothes walked into the campsite, “I know, inside were not silk or spices, but letters—the proposal from Emperor of Tang Dynasty for a Tang–Persian alliance to secure the Silk Road. Give it to me, otherwise, I’ll kill your servants!” Several soldiers include the spy, Qiu, took Lian, Heng and Yue inside the campsite.

Li Yan said, “the unique embroidery patterns on your sleeve told me, you are from the Western Turks.” Yelv smiled sinisterly, “What a smart man!” “But, I won’t give you the box. The trade is not broken by The Western Turks!” Li Yan drove his sword through the canvas roof of the tent to tear a hole and scrambled out in a hurry. The boots crunching on the dry leaves made the man easily keep up with him.

The sound of heavy footsteps thundered behind him, getting closer and closer.

Soon enough, the man caught up. He let out a furious roar and stabbed Li Yan’s left shoulder with a sword with knockout drug on the needle, grabbing the box, then, left, “I don’t want to hurt you, but the disruption of trade between Tang Dynasty and Persia should be continued.” “No...” Li Yan spoke in a hopeless, trembling voice until losing consciousness entirely.

Dewdrops of the early morning dripped onto Li Yan's nose. "Master Li woke up!" Yue shouted in big excitement, "Master, you got injured last night, but Heng found you and dress your wound for you."

"Master, why did you let the enemy rob the box? You could have fight the enemy down!" Heng squatted down and said.

"I anticipated that someone would attempt to hinder my mission of delivering the letter to the Persian. The true goal of this journey isn't to hand over the letter, but to identify the person behind the interference. Now I know, it makes perfect sense that the repeated conflicts among the Silk Road leading to Persia, given that the Western Turks' decline in trade with Persia triggered from its inferior fabric quality compared to that of the Tang Dynasty." Li Yan smiled, "and the real letter is already sent to Persia."

Dawn broke, the sun rising smoothly. "The road ahead is dangerous. The Western Turks won't stop if they read the letter that explains the cooking process of braised pork leg. But we'll reach Persia and meet the Emperor in person. Convey the sincere goodwill of the Tang Dynasty to the Persia. Reactivate the silk road." Yue, Lian and Heng looked each others in confidence.

The bridge between East and West is then fixed by Li Yan and his allegiant servants, stretching endlessly towards the shining, blazing golden sun. Li Yan stared at it on the melting snow, as if it symbolizes the promising future of the whole Tang Dynasty.

The Silk Road and Hope

Kowloon True Light School, Cheng, Yat Nam Adelyn – 15

Diyar had seen what it does. What greed does. How the touch of it darkens the purest souls, its sleight of hand heralding plight upon the most humble lives. Young boys turned to merchants, then monsters of their own doing, preying upon unsuspecting buyers by promising them goods and services beyond their wildest desires, just to rob them of all their possessions and leave them bare of any means to fend for themselves. Driving them to the ground and the brink of bankruptcy. All for greed and an agenda to better themselves.

Diyar would know. He saw it happen before his own eyes.

He witnessed his father fall into the enticing words of these monsters, the captivating, impossible prices, and eventually drown in a river of debts and loans. He saw his elder brother, once innocent and naive as himself, chase financial stability after the disastrous aftermath of his father's investments, just to descend down the road of risky 'business' ventures, the same ones he promised not to follow in his father's footsteps. He saw his mother, plagued by disease, abandoned without medicine, close her eyes for the final time without the comfort of a proper hearth. Her home had been torn apart by constant arguments and mutual blaming. She lay on a thin bed, the wooden frame rickety from years of wear and creaking in help to be replaced at the slightest movement.

His mother asked him to learn from their mistakes. He promised without hesitation.

He sat at the rundown, second-hand table made from scraps and ate with his brother and his father in silence. He wondered how they could ravage the lone dish and lick their plates clean without a shred of shame, how they were so content in taking the fruits of his own hard labour.

He could only blame the monstrous merchants. The caravans filled to the brim with flashy goods. Jade and porcelain from the Han and the East, exotic fruits and wine from the West. Luxuries that were never meant for humble villagers living far from the hustle and bustle.

Yet, deep down, Diyar knew the monsters were not limited only to the merchants. Greed wasn't constrained by status or profession. It touched even the most simple-minded villagers. Diyar knew that perhaps the most vile and greedy monsters, those who allowed themselves to succumb to temptations, were the ones sharing a meal with him.

Diyar thought of his mother and hoped that no such suffering would be brought upon anyone else anymore.

But for now, there were other stories to be told. Ones that differ from Diyar's experience, another side of the tales of the Silk Road.

Somewhere further East in Chengdu, capital of the ancient Han dynasty, there was a massive trade hub with mingling roads full of cultural, social and economic exchange, eventually labelled as the Silk Road. There, Wang, a young boy, imagined himself embarking on a journey carrying similarly beautiful products and goods.

He had heard from the men returning from their travels, who spoke of interesting and beautiful foreign cities. They illustrated vivid tales of different people carrying distinct views, stories and lives. He saw the curious goods they brought back and immediately knew he wanted to be part of it all.

Occasionally, other foreign merchants would reach the city, blabbering in a different language but seeming as merry as his own people. He watched their exchange from his window, observing intently the strangely dressed men in the town centre, waving to locals expressively with exaggerated hand movements. He then watched the locals contemplate for a second. Then, attempt to make conversation in the same passionate manner, accompanied by broken strings of their own language. Wang would laugh, he seriously doubted whether these men understood each other at all, but they both looked a great deal too happy whenever they reached a sort of agreement. He heard them yell, “Chai!” and “Cha!” at each other, likely a word they realised they had in common. They exchanged pouches of silver and bags of tea leaves, eventually going their own way, satisfied.

Wang loved every part of it. He wanted to share in their joy of making new discoveries from other cultures and being able to eventually partake in these exchanges himself. The thought of being able to exchange with someone so different from himself filled Wang with excitement. Similarly, the notion of exploring other places, being able to witness a grand culmination of so many distinct societies, had fueled him with the strength and the hope to keep moving forward as he reached his teenage years, at last leading into adulthood.

Wang’s story doesn’t end here. He will go on to become a great merchant driven by hope and dreams. But for now, we will leave Wang by the window, observing the merchants before him.

It was a dark and cloudy night. The moon could barely be seen, and the stars were completely obscured by the thick clouds. Arman, a lone merchant, tugged the fabric under his hands tightly, urging the camel to hurry forward.

The coarse desert sand under his feet stuck onto his leg, the harsh night winds were a slap across his face. Keeping him awake, yet a bitter reminder of his sorry state. He didn’t dare stop to rest. Only pausing briefly to readjust the ropes around the camel’s back, securing the goods he was carrying with him. He was breathing heavily, his chest heaving up and down with significant effort. Silently cursing himself for misjudging the distance between the last rest stop and the upcoming caravanserais.

The long trek across the desert plains was taxing. Arman couldn’t believe it. So many experienced years traversing the same route, carrying goods from the previous merchant to the next. It first started as a desperate attempt at survival. He was young, looking for jobs near his hometown. He had travelled slightly farther that fateful night to a nearby trade hub of modest size and traffic, but it was enough. He began to learn the ropes. The unique geographic position of this place had allowed the people there to act as delegations for different merchants. The entire trade route was extremely long, spanning countries and all kinds of different climates. It would be insensible for one lone merchant or a single pack of traders to make the whole journey by themselves. Therefore, to relay the goods they carry and to get it to its destination, merchants simply hand the exports to the next, continuing on and on. The goods he carried were not of significant extravagance though, compared to the luxe spices, metals or jade of others. He thought he had nothing to worry about. After all, who would be so greedy?

From years of experience, Arman knew of the risks. The desert weather could be unforgiving, if not equipped properly, it was easy to die of hypothermia or heatstroke. But he had always relied on local towns or tribes, offering protection or a resting place for the night. That is, as long as he gets there before sundown.

One simple miscalculation. Arman berated himself. On these lone travels, Arman would spend time alone with his thoughts. Perhaps, just today, he should've stayed more aware.

Lost in his own mind, he didn't notice the growing shadows of sand dunes covering him and the ground he walked on. He only noticed, to his temporary relief, the lack of a chilling night gale. Eventually, the sand dunes evolved into harsh and rocky mountains. Yet, Arman remained oblivious. The arduous journey had melted his resilience and hope, slipping into the vast desert plains.

Suddenly, the flicker of torchlight in the far distance caught his eye. He rejoiced, *finally!* He had reached a local town, not quite the intended caravanserai he was looking for, but a last-minute change of course seemed to have done him well. It had brought him a resting place.

Tugging his companion camel along with him, he hurried his pace. Sight set on the blaze of the watchtower just in the distance. The town would later be identified as the ancient city of Kharanaq in Iran, but for now, that detail remains irrelevant. For no trader nor camel would ever reach the town tonight.

Arman's determined but desperate steps brought him deeper and deeper into the rugged terrain. It wasn't until the very moment when the tantalizing cackle of light vanished from his sight, concealed by a hill, did he realise the grave danger he had subjected himself to.

Almost immediately, he heard footsteps. Soft but rapid movements coming from somewhere above him. Like a snake in tall grass, ready to spring onto their prey at any moment.

Arman's eyes snapped back to focus, the sudden urge to flee rushed into him. Whatever mortal instincts left in him had taken the rear, he couldn't tear his eyes away from the long, long shadow of the steep hill looming over him.

From the dark shape on the ground, he could see sparse vegetation on top of the hill. A few dry bushes stuck out from its crest. Alongside it stood several men. Men who disappeared as quickly as Arman had caught sight of them.

His heartbeat began to race, a striking contrast to the numbness in his limbs. Be it from the cold or great fear, he never had time to consider. A chilling sensation prickled down his spine as his blood ran cold. His eyes began to water in spite of the dry atmosphere blanketing the land. His hands tightened around the fabric atop his camel's neck for the last time. He didn't urge it on anymore.

His camel cried out as the package on its back was ripped away from it. The bandits had snipped the ropes tied around the goods. Arman reacted just in time to regain his hold on his camel, yelling at the men. But all he got was a face full of fine desert sand just as he was tackled onto the ground. His eyes stung in pain, blinded by the intrusion into his eyes. He could only hear the poor cries of his camel, trying to fend off the bandits by itself. Gripping and digging into the coarse mixture of sand and small rocks, his wrists burned in pain when one of the bandits threw his whole weight onto him to hold him down.

Every attempt to fight back was in vain. If only he had been willing to shell out a bit of money to hire a guard to accompany him. If only he had been willing to spare some of his own earnings to take in an apprentice so he

wouldn't be alone. If only he had set off earlier, even if it meant losing a small number of customers. If only he could have reached the town quicker.

Initially, it was the preliminary desire to survive that set him on this path. It was the hope that he would one day make it with a comfortable lifestyle from his years of hard work. At that moment, he couldn't help but wonder if it was his greed that had led to his demise in the end.

Almost two thousand years later, the term 'Silk Road' was coined. It refers to a massive network of trade routes crossing most of Eurasia, where precious items such as silk, spices, horses, paper and all kinds of ideologies spread across the continent. Soon, the idea of a new Silk Road was born. A new infrastructure to facilitate economic development originating from China.

In addition, historians studied the Silk Road in depth. How the exchange of ideas and religion travelling down the Silk Road had transformed history. How the rise and fall of dynasties marked a significant shift in the Silk Road. All kinds of details that were once lost to time. The good, the bad. The glorious, the bloody. But no matter what, humanity kept pushing forward. Even after the Black Death spread through the Silk Road, humanity endured through all kinds of challenges. Holding on, even if they were hanging on by a thread. Perhaps it was driven by the innate desire to survive. Perhaps it was driven by hope that there would be a greater tomorrow.

The Silk Road wasn't just an exchange of goods and ideas, it was also an exchange of hope. A testament to hope. A witness of hope. An example of hope.

Till this day, the age-old tale of Pandora's box still holds true. All the greed, sickness and evils were released, but the world didn't end.

No matter the ills or worries, as long as we hold onto hope, we will continue to thrive again. Just like the Silk Road.

Tea for Thought? — The Ultimate Tea/Cha Fiasco

Kowloon True Light School, Wong, Hei Nam Kayce – 15

208 BCE

The urban peered at the road with distraught, knowing that *this* is the only way that he will obtain enough tael of silver to feed his family and appease the king in red. As his robes flew open with the wind gusting towards him, he gets ready for the perilous road ahead, a jug of water and heavy amounts of cha on his back for the delivery, and he had prayed to Guanyin for hopes of a smooth journey — he swallowed his saliva, and giddied up his camel, hoping that his supplies won't deplete midway.

The Han Dynasty was truly no saint to carriers like him, the fragrant *cha* weighing heavy bouts on his back, the alluring scent sadly being out of reach to him, even when he is thirsty and aching for flavour on his tongue, even when he has endured the arduous journey. He wonders how it tastes, if it smells this aromatic, surely it must be heavenly! He has heard of how it is supposed to be brewed, a slow, patient steep of the leaves, leaving a magnificently refreshing and nourishing taste. He imagines it would taste like the supposed salty air of the sea, however inlanders like him barely see the sea regardless, and he doesn't know if the 'salty air' is an exaggeration. Even so, as he has these cha leaves on his back, he must learn the way of the cha. To be patient and healthy.

His eyes flicker through the sites, he sees the Jiayuguan Pass from afar, the acres of desert stretching out before his eyes, blending into the setting sky with a soft yellow, the heat waves through his skin, as he starts feeling beads of sweat pooling. It is then that he meets a person; someone he doesn't quite recognise, and definitely not his recipient merchant.

This figure bolts towards him, and yells a string of words he can't quite comprehend, recognising only the sound of 'Si', which he guesses is silk.

He only then finds out that this must be a merchant on the go, people who hang around the Silk Road to buy their materials, as they did not have enough connections with countries as big as the Han Dynasty. However, he cannot stop the lingering fear in his mind, that this may be the violent tribe that resides near this road, that is responsible for the violence and theft which makes this job all the more valuable.

He feels his eyes widen, and he panics — "I only bear cha! cha! You know, cha!"

The man stops and furrows his brows in confusion, "Cha?" He repeats, as if testing the word on his tongue. Nonetheless, he pulls a hand gesture, signalling to open the bag, showing his own wool and fruits in return, as if a peace offering.

Ah! So this man is a wandering merchant! He had packed extra cha leaves in case of this situation, as whatever he gets from this transaction, he can keep for himself. He hurriedly opened his extra bag and showed him the cha leaves.

The figure stops and says, "Te! Te!"

Now he's confused. Te?

"No, cha!"

The man looks at him as if he is *stupid*.

"Te."

"Cha!"

“Te!”

“Cha!”

Their voices overlap with each other, as if a verbal battle. Finally, the figure pulls open his own, (albeit extremely small), bag of cha, and takes out a map alongside it.

“Te.” He says, as he points to an ocean from the map, his fingers trail from the sea to an outpost the urban assumes is his trading centre. He does not quite recognise where he is from.

He, in return, points to his own city, back in China.

The figure across from him widens his eyes, “Eh! Eh! Te!” He says as he points his fingers at where the other had pointed, reiterating that it was, yes, from China.

Now, he is all the more confused. Cha is from China! So it is called cha!

“Cha..”

The other looks at him like he has accepted defeat.

“Te.”

“...”

“...Cha.”

He closes his eyes, breathing in and out through his nose, and realises with this never ending interaction that he has truly learnt the way of the cha, having the patience to bicker with this non-constructive, incessant back and forth.

2025 AD

In the city lights and the bustling sea of people, two friends walk into a café. The walk was truly tiresome, having the two girls be tempted to go and order an uber for just a 10 minute walk up — but the 10 minute walk was on a slope! Entirely reasonable, right? One had even started praying to God (half-heartedly), to end this misery.

“Oh, look! There’s chai tea, let’s go get some!” She pointed to a shop nestled in between the crevices of the packed buildings, the dangling of the street lamp painting a soft, warm glow over the street. The menu was plastered on the brick walls of the establishment, clearly stating, “Chai Tea”, amidst a few other options for all to see.

Her friend looks at her in complete dismay and disgust. Now she’s confused. Clearly, she just wants to go sit down, have a nice, long sip of a drink and bask in the setting sun.

“It’s not chai tea, it’s just chai, or tea! You’re literally repeating the same word!”

“Oh whatever, chai tea, chai, tea, tomato tomato! It says chai tea on the menu anyways, what’s the big deal?”

“Stop saying chai tea!”

“Well stop aggravating me! The more you complain about it, the more I wanna say it. Chai tea, chai tea, chai tea!”

“Stop. Saying. Chai. Tea!”

“...Chai tea.”

The girl groans and puts her head in her hands. Truly, how uncultured!

*** *notes*

Tea was often traded via maritime or the land route like the Silk Road. Depending on which method was used, countries would receive the delicacy in two names. It was ‘Te’, if by the maritime route, or ‘Chai’ by the Silk Road.

The Silk Road

Kowloon True Light School, Wong, Yuen Lam Kelly – 15

1405 (14th century)

“Hey guys ready for the next stop?” asked Hao. “Absolutely dude, it’s the last stop for this trip. Then we can finally relax a bit.” Tan replied eagerly. “Yes, I can’t wait to go back!” Han added.

The treasure ships set off to India through South China Sea, past Southeast Asia, across the Indian Ocean.

Day 21

“I think we’re almost there, a few more days probably,” Han said, optimistic about their progress. “Great! Let’s just hope that nothing goes wrong and we arrive safely.” Hao stated.

That night the sky started howling, flickers of lightning flashes over the horizon. By the time they realised a storm was upon them, it was too late to turn the ship around.

“Hao, what do we do? We have no choice but to enter the storm!” Tan asked with his breath shaking. “Lash down the cargo, secure the deck equipment and the hatches. And most importantly hold onto something!” Hao exclaimed.

As the sky darkened, lightning across the sky illuminated the chaos below. The rain is pouring down in sheets, the thunder is getting louder, the waves are getting taller, crashing into the hull with a strong force. The unstable wind blows over, adding fuel to the tipping point of the ship as it is tossing and turning in every possible direction. Eventually, the ship capsizes, everyone knows this would happen, everyone accepts their fate as they drowned in the ocean.

“Land? Why can my feet touch the ground?” Tan wondered. Surrounded by cold sea water, he was too afraid to open his eyes but this doesn’t make sense. “Am I at the bottom of the ocean? Am I dead?” Muffled voices echo. “Ta–Tan..Tan lo–look..look.” Slowly he opened them and was revealed to be a sand road. Although there was nothing besides kelps and coral reefs lying around, still the unique colour and shade of the sand sets them apart from the rest, creating a mysterious path.

“Woah wait, what’s happening? I can breathe underwater? I can talk too! Woah hey can you hear me?” Han asked.

“Yea, oh my– what’s happening?”

“Relax Tan, the crew is behind us and everyone is fine at the moment. How are you doing?” Han asked again.

“I’m fine too. What should we do now?”

Looking up, they realized they were at the ocean’s floor, a daunting distance between them and the surface.

“I guess we would just have to follow this path right? That’s all we have.”

“But Hao, how can you rely on it? We don’t even know where it will lead us to!”

“Well luckily I have my magnetic compass with me and unlike you I can actually tell the direction. I think it is leading us to land, civilisation... I don’t know anything there is I guess”

“Ok then. Lead the way boss!”

With that they ventured down this unknown path. It started as empty as before, just a couple of muskgrass and sea lettuce until they saw gold coins on the sand but there were not any carvings of words, instead it was a portrait of a man. As they continued they saw glassware, Chinese silk, broken ceramics and porcelain, cotton textile scraps all scattered on the side of their route.

“Hey guys we didn’t have these on our ship. It must be products that are meant to be traded from other countries. See look at this wine bottle, it’s definitely not from us!” Tan said.

“Yes, which also means that we are close to civilization. Come on guys! Hang on! We have to get there!”

Day 22

“Are we seriously going to get there? We have been walking for a whole day and the road is still endless. We are never going to get there!” Han said.

“Have some faith. Every step counts. Every step is closer from us getting rescued so come on!” Hao encouraged.

Han grunted annoyingly. Just as he believed they would remain lost forever, he stumbled on something, but it's not anything like he has ever seen before. The texture of the thing is neither wood nor metal. Maybe a form of clay? It's sturdy but also can leave a dent on it when you use too much force. It is a smooth cylindrical piece with a narrow top, kind of like a bottle yet he couldn't find any words of its name.

“Guys... what's this?” Han asked, eyeing this newfound object.

“Yea we were about to ask the same thing. What is that?” Tan pointed ahead where a mountain of similar shapes and different sizes.

“Well I guess we now need to climb this thing, here goes nothing...” Tan sighed.

As they ascend, the water surface appears lower and lower. And finally they have reached the surface.

2025

What is all this? I have never seen it before. Everything is so different. People are wearing weird clothes and ridiculously large hats. There are also many chairs and colourful toys...

“Excuse me, would you help us contact the emperor? There had been a terrible storm on our way and unfortunately we have lost all our inventory. And can you also please tell him that we are very sorry. Thank you,” Hao asked.

“Is this some kind of cosplay you guys are doing? The outfits are so real though, where did you get them?” The girl replied.

“No, what is that word anyway? Just tell the emperor we are here and send backup.” Hao said in a very serious expression.

The girl looked confused and furrowed her brow as she walked away.

“That's not how you ask a favour. You scared her away. Let me do it.” Tan said

“Excuse me sir, would you mind telling us what day it is today?” Tan asked politely.

The stranger then pulled out a rectangular device and said, “Look it's 2:36 8th of February 2025.”

“Wait repeat it again, 20— what?”

“It is 2025.”

The Timeless Odyssey of the Silk Road: Where Threads Wove Worlds Together

Ning Po No.2 College, Tsang, Shi Wa – 18

In 87 CE, the Han Dynasty was at the height of its prosperity. Three people with different dreams stood at the gate of Chang'an, ready to start a journey along the Silk Road. They were Zhang Yao, a young trader; A Yi Mu, a local guide from Xinjiang; and Wang Xue Zhi, a curious ten-year-old boy. Their story would become a small but shining part of the Silk Road's long history.

Zhang Yao was a kind young man who lived with his aging mother. His small shop in Chang'an was filled with silk bolts woven with beautiful patterns of dragons, phoenixes and flowers. These silks were not just goods to him—they were his hope to earn enough money to let his mother live a comfortable life. For years, he had saved the best silks, waiting for the right chance to trade them in the Western lands. Yi Mu was born and raised near the Silk Road. She had walked the routes with her family since she was a child, so she knew every hill, every desert path and every hidden danger. Her eyes were sharp, and she could speak many languages, making her the perfect caravan guide. Xue Zhi was a boy who hated staying in one place. He had heard countless stories about the Silk Road—about distant cities, strange people and amazing treasures. So, when a caravan was set to leave the city at dawn, he secretly hid in a crate filled with tea leaves, ready for a new adventure.

Chang'an was a busy and lively city, a feast for all the senses. The markets were packed with merchants from every corner of the country. Silk traders shouted loudly, showing off fabrics in bright colors—red like fire, green like leaves, blue like the sky. The air was filled with the sweet smell of spices from India, mixed with the aroma of freshly baked flatbread and roasted lamb. Camel drivers yelled commands, and the clink of coins mixed with the laughter of children. Yi Mu moved through the crowd easily, bargaining with vendors for food and water, and asking about the latest news on the road—whether there were bandits hiding in the valleys or sandstorms coming. Xue Zhi peeked out from the tea crate from time to time, staring at the exotic goods around him: Roman glass beads that sparkled like stars, African ivory carvings and musical instruments he had never seen before. For him, Chang'an was wonderful, but the world beyond the city walls was even more tempting and desirable.

When the first light of the sun painted the sky pink, the caravan set off. It had fifty strong camels, each loaded with Han Dynasty's most precious things: silk, tea, porcelain and paper. With every step the camels took, their bells rang out, a soft and rhythmic sound that would follow them throughout the journey. Zhang Yao walked beside the lead camel, his hand resting gently on his best silk bolt. His mind was full of thoughts of his mother—hoping she was eating well, hoping she was not worried about him. Yi Mu rode a sturdy horse, her eyes scanning the horizon nonstop, looking for any signs of trouble.

On the second day of the journey, Xue Zhi was discovered. The caravan workers found him curled up in the tea crate, asleep. Everyone was surprised, and some wanted to send him back to Chang'an, but Yi Mu stopped them. She saw the curiosity and courage in the boy's eyes, eyes just like hers when she was young. So, she decided to take him under her wing. She set out to teach him how to feed the camels, how to tell directions by looking at the stars at night and how to say simple words in different languages to communicate with other travelers. As Chang'an's tall walls faded into the distance behind them, the landscape began to change, and, a few weeks later, Xue Zhi started to feel familiar with the caravan travelers. Aunt Yuan and Uncle Fang were so friendly to him, so he became accustomed to the caravan life under the warm atmosphere and tried to help around with small and easy tasks. The fertile farmlands had turned into dry grasslands, and before long, they reached the edge of the Taklamakan Desert—known by travelers as the "Sea of Death".

Crossing the Taklamakan Desert was the hardest part of the whole journey. The sand stretched as far as the eye could see, a golden sea that shimmered under the hot sun. Although it looked breathtaking and eye-catching, a peculiar and menacing atmosphere hung over the place. The heat was unbearable, burning their skin and drying their throats. They had to save every drop of water, drinking only a small sip at dawn and dusk. Sand got

everywhere—in their eyes, noses, ears and clothes. Even the strong camels stumbled under the sun, their steps getting slower and slower. After a few days, disaster struck. Without any warning, a sandstorm hit. The wind roared like a wild beast, and sand flew through the air like tiny stones, stinging their faces. The sky turned black, and they could not see anything in front of them. Yi Mu shouted loudly, telling everyone to huddle together behind the camels, and cover their mouths and noses with cloth to keep the sand out.

For hours, they sat there, trembling in the dark. Xue Zhi was so scared that he cried, clinging tightly to Yi Mu's cloak. Zhang Yao asked Aunt Liu to hold onto him anxiously and hastily too. Aunt Liu was a 45-year-old woman and she had curved eyes and always wore a warm smile on her face. Most surprisingly, Aunt Liu looked a bit like Zhang Yao's mother. Yi Mu closed her eyes and prayed silently to the gods of the road, promising to offer a big sacrifice if they could survive. The sandstorm seemed to last forever, but finally, the wind died down and the sun came out again. When they opened their eyes, they were shocked. The caravan was a mess—several camels were missing, and many supplies were buried under the sand. Luckily, everyone was alive. That was the most important and marvelous thing. As they dug through the sand to find their goods, Zhang Yao's hand touched something soft. It was his best silk bolt. He pulled it out, and to his surprise, it was still intact. The bright colors were as vivid as ever, not damaged by the sandstorm at all. And the most important thing was that Aunt Liu was safe and well. At that moment, Zhang Yao felt a surge of hope in his heart. No matter how hard the journey was, it would all be worth it.

After leaving the desert, the landscape changed again. The endless sand gave way to rocky plateaus, and soon, the towering Pamir Mountains came into view—called the “Roof of the World”. The air here got thinner and thinner, making it hard to breathe. The path became narrow and dangerous, barely a small ledge that dropped hundreds of meters down to the valley below. The rocks were covered with ice, making every step slippery. Yi Mu led the way carefully, her feet sure and steady. Zhang Yao walked behind her, holding Xue Zhi's hand tightly. The boy's small hands were cold and trembling, but he did not complain, gripping Zhang Yao's hand as if it was his lifeline.

They walked slowly through the mountains, and after several days, they reached a small village. The local herders were friendly, welcoming them with dried mangoes, longans and warm goat's milk. The taste was strange at first, but it warmed their cold bodies and lifted their spirits. The villagers had never seen silk before. They touched the soft fabric with surprise and joy, their eyes wide with wonder. In exchange for a small bolt of silk, the villagers gave them fresh water and told them about the next part of the road—warning them about a narrow valley where bandits often hid. Xue Zhi made friends with a boy his age in the village. The village boy taught him to play a flute made of wood, and the clear, sweet music echoed through the mountains. Even though they could not understand each other's words, they laughed and played together, their friendship bridging the gap between different languages and cultures.

As they continued their journey, they stopped at caravanserais—stone inns built specially for Silk Road travelers. These inns were lifelines in the wilderness, offering shelter from the wind and rain, a place to rest and a chance to trade with other caravans. The caravanserai in Bukhara was the busiest one they had ever seen. Traders from all over the world gathered here: Persians selling spices and colorful carpets, Indian monks sitting together talking about Buddhism, and Roman merchants looking to buy silk. The air was filled with the smell of roasted meat and incense, and the sound of different languages—Chinese, Persian, Greek, Latin—mixed together like a lively song.

Zhang Yao was excited to trade his silk. He bartered his finest bolts for Persian saffron and Roman glass, his heart racing as he talked to merchants who had traveled as far as he had. Yi Mu sat with other guides, sharing stories about their journeys—exchanging tips about safe routes and places where bandits were most active. Xue Zhi ran around the caravanserai, his eyes wide with curiosity. He watched artisans make exquisite pottery, their hands moving skillfully to shape clay into beautiful bowls and plates. He also saw weavers making textiles with patterns he had never seen before. Then, he made a surprising discovery: the people in the West still wrote on parchment and papyrus, not paper. He took a piece of paper from the caravan and showed a village scribe how to write on it. The scribe was amazed, calling paper a “gift from the gods”. At that moment, Xue Zhi finally understood—the Silk Road was not just about trading goods. It was about sharing ideas and knowledge, things that could change people's lives forever.

But the Silk Road was not always full of friendly meetings and happy discoveries. Danger was never far away. One evening, as the caravan was passing through a narrow valley, they were ambushed by bandits. The bandits were armed with swords and bows, their faces fierce. They shouted loudly, demanding all the caravan's goods, and threatening to hurt everyone if they refused. Zhang Yao stepped forward immediately, his hands clenched into fists. He was ready to fight to protect his silk and his friends. But Yi Mu pulled him back. She knew that fighting would only lead to bloodshed, and no one would win. So, she walked to the bandits calmly and spoke to them in their own language. She told them that the caravan had little gold, but carried silk that was more valuable than any treasure. She offered them a few bolts of silk—not as a surrender, but as a gesture of goodwill. She promised that when the caravan came back from the West, they would bring more silk to trade with them. The bandits looked at each other, hesitating. They knew that a caravan that could come back again and again was more valuable than robbing it once. So, they agreed to let the caravan pass. This moment taught everyone a valuable lesson: courage is not just about fighting. It is about being wise, and finding common ground even with your enemies.

After months of hard travel, they finally reached Samarkand—a city of legendary beauty, a crossroads where the East and West met. The markets in Samarkand were even more vibrant than Chang'an's. Stalls were filled with Chinese silk, Indian spices, Persian carpets and Roman jewelry, all shining under the sun. The city's mosques and palaces were stunning, with walls decorated with intricate tile work in shades of blue and gold, like something out of a dream. The people of Samarkand welcomed them warmly. They had heard about China's silk and paper for a long time, and were eager to trade. Zhang Yao sold most of his silk there, earning enough money to support his mother for the rest of her life. But he kept a small bolt for himself, a reminder of this amazing journey. Yi Mu was overjoyed to reunite with her family—they had moved to Samarkand years ago, while she had stayed with her grandmother in Xinjiang. Xue Zhi wandered through the city's fountains and gardens, his mouth hanging open in surprise. The gardens were filled with flowers he had never seen before, and the fountains sprayed water high into the air, sparkling in the sun. It was like a fairyland.

In Samarkand, they made many new friends: a Persian poet who wrote beautiful verses about the Silk Road, a Chinese monk who was traveling to India to study Buddhism, and a Roman scholar who was eager to learn how to make paper. They sat together every night, sharing meals and stories. Xue Zhi listened carefully, and he realized something important: no matter where people came from, they all had the same hopes and fears. They all hoped for a better life, feared the unknown and missed their homes.

As the days passed, homesickness began to creep into everyone's hearts. Zhang Yao often sat under the stars at night, thinking of his mother. Fortunately, Aunt Liu always played an indispensable role in accompanying him along the journey, so when Zhang Yao started to miss his mother, he always chatted with Aunt Liu and leaned against her side. Yi Mu missed her childhood, where she had run free with her tribe, played with her friends, and tasted every single palatable meal cooked by her skilled grandmother. Xue Zhi cried for his parents sometimes, especially when he saw other children with their families, but he understood that sometimes he needed to be independent and tough if he wanted to travel around and see the world. While they all missed home, they also felt grateful for all the amazing things they had seen and experienced. With all the cultural exchange, they had learned to adapt to new customs: eating with their hands in Indian villages for experiencing another country's unique culture, taking off their shoes before entering Persian mosques for respecting religious rituals and bowing to Roman nobles. They had learned new words and phrases, and made friends with people from different cultures. They realized that cultural differences were not barriers—they were bridges, opportunities to broaden their horizons with communication and exchange of ideas. The Silk Road had taught them that the world was much bigger than they had ever imagined, and that all humans were connected by kindness and curiosity.

After a whole year in the West, the caravan finally began its journey back to Chang'an. They loaded their camels with new treasures: spices from Persia, glass from Rome, gold from distant lands. But they also carried something more valuable—new ideas. They brought back Buddhism, which would soon spread across China; mathematical concepts from India that would help Chinese scholars make new discoveries; and agricultural techniques from Persia that would improve farming in China. They also carried stories—stories of cities with golden domes, mountains that touched the sky and people who laughed and cried just like them. On the way back, they passed through the same deserts and mountains they had crossed before. But this time, they saw them differently. The deserts and mountains were no longer just obstacles to overcome. They were part of their journey, part of the

memories they would carry with them forever. Xue Zhi was no longer the scared little boy who had hidden in a tea crate. He was a brave young explorer who had seen the world. Zhang Yao was no longer just a trader chasing profit. He was a messenger of cultural exchange. Yi Mu was no longer just a guide. She was a bridge between the East and the West.

The Silk Road that Zhang Yao, A Yi Mu, Wang Xue Zhi traveled has long since disappeared. Camels no longer walk the ancient routes, and caravanserais are now ruins, silent reminders of the past. But the legacy of the Silk Road lives on, even in the modern world. Today, the Belt and Road Initiative has brought back the spirit of the ancient Silk Road. It connects countries across Asia, Europe and Africa through new railways, ports and trade agreements.

The ancient Silk Road changed the world in ways that no one could have imagined. It brought the East and West closer, breaking down barriers of distance and culture long before the word “globalization” was invented. Silk from China transformed fashion in Rome, making it a symbol of wealth and luxury. Paper from China revolutionized education and communication in the West, making it easier for people to share knowledge. Buddhism from India enriched Chinese philosophy, adding new ideas and ways of thinking. Spices from India and Persia changed the way people cooked across Eurasia, making food more flavorful and delicious. Astronomy and the calendar of ancient Greece would help the development of Chinese astronomy. But the Silk Road was not just about goods. It was about ideas, beliefs, art and science. It taught the world that cultural exchange is not a threat—it is a strength. When people from different lands come together, they create something greater than the sum of their parts. It taught us that adventure and risk are worth taking, that the unknown is not something to fear but something to explore. It taught us that homesickness is a sign of love, and that friendship can transcend languages and borders.

What can we learn from the Silk Road today? In a world that is often divided by conflict, prejudice and misunderstanding, the Silk Road offers a powerful lesson: connection is the key to progress. The ancient travelers of the Silk Road did not see each other as strangers or enemies. They saw each other as fellow humans, bound by the same desire to trade, learn and connect. They knew that no single civilization has all the answers, that everyone has something to teach and something to learn. Today, as we face global challenges like climate change, poverty and pandemics, we need the spirit of the Silk Road more than ever. We need to work together across borders and cultures, share our knowledge and resources, and build bridges instead of walls. We need to remember that just as a single bolt of silk could connect China to Rome, a single act of kindness can connect people across the world.

Thankful

Po Leung Kuk Choi Kai Yau School, Chen, Jasmine – 16

New tales were supposed to happen, but I could not resist leaving you unattained along the silk road, so I held you, dearly. Like a spider clinging to his monopoly of thread. The silk road indeed brought us feasts, which I'm beyond thankful for, but the bubonic disease carried afar and left something more sorrowful than misery to us both. For me, mentally, and you, physically. We were two hearts yearning for survival, until he had trouble with breathing, that's when I knew the war was more than amidst intended knowledge, and pure yearning was no longer a valid solution.

Ponding hearts, wrenching hands, droplets of our velvet-ly cold yet hot blood dripping down the ground in coarseness.

I closely held you near my heart located on the left, trying to grab on tightly. For I did not want you to close your eyes near my sight. Apart from the drips of blood, they were mixed with sizzling fire from the candle at the corner. Since the room was empty, the frail crackle sounded stentorianly loud. The candle's light flame lightened up your body, as if rekindling your dying heart. The orange and red from the fire brought a radiant glow to your pale skin, as if a patronus. Your eyes could barely open, but you still looked handsome, the sole light coming from your half closed eyes flickered and dazzled me. How ironic, how the lifeless brought life to the alive, maybe because the shine from the fire radiated on you. I could not help but crease for your pale, yet soft skin. I brushed my fingers along your pitch black hair, leaned in for your cleansed skin which was once bloody, and...

Ding!

The sudden ring from the door tore our silence in the tumultuous flames apart, the candle immediately quenched from the loud ring. I carefully put you down on the pillow and went to catch the door.

A pleasantly dressed soldier showed up, he was holding a basket of goods.

"Hello, delivery here, is this Mr Huang's?"

I was abruptly stunned for a second, I turned to face my husband. He was laying on the pillow I put him on, his half-opened eyes seemed blank.

"Hello.. uhm.. Yes, that is me." I responded.

"Alright then, here's your package." The man handed me the basket of goods, and left.

I was still left shocked.

My husband didn't have the strength to open his mouth, silence and enfeeblement confined him. Despite this, he managed to get up, slowly. "Open it, dear." He let out a painful cough as he delivered these three words. Honestly, I really didn't have a clue about the sudden "abundance. In fact, I was paranoid, what if this was a scam from someone, containing some kind of virus that would poison BOTH my husband and I into the deadly plague. I could only feel sweats coming out from me at this point, I felt rather useless. I loved my husband, but at that time I thought my condition was worse than him, I was worse than a merely physically fragile male.

For a moment, I could tell something was definitely wrong.. No, I actually could not tell what I was doing anymore. The candle and warm sense of aroma that embraced my husband, who was looking at me with pleading puppy eyes, turned into the stare of a snake. Recalling was getting hard for me, and all I could focus on were the goods my sweaty palms were holding like a gift from god. But no, it could not be from God if it were to be something evil.

A paradox was contradicting my loss of thoughts, or rather the abyss of a pitiful, crumbled mess, as lack or loss were certainly not the words to describe such a mess.

Your candle disarmed from the triumph of glory, you no longer seem like the man I adored and kept dearly in my soul, even if you've called me dear just now. A thick sense of black strands fabricated from my soul to the extent of my whole body, something ominous, surrounding the arc of me, needless shadows encompassed my

being, I now felt like the sick one. The bubonic plague has got to me, is it? I could not tell, I could not tell anything,

My husband was still looking at me, who had horror deemed from my two eyes, but at that moment, I could only feel hostility.

“Open it, dear.” A soothing voice advocated. His voice echoed and brought me back to life, horror remained but embraced among my fearful body instead. The imagery was that the shadows and voices encompassing me turned into flowery ghosts that appeared in mythical gracious tales.

He took the job for me, it seemed like he was sick no more. An angel was what he seemed to me. He leaned and reached out to me, grabbing the bundle of goods. Slowly and steadily, he untied the silk ribbon attached to the box, it was a bowl. A pink bowl, that seemed to be glowing, somehow more radiant than how my husband with the dazzling glow on his skin from the candle, when he looked at me as we transcended intimacy before the man interfered with us.

“Open it, dear.” He guided me once again. I obeyed him,

And, what I saw was so ordinary, it was *special*.

A bowl of porridge.

In the new tales of China's silk road, things would spread contagiously, and for this time. I know that although there may be the bubonic plague, goods would still be delivered within humanity's interconnected hearts.

The Flowing Silk

Po Leung Kuk No. 1 W.H. Cheung College, Kong, Yi Ching Gabriella – 15

Silk is not only a kind of fabric which is known for its flexibility and softness, but it also symbolizes the paths that were taken by the traders and the connection between different countries. In 138 BC, Zhang Qian laid the foundation for the Silk Road. Since then, there has been a dynamic expansion of trade along the Silk Road, and the stories of bonds and discoveries between countries and a tale of a courageous girl also began.

Orchid was a daughter of a merchant. She moved back and forth between towns along the Silk Road with her father and her father's caravan since she was small. She practised negotiating business deals and had strong adaptability. However, Orchid always murmured, 'What's the purpose of learning foreign languages? Don't you know I'm tired of learning Sogdian and Turkic? There aren't numerous translators in the world.' But then, her father would explain to her patiently and tell her that learning others' languages not only benefited the trading of goods but also boosted the exchange of cultures.

One day, Orchid's father told Orchid that the caravan would set off the following week and asked whether she would come as the journey included not only trading, but also an extension of the trade route by walking towards the west for three more days after they arrived at Bukhara, which would be gruelling and filled with mysteries. Young and exuberant, Orchid agreed immediately.

On the way, walking along the Taklamakan, everyone was sweating under the blazing sun. With a surge of curiosity, Orchid asked her father the reason that he was willing to bring her along the caravan and the purpose of extending the trade route while she was riding on a camel. He thought for a while and answered, 'I wholeheartedly believe that taking you to different places could broaden your horizons and that you could also take a bold step. Everyone does have a different perspective on the unknown, but from my perspective, apart from the profit of trading, boosting the exchange of cultures can connect people from different countries. You can get along with more people and gain insights.'

Orchid asked, 'It sounds meaningful. But don't you think this is a bit risky?'

'You won't mind whether it's risky or not if you're truly passionate about it. Sometimes, we may come with different kinds of ideas, they could be strange, meaningful or even silly. More importantly, we can simply follow our hearts.' Orchid's father replied and gave a soft chuckle.

The wind blew. Orchid shook her head and mumbled, 'Perhaps, I may figure it out in the future.'

With an oasis in sight, the caravan knew that they had arrived at their first transaction location, Samarkand, and everyone was over the moon. When they first arrived, a bejewelled woman came up and asked Orchid, 'I like your dress and its flora pattern on it. It's really gorgeous! How did you make it?'

Orchid replied delightedly and proudly, 'Thank you. My mother is a tailor. The embroidery of flowers, which is orchids, is also made by her. This fabric is called silk which is made from a thread produced by silkworms.'

'Worms? It sounds a bit disgusting,' said the woman.

'Absolutely not! Feel it, isn't it soft? We are merchants from China, and we sell silk, tea and jade. Would you like to have a look? Let me introduce them to you,' replied Orchid.

After a while, Orchid's father walked towards Orchid briskly and told her an important message delightedly, 'Great news, my dear! Some locals told us that there was a place called "Antioch" on the western edge of the land. Many years ago, some Chinese merchants reached there. I think you had better pack all your belongings now as the caravan will set off soon.' Orchid was literally bowled over by the news, feeling excited.

On the way to the west, 'Well, everything runs smoothly on this trip, just like that,' Orchid said with a touch of confidence in the path to the west.

'Nonsense! Couldn't it be the lull before the storm?' a merchant said in an irritable voice. The air went awkward but suddenly a gang of robbers surrounded and robbed the caravan, and Orchid was separated with her father in the melee. Soon the crowd was caught at the brigand camp.

In the brigand camp, being female singled Orchid out from the crowd. The leader of the robbers asked, 'Why are you here, young lady?'

Orchid kept silent. He asked Orchid again, 'Don't you know there're only two paths for the females? Muddy servants or heiresses, but mostly the former ones. If you surrender to me, I may leave you to be a servant, otherwise...'

Orchid spat right in the leader's face and screamed, 'Surrender to a rule, worthless and despicable robber? Ridiculous!'

The leader of the robbers went raged and yelled, 'This bold lady is lippy but has a good look. Send her out and traffic her to the market now!'

The robbers held Orchid captive and planned to send her away the next day. In the gloomy dungeon, everywhere was covered with cobwebs and dust. Orchid was nauseated by the funky smell, and felt a sense of despair, but she didn't regret what she had done or what she had decided. A boy, who was carrying a plate of bread, approached Orchid's cage surreptitiously and asked stealthily, 'Who're you? How dare you talk to the leader like that? Aren't you afraid of death?'

Orchid rolled her eyes and turned away.

Bedouin continued, 'I'm Bedouin, the son of an adventurer. A few years ago, my father and I decided to travel to a place called "China". Unfortunately, my father was killed, and I was made a servant. Maybe I could help if you tell me something about you?'

At that moment, Orchid burst into tears, whispered with tears in her eyes and told him about what she had encountered.

Orchid asked suspiciously, 'Why would you like to help me?'

'Firstly, I heard that there will be a riot tomorrow and many guards will be allocated to the main entrance for the defence tonight from the gossip. Therefore, it's a great chance to escape. Secondly, I was influenced by your ambition and daring.' Orchid smiled.

Up until the wee hours, Bedouin kept his promise. He unlocked the cage with a stolen key. They climbed up the spiral staircase sneakily. When they reached the surface of the ground, Orchid soaked up the fresh air and Bedouin was already on the horse. Bedouin shouted, 'Hurry up!'

'Shh, why are you talking so loudly? Are you trying to alert the guards?' whispered Orchid.

Hanging by a thread, Orchid was pulled up and got on the horse. Bedouin yelled with indescribable excitement, 'We did it!' 'Yes, we did it and it's unbelievable! But...'

Orchid replied and her voice trailed off suddenly. At that moment, Orchid was a bit wavering about her future due to the accident on this journey. Bedouin slightly noticed her subtle change in mood and whispered softly, 'Maybe you could simply follow your heart.' A gentle breeze cooled Orchid, but then she realized persistence and adaptability made her nearly indestructible.

Many days later, the sun rose slowly above the horizon, Orchid was home. As Orchid crossed the threshold, she was greeted by a wonderful smell of flowers. She glanced around. Nothing seemed to be changed, only the door looked shrunk as Orchid grew taller. A woman was passing the garden and Orchid yelled, 'Mother!' The woman looked up and saw her. Both rushed towards each other, embracing, and tears streamed down their faces.

Orchid's mother said, 'I'm sorry that you had such a difficult journey.' 'Well, although it was arduous, I think I've gained a lot from it. By the way, did dad come back?' asked Orchid.

Instantly, Orchid knew that her father was dead when she noticed her mother sigh sorrowfully. At first, Orchid was heartbroken as she loved her father and took a leaf out of his book. But soon, with the purpose of extending the Silk Road to boost the exchange of cultures and aiming to go after her dream of being a merchant, Orchid announced that she would inherit all her father's business even though she knew that there would be many dissenting voices.

At the beginning, many people underestimated Orchid. Indeed, it was hard to believe that a lady, who was only about twenty years old could have any accomplishments. Once, when Orchid was trading with foreign merchants, some of them tried to humiliate her. However, soon, they were all impressed by Orchid's aspiration, infinite perseverance and proficiency in different foreign languages. Orchid's trading career started from leading a caravan of only a few people to hundreds of merchants, and it was onwards and upwards. Besides, her caravan achieved a great success on the extension of the Silk Road that they reached to countries which were further than Bukhara and Samarkand, such as Antioch and Tyre. Orchid showcased her resourcefulness in overcoming appalling weather and treacherous terrain.

Years later, leaves turned yellow and autumn arrived. Orchid put forward the plan of the maritime silk road in light of the recent development of shipbuilding. At the start, all the preparations were well-oiled, but two weeks before the departure of the maritime caravan, Orchid heard through a grapevine that the route that they had planned might take them right across the pirate-infested waters, which caused Orchid to be completely distressed. At the same time, Bedouin finished travelling around China and came to visit Orchid. When Orchid greeted Bedouin at the door, a momentary look of anxiety passed across her face, Bedouin knew that Orchid was hiding something.

'What's your concern?' asked Bedouin.

'The safety concern! Do you think I can ignore it and put the other merchants at risk? Or shall I act as an innocent bystander when an accident really happens?' questioned Orchid in a snippy voice.

Bedouin yelled, 'Hold your horses! The problem won't be solved if you put the blame on me. Orchid, you are talented, tough and passionate. Therefore, you should also remind yourself to be detached from reality, consider objectively, and follow...'

'And follow your heart.' Orchid continued, 'I know what I shall do now, thanks for your reminder! Sorry, I shall go now and find back my "silk".' After the meeting with her old friend, Orchid got back her determination and enthusiasm. She then notified the merchants about the risks of the maritime silk road and recounted the number of participants.

Right on the day of the departure, it was a bit cold. At dawn, everyone was on board, Orchid was reading the participation list and marking the attendance, and a crisp breeze brushed on her cheek. Although Orchid was sanchor; nervous and her heart was as heavy as an anchor, as the ship weighed the anchor, she knew that she was ready for keeping her nose to the grindstone and the extension of the magical Silk Road.

Most merchants would look at the Silk Road as a trade route, but there was still a small portion among them who might regard it as a valuable opportunity for exchanging cultures. Many of them, like Orchid and her father, were willing to help expand the Silk Road even though they had to bear risks, which also shows that those

merchants played an important role in the development of the Silk Road. Furthermore, it is believed that even though the Silk Road has turned into the Belt and Road Initiative, the story and the development of this road will still be continued just as long as silk exists in the foreseeable future.

The City

Po Leung Kuk No. 1 W.H. Cheung College, Lam, Sheung Chit – 16

There is no silk on the Silk Road.

To understand how this came to be, we must fixate our gaze upon a bustling metropolis located on the east end of the Silk Road.

Dusk loomed. A legion of masked men riding their ivory-white horses penetrated the desert with haste and flamboyance.

A lone traveller took refuge in a small nook between two rocks. Unfortunately, his movement caught the attention of the bandits, who ransacked him for all he was worth. He immediately passed out, but was later rescued by a squad of patrolling soldiers.

Later on, the young boy, anachronistic in demeanor, attire, complexion, or anything for that matter, found himself sauntering down the ever-familiar alleyways of Chang'an.

Calvin would drift through the wee hours of the day like a mastless ship. Hazy recollections of cavalry in shining armour would float by, coupled with the enigmatic image of an old priest, who hadn't even the ghost of an eyelash.

The words "SILK CAPACITOR MISSING" undulated across a device screen. He sighed. "No silk on the Silk Road! What sort of lazy joke is this? I can't believe this is how I'm stuck 1000 years into the past."

The avenues intersected like arabesque. Redolent fragrances of saffron and rosemary wafted through the air, revitalizing the dreary crowds, where an incessant murmur of bartering and haggling lingered so long as the sun shone overhead.

He maneuvered through the throng, twisting and turning between the textile shops displaying arrays of delicately knitted garments—yet no silk. A disdainful frown rose to his complexion. Again.

In the corner of his eye, a gargantuan temple faded into view. Its extravagant facade was supplemented with geometrical precision. Sharp contours, crimson drapes and golden windows—a fitting home for a powerful person. Someone who could give him an answer.

A burly gentleman stood near the top of the stairs with impeccable posture. He wore a robe of multifarious colours and donned a fabulous, yet extremely elongated hat. Even so, his silence carried more volume than most people's screams.

"Strange traveller. You come from afar. Brilliance, radiating from your pores. You have endeavoured on a quest, I assume?" the man spoke with a sonorous voice.

"Yes—that's true," replied Calvin, squeakish in comparison. "I need some silk." "Your journey would have concluded long ago."

"It's just that every time I—"

"Come closer, and remember this by heart."

Lands of silk, blossom and wilt,

Cities of stone and marble we built.

With sweat and tears, our kingdom glorious,

We stand firm in the face of Boreas.

Hunters on horseback, silently attack,

Traces unkempt, none we could track.

*Silk they steal and land they plunder,
In their wake they rend realms asunder.
Against white garbs of frightful night,
Muster your courage and your might!
So wield your sword by guard and hilt,
Then remember this tale of shame and guilt!*

"It is a tragic tale. They are maddened, but ultimately unstoppable. Cities have bent to their will. I do not expect them to bend to yours."

"I'll prove that I'm strong enough. I'm worthy of wearing silk as much as they are!"

The sage ruffled his long grey beard. He stared into Calvin's eyes discerningly. He hadn't seen a youngster of such confidence in a long time.

"Tenacity alone is insufficient. You must also possess wisdom," he said.

"Wisdom, you say? I've got plenty. I've heard of a tyrannical ruler who strategically uses his offspring to conquer his enemies. As a result, he'll dominate the majority of Asia and then set his sights on the world."

The dimmest light glowed in the sage's pupils. "Tell me more," he said with anticipation.

"Soon after, a terrible plague will befall the world, stunting every type of trade along the Silk Road. Civilizations will crumble. Nations will collapse. The fate of humanity lies in the balance."

"Oh dear! Is there a remedy for this? The trembling in your voice—there is no doubt that what you say is true."

"I must retrieve silk from the Hunters' grasps. It's the only way we escape our dismal fate," Calvin proclaimed. "I also require your guidance, so that our venture to the west is conducted smoothly with haste."

"If it means saving humanity, then I accept! I must endure trials and tribulations for the greater good. It is the epitome of my life's work" The sage fanatically extended his hand to Calvin, who shook it just as enthusiastically.

The Road

Furiously burned the sun at noon. Under its radiance, the sandstone city was laminated by a golden veil. Its citizens hadn't the slightest idea that their leader would embark on a perilous odyssey with a random teenager.

With the assistance of servants galore, they loaded heaps of supplies onto the caravan, alongside some local specialties which would prove useful for trading. They were also granted an albino horse—the rarest of its kind—then set off.

Woosh went the caravan as it drifted past the city gates and into nature's bosom. Waves of sand dunes inundated the barren desert, while a serpentine path parted the land.

Their sojourn met its first roadblock in a tiny nomadic settlement, where a stray flock of sheep had rammed into the caravan, dislodging one of its wheels. They stopped to examine the damages—hardly fatal, but they'd rather settle down for the night and finish the repairs tomorrow.

The sheep herders welcomed them with overflowing vitality, bartering heaps of fresh beef and wool just for a few Chinese specialties. Despite their nomadism, they had a keen eye for pottery and jade. The former, the product of delicate craftsmanship and masterful smithing. The latter, a shimmering gemstone signifying good fortune— a perfect fit for the superstitious.

Calvin broke away from the avarice brought by the sage's skillful bartering. Instead, he would scour the tribe for information about silk. He soon came across a young girl playing alone at the back of a tent.

"What're you playing with?" Calvin asked, pointing at the bundle of strings in her hands.

"It's silk!" she replied. "Mom and Dad gave it to me for my birthday. They said that if I learn how to weave silk, I'll grow up to be a beautiful woman and find a rich husband."

"Let me have a look," Calvin gently fondled the strings. Their texture was ostensibly fine and smooth, but it was far from the real deal. But to play his cards right, he couldn't afford to point out her mistake.

"It really is silk!" he exclaimed. "You'll grow up to be very beautiful, indeed."

The girl looked away, covering her mouth as she smiled. Calvin saw this as the perfect opportunity.

"Speaking of silk, have you heard about the Silk Hunters?"

"No." she stated bluntly.

"I've heard that they've pillaged others for their silk. So I assume your village hasn't been invaded by them?"

Staring emptily at the bloodstained tracks in the sand, she made no reply. Ominous shadows of that dreadful day emerged in their place.

Calvin immediately felt a guilty conscience creeping up to him. Right as he was about to apologize, she spoke.

"No, not yet. I—I don't know. You can... ask the others, I guess," she stammered. "We should get going, follow me. There's a gathering tonight."

The endless vigil of night came to a dramatic closure as dance and song filled the air. Circling the bonfire's incandescent glow, they shared myths and legends of yore. All the while they feasted and gulped to their hearts content.

Returning to their tents, Calvin collapsed onto the soft grass, feeling more satisfied than ever.

"I'm glad you're travelling with me. It gets hard sometimes, you know, being alone with your own thoughts—" said Calvin. "Surely you feel the same way."

The sage nodded, resting his head on his shoulder. "Indeed. People flock to me for advice. Friendship, wealth, love... their questions have no end. I implore them to seek answers on their own, but it only makes me appear wiser.

"Why's that?"

"Silkworms, my child. They wrap themselves in layers and layers of silk to form cocoons, finally metamorphosing into beautiful moths. I merely spew out silk. But we all know that real change starts from the little worm—the silk only acts as protection."

"The only truth is that you are extremely wise!" he chuckled.

"You flatter me!" the sage continued. "This trip has been quite silent, don't you think?"

"All the better," joked Calvin. "The sooner we get that silk, the better... why are you looking at me like that?"

The sage paused. He clutched himself in the chest, casting his gaze away from Calvin. He rectified his look immediately.

"Yes, you're right. I'm exhausted. I shall rest now."

Calvin followed suit, though the sage's peculiar tone and cadence raised a few hairs. He mused on it as long as he could focus, which came out to be around ten seconds.

The Sandstorm

They set off in high spirits, invigorated by the blazing sun. Their hosts had dextrously repaired the caravan while they were sleeping; it was now in better shape than it was before! It continued its endless trek towards the West.

Captivated by the awe-inspiring mountain ranges to the north, they felt the week-long journey slipping through the sands of time.

From town to town they hopped, hoping to find tiny traces of silk, but to no avail. The device, unhelpfully, remained kaput, while Calvin's stomach kept rumbling.

They made themselves at home in Kazakhstan, Iraq and Syria, gracefully immersing themselves in their vibrant culture. Of prayers, hymns and oaths; of food, drinks and etiquette; of greetings, proverbs and goodbyes.

Yet the journey felt incomplete. The experiences they'd acquired along the way were diminutive compared to the fleeting reverie of silk, presenting itself as some priceless treasure they'd be promised at the end of the road.

Barren, parched land off the southern edge of a massive lake. Too remote for timely assistance. Too close for isolation. The caravan had reached a treacherous location.

As the two looked out of the caravan, blocky silhouettes had cast onto the covering linen, growing in size as they stooped closer.

Their horse bleated and halted in its tracks. No further could it continue. A pair of steel jaws clamped down on the horse's pale legs. Pairs of shadows encroached through the sands. That trademark silver garb... it must be them!

The Silk Hunters.

Their garbs rustled in the howling winds. The leader of the bunch, who boasted another gilded coat and a dozen ruby amulets, slithered snakelike towards the immobile wagon. Crisply he split the covers, revealing the pair of terror-stricken adventurers huddled up in the corner.

"Hello, travellersss," snickered the bandit. "I love how your horsse looksss— ssay... iss he made of... sssilk?" He acquired this lisp by enunciating the word "silk" too many times.

"N—n—no," replied the sage, trembling. "It's a rare breed exclusively—"

Calvin signalled the sage to remain silent. "You couldn't be more correct! It's made of the finest, purest silk there is."

In a flash, the bandits surrounded the horse, then restrained it with four pairs of heavy chains, one for each leg. It let out a terrified weal, frantically galloping in all directions, but its resistance soon faltered. The bandits triumphantly towed the toiled animal to the back of the line.

"Thank you for your patronage, gentlemen!" chuckled the bandit, now pointing a sharp dagger at them. "I sssuppose you won't excusse me then, for taking a few more ssshare of your inventory? My men are tired, you ssee, and you two don't require much maintenance anyway."

The bandits barged into the disjointed wagon, each taking a fraction of their hard-earned supplies. Powerless to resist, Calvin's cheeks grew crimson like the fiery mesa. The sage, meanwhile, languished calmly, his countenance betraying not one symptom of fright.

The Mirage

The process was swift and merciful. What remained in the caravan were two despondent travellers.

"What do we do now?" cried Calvin. "They just t—t—took all our stuff and left... just like that. Why didn't you pick a safer path? And... how come you look completely unfazed by this?"

"Life is like a flowing river—"

Calvin groaned. "Quit repeating those weird phrases! Can't you recognize the situation we're in? Our horse's gone, our cart's destroyed, our food's stolen... What plans do you have now, huh? Are you just gonna sit this one out, like you always do?"

The sage hushed, then answered.

"We never step in the same river twice. We have to keep moving—it's unfortunate, but that's the mechanism of this world! I sympathize with your anguish and turmoil. But our courses aren't predetermined! Change originates from us!"

The sage inched closer.

"Learn from the silkworm, my child. Most of them have their silk harvested before they can develop into moths. But does that mean we should stop growing, just because someone will take advantage of us? No! We must keep going."

Although skeptical at first, a healthy color gradually returned to Calvin's face, and the bubbling notions in his head began to subside. He eventually came to terms with the current setback—disastrous, but not sempiternal.

"You're right," sighed Calvin. "Sorry for lashing out like that."

"You are forgiven. Yet we must continue down this trail. Do you still have the map with you?"

"The map?" He opened his backpack, dug into his pockets, but found no trace of it. "Oh no, I think I've lost it!"

"Don't fret. I'll lead the way. I have vivid memories of these desolate dunes—I was raised in a small village not far away, but I fled to the east because of a gruelling war."

And so they braved the final miles of their odyssey on foot, persevering despite the crippling aches that shot up from the soles of their feet. Amid the brutal sandstorms, glimmers of populated cities would materialize beside oases, but we know all too well that those are mirages.

Calvin was submerged in thought.

"Why, why, not even the profaned Silk Hunters, named after the fabric they're so notorious for stealing, wear it as an accessory? Surely they'd accidentally leave traces behind—if only I'd kept pursuing them."

In the earliest hours of dawn did they arrive at a slumbering village bordering two gigantic cities, whose facades one could easily recognize miles away. The sage examined Calvin with an inquisitive look, but was met with equal scrutiny.

"Here, of all places," Calvin scoffed. "Even a raccoon could tell that nobody lives here."

"Throughout our journey, I've been searching to and fro for silk, so that we can—you know, save humanity and all that; but you've been utterly apathetic, as I've observed. What changed?"

"You humour me, Calvin. You should be well aware of the truth!" said the sage, vexingly. "But you're a terrible liar—you lied to me from the very start. That's why you don't deserve silk at all."

"What? When have I lied?" exclaimed Calvin. "You're the one who led me on this journey, then got me into that scuffle with the Hunters, then led me to this deserted village! Tell me, when have I lied?"

The sage burst into maniacal laughter. He put up his hands in prayer, as though begging for forgiveness. His nonexistent eyelashes accentuated the ferociousness of his glare.

"How hopeful you are! It is commendable. But I must tell you the truth." "There is no silk on the Silk Road."

Calvin froze in confusion. His mind was now an empty slate. He listened intently.

"The Silk Hunters, under the guise of searching for this treasure, have committed massacre and destruction in its name—but they, too, recognize it has abandoned us."

"Ah, silk on the Silk Road. It tells a story not of prosperity and trade, but of decadence and decay. The emperor you speak of—he transformed silk into weapons of mass destruction,

suffocating his adversaries from the inside out. With his hunters, dilapidation followed his wake; the plague you speak of, which also existed, followed the century-long war. A deadly virus nonetheless, but it only targets worms—what kind of worms, you ask? You ought to know."

"Here, I return what I have rightfully taken from you. Take it, and go back to where you came from. I possess little knowledge of what happens thereafter— but it seems to me that you attempt to rekindle the flame that brought us nothing but despair."

The sage handed over the silk as casually as a merchant would with spare change.

"Goodbye, dear child. You must remember this tale and I! Return to your Silk Road, where the flowers bloom, and silk, begrudgingly, persists! That is the legend of the Silk Road I have told you."

Seeing his grand mission complete, the sage walked off into the distance, the weight of the world left all behind him.

The Flowers

Calvin took the moment to look at the silk in his hands. It was just as untainted as it was when he first found it.

The violet night grew shiveringly cold. Calvin sought what little warmth he could find in the desert. An abandoned home sufficed.

Calvin hesitantly inserted the silk strands into the device. He braved one look at him—one of rage and regret, yet he couldn't bear to look in his direction. A pang of turbulent emotions violently pulsed in his chest every time he tried.

But when the silk capacitor finally rebooted, and his portal of return was finally reopened, a bitter apathy lingered in the direction of his departure. After all, he, too, possessed an estranged relationship with silk. What comfort could he find by seeking contentment in something that doesn't exist?

He made one final prolonged gaze into the hazy night before woefully returning to the time where he belonged—one where silk still exists on the Silk Road.

Across Time and Sand: My Silk Road Adventure

Po Leung Kuk No. 1 W.H. Cheung College, Lee, Man Sum Woody – 15

Sitting in the quiet darkness of my room, I wrote in my diary to record the incredible adventure that was like a fleeting dream to me. The story began with my monotonous working life.

Yesterday, when I was in my office engrossed in my work as usual, my boss abruptly came up to me and accused me of not being passionate enough to pursue a higher goal, as I was not able to step out of my comfort zone. Yet, I simply dismissed his words and regarded them as useless and unpleasant, like the annoying flies that kept buzzing around me relentlessly. I just wanted to deliver all the goods to the customers so that I could finish my work as quickly as possible and go home.

By the time the mellow sunlight gradually gave way to darkness, I was on my way home, thinking about the “joke” my boss had played on me that morning. After arriving at my cosy home and lying down to sleep on my soothing bed, I felt unintentionally faint, and it seemed like the world was spinning fast, which made me extremely nervous and nauseated. Eventually, I fell onto the floor.

After a while, my brain began to function again. I opened my eyes and realised that I was lying under a strange, cruel sun in a desert. I glanced around nervously at my surroundings and became more and more frantic with worry. I walked around to see if there were any people nearby.

I ran and ran until I finally spotted a group of people with lots of rucksacks walking a few kilometres away. I heaved a sigh of relief, as if the heavy snow on the roof was finally falling to the ground and melting into a pool of serenity. Then I ran to them as fast as I could and asked, “Excuse me, may I ask where I am and what date it is today?” They politely replied, “We are in China, and today is 12 July 130 B.C. What’s wrong? Are you in trouble?” I shook my head, completely shocked by the place and date I was in at the same time. The caravan leader, mistaking my stunned silence for fatigue, offered me water and a place in their group. Having no other choice, I walked alongside them.

As we continued walking and talking, I learnt more about their background. They were all businessmen who traded silk from China to Europe. They were the pioneers who went to Europe to trade. Without the help of modern technology and advanced means of transport, they had to ride their horses or even walk and find their own way. What a terrible experience that would be! Wouldn’t they feel exhausted or unwilling to travel such a long distance just to exchange a few goods? Why didn’t they do this in their own country?

As time passed quickly, it was already night. We had a simple supper together and then slept. Once I lay down, the feeling of missing my dearest home washed over me. At that time, I really hoped to see my parents, my beloved, and my friends again, but it seemed hopeless to return home, and only a few stars in the sky comforted me miserably.

The next day our journey continued. Our relationship with each other improved after the previous day’s communication. However, the beginning of this day also signalled the beginning of a test. The test we faced came not from bandits or sandstorms, but from a much greater despair: our water supplies were not sufficient! In the days that followed, we endeavoured to find an oasis. For three days without a drop of water, our hope evaporated like the moisture in our bodies under the scorching desert sun. Our voices began to grow hoarse. If we could not find a water supply in the next two days, this would be our last journey. Some of our companions eventually fell into a coma, causing us immense stress. I carried one of them on my back, although my vision was also starting to blur. My memories bubbled into my mind one by one, including the experiences of playing an exhilarating game with my friends, the day I told my parents that I had got my first job, the moment I met my beautiful lover for the first time, and many other impressive events. At this point, I thought that my life would soon be over, so I felt extremely guilty and sorrowful. When my energy reached its limit, I knelt down and cried. Something green on the ground came into my field of vision. It was a plant! I called my partners to search for the nearby water source. We spared no effort digging into the ground until finally a massive amount of water gushed out. We immediately drank a lot and kept it in our containers. The cool water slid down our throats, and we were saved. Our partners got up and resumed our journey.

After a few days, we finally arrived in Europe. When we saw the lively market there, we hugged each other in joy. We sold many Chinese goods, while we also received some European items from them. We each got a small diamond to commemorate this memorable time.

After I received the diamond, the surroundings became dark and I felt faint, just as when I first came to this world. I fell to the ground and saw a person I had never seen before. He clapped his hands and said, "Well done! You have helped us a lot on this journey, and thus we could explore the Silk Road all around the world, both by land and by water, based on the foundation you made." Suddenly he disappeared, and I felt like I was falling into a tunnel of Silk Road history — its development flashed before my eyes. I could see its origins, its decline, and its resurgence in 2013. At that moment, I was deeply moved to see this. An intense light pierced my eyes, forcing me to close my eyelids. When I opened my eyes again, I found that I was lying on my favourite bed in my small bedroom, holding the diamond in my hand.

I got up from my bed and looked out of the window. I smiled when I saw a train delivering goods. The legendary tale of China's Silk Road will never be forgotten.

The Wind on the Taklamakan Sings of Silk

Po Leung Kuk No. 1 W.H. Cheung College, Ma, Tsz Ho Cyrus – 15

The song of the Taklamakan is older than empires. It is a low, mournful drone, sweeping across the sea of singing sands, a chorus of a million polished grains recounting journeys of thirst, ambition, and bones. To live on its edge, as my family has for generations, is to learn the wind's many tongues: the hiss of a sand-serpent's approach, the shriek of a dying storm, and, most precious of all, the deep, rhythmic sigh that heralds the caravan.

My name is Liang, and I am the keeper of the White Horse Inn. It is not an inn of timber and comfort, but a fortress of stubborn, sun-baked earth; a clenched fist of civilization raised against the desert's yawn. From our parapet, I have watched the pulse of the world's artery for thirty years. The Silk Road is not a road. It is a living, breathing organism—a sprawling, fragile nervous system connecting the forehead of the world to its toes. Its lifeblood is not just silk, but jade and Buddhism, stirrups and saffron, glass and grief, all borne on the swaying, patient humps of Bactrian camels.

My own blood is its map. My grandfather's grandfather was a guard from Chang'an, a man of the Tang army's proud cavalry, assigned to protect a train of tribute. In Khotan, the City of Jade, he saw a weaver's daughter drawing water from a well, her movements as fluid as the silk she spun. He deserted his post, his horse, his very name, for that grace. I am the product of that choice, a man of both garrison and oasis, my face etched by the same sun that gilds the Buddha of Bamiyan.

The pulse came at the bruised hour before dusk, when the desert bleeds from gold to violet. The dust cloud was small, struggling. I rang the great bronze bell, its voice a dull, welcoming thunder against the wind's whine. My sons, Bao and Jun, rushed to man the great wooden gates, while my wife, Mei, stoked the central fire and set the great iron kettle to boil.

They staggered in—a dozen men and three dozen camels, all reduced to one trembling organism of exhaustion. The camels' groans were like rusted hinges. The men's eyes were hollow, scoured clean by the sand. They were Sogdians, the legendary traders of the Road, their once-vibrant tunics faded to the color of dust. At their center, a figure smaller than the rest, swathed in a travel-stained chador, slumped against a camel's flank. It was a woman. As her attendants helped her down, she clutched a wooden crate, not with the carefulness of a merchant guarding treasure, but with the visceral, animal desperation of a mother clutching her last child.

They revived mutton broth and millet wine. The caravan master, a man named Anahid with a beard like a thorn bush, bowed his thanks. "The desert tried to claim us, Keeper Liang. The spirits of the dunes were hungry this season."

"The desert is always hungry," I replied, my eyes drifting to the woman. She had removed her outer veil, revealing a face not young, but fiercely compelling. High cheekbones spoke of Persian plateaus, but her eyes—a startling hazel-green, like moss on a wet stone—held a depth that was entirely her own. She sat apart, the crate on her lap.

"She is Farima," Anahid said, following my gaze, his voice dropping. "A glassblower from Samarkand. She does not trade in trinkets. She carries a single piece, and she seeks not a market, but a man."

I brought her a cup of hot tea. She accepted it with a nod, her fingers long and delicate, yet marked by old, silvery burns—the kisses of her craft.

"You seek a man?" I asked.

"I seek the Eastern Star," she said. Her voice was husky, scraped raw by the desert, yet melodious. "In Luoyang. They say he can weave the clouds into tapestries and trap the sound of rivers in brocade."

"The master weaver. I have heard the tales. They say his silks are so fine, they can be drawn through a wedding ring."

A ghost with a smile touched her lips. "I do not seek fineness. I seek a conversation."

That night, in the fire-lit privacy of my own quarters, she opened the crate. It was lined with raw, unspun silk, and nestled within was an object wrapped in faded blue linen. With reverence that was almost religious, she unfolded the cloth.

The air left my lungs.

It was an ewer, perhaps a foot tall. Its form was elegantly simple, echoing the amphorae of the Romans, but its substance was a miracle. It was glass, but of a blue so profound, it seemed like a piece of the evening sky just after sunset, captured and given form. This alone would have made it priceless. But within the very heart of the glass, swirling as if caught in a slow, eternal vortex, were filaments of pure, radiant gold. They were not painted on, nor laid in. They were entirely within, born of the molten glass itself, moving through the blue like celestial bodies in a midnight firmament.

"They call it 'naqsh-i-zarr'—the pattern of gold," Farima whispered, her eyes reflecting the dancing firelight in the blue surface. "The secret is in the breath and the fire. The gold is not thread. It is... an idea given substance. A dream made solid." Her hand hovered over it, not touching. "The Eastern Star weaves stories. I blow visions. I believe they are the same language, spoken in different materials. My glass must speak to his silk."

Her quest was not commerce, but communion. A shiver, not of cold, but of recognition, went through me. This was the true magic of the Road: not the transport of goods, but the collision of genius, the desperate, human need to have one's deepest vision understood by another soul across the chasm of the world.

"The path to Luoyang from here is the most dangerous," I said. "The Pamir Mountains. The Roof of the World. My life has been sand and sun. But my father's father was a soldier of the High Pass. I know the stories. I will guide you."

We joined a larger, more diverse train assembling at the foot of the Pamirs. Here, the Silk Road revealed its true tapestry. There was Leo, a burly, red-faced Byzantine with a laugh like falling rocks, guarding his bolts of purple damask woven with silver gryphons—cloth fit for an emperor's shroud. There was Rashid, a Persian scholar-turned-merchant, his camel laden not with spices but with rolled papyri and vellum, texts on astronomy and medicine. There were taciturn Uighur horsemen, their bows strapped to their saddles; Tibetan traders with lumps of raw turquoise; and a small, serene party of Buddhist monks from Gandhara, carrying a sealed reliquary and hearts full of quiet prayer.

We ascended, and the world transformed. The relentless, baking yellow gave way to a brutal, sublime geometry of grey rock and blinding white. The air grew thin and sharp as a newly honed knife. Our breath plumed in the eternal chill. The camels, desert kings, became clumsy and fearful. We were ants crawling across the ribcage of a slumbering, stone giant. Men spoke in hushed tones of the spirits of the peaks, of yeti that walked like men, and of passes that could close with a sigh, burying travelers for a thousand years.

Farima's glass ewer traveled in its crate, now padded with wool and held in a specially slung basket. She watched it constantly, her worry a silent companion. Leo the Byzantine would often ride beside her, regaling her with boisterous tales of the Hippodrome and the scheming bishops of Constantinople, his Greek-accented Persian a comical, warm sound in the sterile air.

Ten days into the mountains, the disaster struck.

It was on a narrow traverse, a path no wider than two camels, with a sheer wall of ice on one side and a void that drank the light on the other. A sudden, sharp crack, louder than thunder, split the air. A ledge of ancient ice, hidden under a fresh dusting of snow, gave way beneath the feet of Leo's lead yak. The beast bellowed in terror, its legs scrambling at nothing, and plunged into the abyss, the sound of its fall swallowed instantly by the vastness. The yak behind it stumbled, its leg snapping with a sickening crunch. It collapsed, blocking the path, and the precious load on its back—six bolts of that legendary Byzantine damask—burst from their bindings. The wind, that cruel artist of the heights, snatched at them. For a surreal, horrifying moment, the most expensive cloth in the world danced in the void like gaudy ghosts, before fluttering down, snagging on rocks a hundred feet below, lost to all recovery.

The column lurched to a halt. Leo stood frozen, his red face bleached to the color of parchment. He did not scream. He made a small, choked sound, like a wounded animal. He sank to his knees in the snow, his great shoulders shaking. That damask was not just his fortune; it was his legacy, his promise to his guild, the fruit of a year's perilous journey. Its loss was absolute ruin, a sentence of debt and disgrace.

The silence that followed was heavier than the mountains. The law of the Road was clear: you were responsible for your own. To stop was to risk everyone. To help was often impossible. We would have to move the injured yak, leave Leo with what supplies we could spare, and continue. It was the arithmetic of survival.

Then, Farima moved.

She slid from her camel; her movements deliberate in the deep snow. She walked to where Leo knelt, the crate containing her life's masterpiece in her hands. She did not speak. She simply knelt before him, placed the crate in the snow, and opened it. She unwrapped the blue linen, and lifted the ewer into the thin, crystalline light.

The effect was staggering. Against the monochrome brutality of the ice and rock, the vessel's deep, vibrant blue was a shocking, almost painful proclamation of beauty. The trapped gold filaments blazed, capturing the high-altitude sun, seeming to swirl with an inner fire. It was a piece of another, more generous world.

"Take this," Farima said, her voice clear and calm in the absolute silence. "In Kashgar, at the western market, show it to the headman of the glass-sellers' guild. His name is Yusuf. He knows its worth. It will cover the loss of your damask twice over."

Leo stared, uncomprehending. His eyes, bleary with despair, shifted from the glorious object to Farima's serene face. "What... what trick is this?" he stammered. "This is your soul you hold. I cannot..."

"It is glass," she said, though the word was a blasphemy against its glory. "It is replaceable."

"You do not know me!" Leo cried, a sob breaking through. "I am a stranger from a strange land! My god is not your god!"

Farima reached out and placed a hand, scarred by fire, on his fur-clad arm. "The Road knows you," she said, and her words seemed to hang in the frozen air, a new kind of law. "We are all its children. If the artery breaks for one, the lifeblood fails for all. This is not charity. It is preservation."

I watched, and I felt the understanding ripple through the column—the Uighur horsemen, the Tibetan traders, the silent monks. In that moment, the true cargo of the Silk Road was unveiled. It was not the silk, nor the glass, nor the spices. It was trust. A fragile, threadbare, and absolutely vital fabric woven from a million such choices. It was the unspoken oath that a Sogdian's word would be honored in a Chang'an counting-house, that a Nestorian Christian would find shelter in a Buddhist cave-temple, that a woman from Samarkand would sacrifice her dream to save the dream of a man from Constantinople.

Leo, wordless, took the ewer. He cradled it with a tenderness he might give an infant. The transaction was complete, but it was not a purchase; it was a covenant.

The journey resumed. The mood had shifted. We were no longer a collection of individuals, but a single organism. The monks shared their meager rations more freely. Rashid the scholar tended to the injured yak with his knowledge of animal medicine. The Uighurs took point, scouting the path with renewed vigilance. Farima now rode with an empty basket, but her head was held higher than ever.

Weeks later, we descended from the realm of stone and ice into the verdant, humid embrace of the Hexi Corridor, and finally, to the Eternal City of Luoyang. The noise was an assault—the din of a million lives, the clamor of markets, the scent of mud, spice, sewage, and incense. After the purity of the mountains, it was overwhelming.

The Eastern Star's studio was not a grand hall, but a quiet, airy compound near the river, shaded by ancient ginkgo trees. The sound here was the soft, rhythmic clack-clack-clack of a dozen looms. We were led into a sunlit room where the master sat before a simple, yet magnificent, draw-loom.

He was ancient, his face a landscape of gentle wrinkles, but his eyes were the keen, black eyes of a songbird. He did not look at us, but at the work before him. Farima stood, silent, waiting. She had not brought her glass; she had brought only herself, and the story.

After a long while, he spoke without turning. "The mountains are in your eyes, and the desert is on your skin. You have come far to watch an old man weave."

"I have come," Farima said, "to hear a story I have seen only in blue and gold."

The Eastern Star nodded slowly. He gestured to a bolt of cloth resting on a low table. "Unroll it."

Farima stepped forward. She unbound the silk, and as it spilled across the floor, a soft gasp escaped her. It was the exact, profound blue of her ewer. And woven into it, in threads of gold so fine they seemed mere suggestions of light, was a pattern. Not of flowers or dragons, but of constellations—the specific, swirling arrangement of the night sky as seen from the deserts of Samarkand in the month of Farvardin. It was her vision. It was the firmament within her glass, translated into thread.

"A caravan master from Kashgar, a man named Yusuf, passed through many moons ago," the weaver said softly. "He spoke of a glassblower who had perfected the breath of the fire dragon. He described the sky she held in her hands. I have been trying to catch its echo ever since."

Tears, clean and quiet, traced paths through the dust on Farima's cheeks. No money was exchanged. No contracts were drawn. The weaver handed her the bolt of silk. She bowed, deeper than I had ever seen her bow to anyone. In return, she produced from her pouch a small, rough lump of uncut cobalt—the raw material from which her blue was born—and placed it in his hand.

They had conversed. Across three thousand miles of desert, mountain, and steppe, through the medium of fire and thread, they had completed a sentence begun by the wind itself.

I returned to the White Horse Inn, to the song of the Taklamakan. Leo's damask was lost, but his name was now spoken with respect from Kashgar to Constantinople. Farima's ewer graced the altar of a great cathedral, they say,

holding holy water. Her new work, infused with the spirit of the Eastern Star's silk, made her the glassblower to caliphs and khans.

I still watch the artery pulse. I see the silks and the spices, the horses and the ideas. But I see with new eyes. The greatest treasure is weightless, invisible, and carried in the human heart. It is the trust that turns a collection of strangers into a caravan. It is the courage to offer your masterpiece to a broken man on a frozen pass. It is the faith that someone, somewhere, will understand the language of your dream.

The wind sings of many things. But if you listen closely, beneath the tales of gold and bones, you can hear the true, enduring melody: the soft, resilient, golden thread of trust, weaving East to West, past to future, one fragile, human choice at a time. And that, I now know, is the song that never ends.

New Tales of China's Silk Road

Po Leung Kuk No. 1 W.H. Cheung College, Wong, Pak Lok Dexter – 15

It was madness. When that frayed silk from the West first appeared in our square, I knew I would follow it. I remember the day with a clarity that seems inscribed with a diamond-tipped stylus. The merchant—a man with a face dried by the desert sun and a voice roughened by the desert winds—was both suspected and feared. Our elders gazed at him with trepidation, speaking of *guǐ*—ghosts and tricksters—who roamed the dunes. As the weaver's son, I could not tear my eyes from the length of cloth he used to buff a trinket. It was an odd cloth, thick even compared with our best *luo* silk, patterned with knots that defied the looms of our towns, colored with a purple that hinted at distant mollusks and foreign dyes. It was a piece of a tale, a single word from a vast and untranslated vocabulary. As a weaver's son, I know the language of thread. And this one had a story unspoken. That frayed silk was a question, and my soul, uneasy in the confines of our town and the regular rhythm of our silk shuttles, required an answer.

My resolve was a silent, growing thing, fostered in the presence of my father's disapproval. "We weave for emperors and for scholars," he said, his hands—ever stained with the dye of indigo and madder—gesturing to the bolts headed for Chang'an. "We do not chase phantasms into the howling waste." The phantasm, however, had planted a seed. I started my preparations, not in the open, but in darkness. I began to weave for a quest, not for a client. The silks I produced were a statement, a passport, and a plea. The bolt was of common *ling*, yet its weave was so densely thick with thread that it was almost liquid, catching light with a low, pearl-like shine—a blank canvas. This was my "key," perfect and untainted, designed to open doors to the unknown.

"My name is Issac. I had nothing with me except a small, perfect bolt of my own silk—my 'key.' I had a small party: my cousin Bo, two camels, and Arslan, a guide who claimed the whisperings of the desert were intelligible to him," explains T. E. Lawrence. "The journal I kept began with less finesse: I wrote on bamboo leaves: I, Liang, third son of Wei the Weaver, start on this day. With me were Bo, too loyal to have good sense; two stoic Bactrian camels—Brother Stone and Brother Sand—and also the Uighur guide, Arslan, who reeked of mutton fat and spoke to the wind."

The passes west of Jade Gate consisted of sand. The Gobi collected bones from lost caravans. The truth of the desert: the theft of all senses. The quiet does not soothe; it weighs, a palpable and piercing echo. The sky is ruled by a tyrant sun, and night by a cold king. We found the caravan piecemeal: not as the complete skeletons of the lost, but in splintered pieces—the ribs of a caravan stiff and half-buried in a sandhill, the shattered aplomb of mule teeth hardened to iron, a lone stinking boot forever pointed westward. Arslan would kneel to these artifacts, his long fingers scattering sand, repeating, "This caravaner feared the quiet more than dehydration." Our path followed the cool stars: a world contracting to the circle of our tired group, the never-ending ridge of ochre sand, and the flashing, shining, incomprehensible cold map etched upon the sky.

Again, the world changed. Not politically. Not ideologically. This world overturned physically. Then came the mountains. They rose before us, a dragon's spine of ice and nothingness. It's more than a mountain range; it's a land of giants. Our air is thin, scratching our lungs with every breath. Pounding headaches began in our heads, throbbing steadily. Trails were narrow ledges of stone over pits of scree and darkness. Screaming wind blasted passes, its own cry diabolical. Respiration required effort. It made us knot together. Our pathetic signal to the mountains began as a crimson ribbon draped across a rock outcropping. This ribbon, a ripping of Bo's emergency tunic, was more than a symbol of our presence; it was our proclamation of our humanity against the indifference of the mountain.

Yet as we descended, we entered another world—past green valleys and finally into endless grass and endless blue sky. This explosion of color left us blinking tears from our eyes. Green pastures rolled like an endless sea, spotted with grazing flocks of sheep that wandered like marshmallow clouds. We breathed air that was heavy and sweet, thick with the smells of earth and herbs, and could drink it. We had traversed the backbone of the world, and now, on this other side of it, growth seemed to flourish in prodigious abundance. We met people whose eyes were blue-green. These people dwelled in tents of soft felt that sprang up from the grassy plain like mushrooms and moved with an almost dance-like elegance on ponies that were tough and small. There was an intricate dance of communication. A smile was an international medium of exchange. We traded without benefiting from

an understanding of language—a rock for a bed, a mirror for milk. Our jade pebble carvings secured us warmth by a fire, and a simple mirror of bronze, which reflected an understanding of a windswept face to a herdsman who may never before have seen it, secured us mugs full of sweet, fermented mare's milk. We were stumbling into a different grammar of bartering.

In a market that smelled of spices and sheep, that is where I found him. The marketplace was a chaos of sounds—of baas and barks and the grunts of traders speaking a dozen different tongues, of cumin and coriander wafting through the smell of the animals. And there, beyond the chaos, sitting cross-legged with an assortment of odd wares laid out before him, was a man sitting quietly through it all. His face was lined with dust, and his eyes had a light of a far-off sea. He was from a place even further west than his brother. Arslan, who spoke scraps of a dozen tongues, found that he could decipher that he was a Sogdian, from a place of oasis cities beyond the Steppes. His brother had gone east, and he had come from even further west, from the shores of a large inner sea. A crowd gathered, a sense of occasion in the air. Taking a deep breath, I loosened the ties of my pack. I unfurled my silk. The hushed murmur of the onlookers stopped as my silk shimmered like a captive ray of sunlight. In the clear light of the steppe, the length came alive. It wasn't merely fabric, but a subjugated ray of light, a testament to a culture that could tame the worm, the loom, and the dye vat. The Sogdian's eyes, his sea-green windows, opened wide. He hunched forward, not to touch, but to observe the immaculate, dense weave. And then, incrementally, he reached into his own pack and drew out a necklace. The blue of the beads rivaled the twilight sky above—a hue I would come to know later as a mixture of something far bluer than blue, flecked with bits of pyrite, a starry night wrapped up in a package, a captured piece of heaven itself, unfathomably deep and rich, a hue of a soil so unforgiving and barren that grasses would not grow. We traded our treasures without a word being spoken. I offered him the bolt. He put the necklace in my outstretched hand. It was heavy with the weight of the stones. It is in this silence that the road was fully born. It did not come through empire, but through this quiet clasp of hands across the reaches of time, this acknowledgment of beauty wrought in distant places. There was nothing in this moment of dictatorship from Khan or Caesar, nothing of taxation or domination. It was only this clean, fundamental transaction in wonder. My silk, bred through agricultural prowess, in exchange for his lapis, generated through mine and mountain. The road was not traced on sand, but in this flash of shared need.

However, the return home was easier. The mountains appeared less intimidating, the desert seemed less endless, because they were familiar now. I did not have any chests of gold; instead, I had something heavier—knowledge. This time, the burden was in my head. I was taking home the blue glass, weird seeds, and crude maps scribbled on dust. These seeds, those of alfalfa and grapes, were packed carefully in wax cloth. The maps were drawn on leather, indicating rivers that led to other unknown lands and markers for other cities that represented Samarkand and Merv. But most significant was the realization that the terrible deserts and mountains were merely an antechamber, or a corridor, rather than a barrier. I had returned home as a hero, but I felt nothing but vision. They saw the foreign jewelry, the foreign seeds, and declared me a hero. I saw the start. I saw our silk flowing west along the route I had pioneered, while the return caravans were laden with wool, silver, and new knowledge inscribed on parchment. I saw, in my vision, not a drip, but a stream: bolts of brocade and damask, vats of cinnamon, bundles of lacquerware pouring out. And pouring back, not only goods, but ideas: scrolls of astronomy showing differing constellations, scrolls of healers' knowledge featuring strange herbs, rumors of a prophet born in the desert, the ringing of horses bred for battle and for beauty.

I was the first. I drew the line with my feet. My line was a single, delicate strand, close to being obliterated by the next puff of wind. The true history of the Silk Road, however, would be written by the thousands who followed me, meshing my faint, isolated strand into a sturdy rope that would connect the entire world. Now, an old man, I sit with my fire. My lapis necklace lies on a shelf. At times, I hear the camel bells ringing from the new, bustling caravanserai outside our walls, no longer a town but a vibrant metropolis. I recall the Sogdian man with sea-silver eyes, and I wonder if he, too, has grown old under some foreign sky, speaking of this weird, luminous fabric from the East. My thread alone was just the beginning. Now, I watch the rope expand, swelled with the fibers of innumerable others: Persian cartographers, Tibetan horsemen, Byzantine goldsmiths, Indian philosophers, all pressing on, peddling, transliterating, loving, and warring through that highway we chose to take. The folly resided not in going, but in thinking the world small to start with. The deeper wisdom resided in secretly learning, with each quiet trade, just how expansive and deliciously interconnected it might be.

Walking on the Reborn Silk Road

Pui Ching Middle School (Macau), Cheong, U Tang Jayden – 15

In ancient times, the Silk Road wound its way through deserts and mountains like a golden dragon, carrying China's silk, porcelain and tea to exchange for grapes, gems and horses from the Western Regions. The camel bells of merchant caravans echoed as the camels swayed along, delivering not just goods, but also dreams and stories.

Today, the Silk Road of the 21st century has transformed into a steel giant of the Belt and Road Initiative. High-speed trains dash across the Gobi Desert like lightning, and the Digital Silk Road weaves information together like invisible threads. This is the start of a new story, a tale about connection and hope.

Sunny, a young engineer from Shanghai, boarded a train to Xinjiang with a heavy backpack. The train roared toward Central Asia, part of an extension of the China-Europe Railway Express. Sunny, whose grandfather used to be a camel caravan merchant on the old Silk Road, was working on a solar energy project in Kazakhstan. When he was a child, his grandfather told him legends about oasis taverns and exotic beauties. On his deathbed, the old man held Sunny's hand,

"My child, the Silk Road has never broken, it will be reborn in your hands. Please remember, the Silk Road thrives on hearts, not swords."

Now, instead of silk, Sunny carried a tablet and engineering blueprints. As he gazed out at the endless Taklamakan Desert, he wondered,

"What new stories will the new Silk Road bring?"

When the train arrived at the Alashankou border, it was already dark. Sunny dragged his luggage through the bustling customs checkpoint. Suddenly, a sharp ringing sound broke out—not from an antique camel bell, but a modern warning bell. An electric truck had lost control and was charging toward the crowd. Instinctively, Sunny lunged at the nearest girl and pushed her out of the way. The truck brushed past, almost hitting the girl.

The girl was Anna, a local translator from Kazakhstan. Her long hair was as smooth as black silk, and her eyes shone like sapphires. She rubbed her arm, stood up still shaken, and said in broken Chinese,

"Thank you! You're Chinese, aren't you?"

"Yes, I'm Sunny. Are you okay?"

"Yes, I'm Anna. I work here helping the Chinese engineering team. Are you here to install the solar panels?"

Sunny nodded, and they got to know each other from then on.

The next day, they traveled together to the construction site near Almaty. On the path of the ancient Silk Road, huge arrays of solar panels now stood tall, glistening in the sun like silver silk. This was a cooperative project between a Chinese company and Kazakhstan, making the Gobi Desert full of green energy. Sunny was in charge of installing the intelligent monitoring system, while Anna helped communicate with local herdsman.

Life at the construction site was harsh. The sun blazed fiercely during the day, and cold winds froze their lungs at night. Sunny and Anna often chatted in their tent. She told him about Kazakhstan's nomadic legends,

"Our ancestors traded fine horses along the Silk Road for ironware from the Central Plains."

He shared stories of Shanghai's skyscrapers and neon lights, as well as his grandfather's camel caravan tales. One time, Anna took out a family heirloom silk scarf.

“This was woven from Tang Dynasty silk. Legend says it came from Dunhuang. Our blood ties have never been severed.”

Said Anna, Sunny was touched, looking at the solar panels outside,

“Look, this is the new Silk Road. No more camel caravans, but trains and optical fibers. However, though technology are advancing so fast, our blood are still connected through thousands of years”

But challenges soon came.

“Stop the project right now! It is eroding traditions!”

Some local conservatives opposed the project. A snowstorm hit, covering the solar panels with dust and causing system failures. Herdsmen gathered to protest, threatening to tear down the equipment. Sunny’s team was at a loss, but he remembered his grandfather’s words:

“The Silk Road thrives on hearts, not swords.”

That night, Sunny and Anna rode horses deep into the herdsmen’s settlement. Braving the cold wind, they reached an elder’s yurt. Anna translated in Kazakh as Sunny took out his tablet and showed simulation diagrams: the solar energy project would not only supply electricity, but also provide free lighting and water pumps for the herdsmen, letting their sheep drink from the oasis. The elder stroked his beard and asked,

“Why do you Chinese come all this way here?”

“On the ancient Silk Road, we traded silk. On the new Silk Road, we trade light. This is not conquest—it’s sharing.”

Replied Sunny, he told the elder his grandfather’s stories: how camel caravans helped each other through sandstorms and hardships. And Anna told him local legends: how the Silk Road Goddess used silk threads to connect the East and West.

The elder fell silent for a long time, fortunately, he finally nodded.

“All right, just like in the old days, we’ll give it a try.”

The next day, the herdsmen joined in cleaning the dust off the solar panels, and the project was restarted. The solar panels glistened again, lighting up the entire oasis. When the first light bulb turned on, Anna held Sunny’s hand,

“This is our new Silk Road story.”

A few months later, the project was completed. High-speed trains departed from here for Europe, loaded with solar energy equipment and Kazakh honey. Sunny was about to return to Shanghai. Anna gave him a newly woven silk scarf embroidered with camel bells and a sun. “Come back. The Silk Road never ends.

On the train, Sunny unfolded the scarf and watched the railway tracks stretch toward the horizon. He sent a message to Anna:

“The new story has only just begun. Next time, let’s go to Dunhuang—to see the real starting point of the Silk Road!”

Today, the Silk Road is no longer a forgotten legend. It is the roar of high-speed trains, the flow of data, and the heartbeats of two young people. On this new path, China and the world are connected once again, creating wonderful dreams in the world.

Silk Road Interlude—— the Stolen Pattern

Pui Ching Middle School (Macau), Han, LinTong – 16

The wind became heavier the first time when Celia heard the sound. It was spring, and the sun separated the desert horizontally, warming up the whole market.

“You got the silver?” Her father, Lance, called out from the other side of the canvas. They’ve already been running the caravans for years. “Did you see it? The long caravan came in from Chang’an, bringing five boxes of brocade.”

When they got down at night, and left the caravans to proceed across the deserts, Celia said she wanted to go too.

Her father hesitated, but still nodded at the end. The first day was just like a rest for business. However, on the third day, in an inn called “Green-Willow Rest”, their plans developed a flaw.

The caravan made camp at the caravansary. Celia awoke to the sound of metal on metal. She saw a slender, quick form unfasten the chain of the storeroom. The intruder worked fast and quietly and seemed afraid to wake somebody. The form looked up and met her eyes. Time froze suddenly.

"Don't say anything," the man whispered. The sound was in a foreign accent. “If you scream, they will take everything and set the place on fire.”

"What are you doing?" Celia whispered, her heart fluttering quickly like frightened birds. “Hide it,” he said “They’ve ordered me to steal a piece, just a small part!”

“I thought I could stop them. I hid it. But I couldn't keep it. They'll be back.”

He was popularly known as Saimu, and he mentioned that he had been hired for the job of delivering a package. Celia was suspicious. Why did he take a piece of cloth whose only value lay in its integrity? However, when she followed him to the riverside in the moonlight, she found some evidence: drag marks in the wet mud, and an insignificant brass nail on a box.

Celia took the cloth out of an old well that was located behind the storeroom. She heard the steps in the dark when she was about to touch the well. He came back and had a lantern with him. “I hid it,” he repeated. I heard that even a small piece of cloth is highly valued to bad people too, so I ran away.

Celia took the pad of cloth in her hand. If those bad guys get this, it would create a problem for everyone who is related to the caravan. It would be disastrous.

Lance was having dinner with the caravan leader and a group of town elders when, at dawn, a messenger from the Imperial Inspector arrived.

The Inspector's arrival meant a formal investigation was about to begin. Lance could write a long letter, resorting to the law, or surrender the entire district's profits, or even more. Celia felt that if there were any hidden secrets, the authorities would only put her in greater danger.

She carefully folded the small piece of brocade. She could hand it to the officials before they stopped the caravan and bow. Or, she could do something discreetly first, to see who had cut the brocade and who had taken the whole chest.

Her father disapproved of her plan—he disliked risks. But he nodded nonetheless. “Don’t get hurt,” he said, “go with Saimu.”

Saimu stood outside the teahouse as Celia left.

They followed the footprints Saimu could still remember: from the storeroom to the riverbank, then to a small patch of saltwort. The wind carried the scent of salt and rags from the grass; beyond the grass, the desert stretched out like a pale sheet.

On the ridge, they found evidence: a small, smooth coin, the kind never seen in the Dunhuang markets. Saimu recounted what he could tell: a man who spoke like a foreigner had paid him more than usual and instructed him to "get some samples." The man leaned closer to Saimu. "It's safer to sell them in batches than to risk someone recognizing that all five boxes belong to the same person."

Around noon, the inspector's messenger arrived at the inn. He was younger than Celia had expected and seemed unaware of the local rumors. He asked, "Where is the chest? Who has the key? Who is guarding it?" Lance replied that the chest was locked in the storeroom, guarded by three guards. The messenger then inquired about the workers, the caravan's route, and the names of the merchants who usually sold imperial patterns.

Celia remained silent during the questioning. She noticed the men around the messenger exchange glances. Their main suggestion was to register and confiscate the brocade, leaving it there until the people of Chang'an came to investigate its origin. This would stop the caravan.

The profits of every household in the caravan could turn into losses, and the indebted merchants would be further burdened.

She devised a plan: to tell the people who hired Saimu about this. They wouldn't hand over this scrap to the messenger. Celia decided to hide the sliver of cloth in her scarf and then wrap it around her head to avoid being discovered. Sam led them to the man with the bag.

Sam led them to a low ridge. The mysterious man stood beside a mule, his back to the sun. Sam called his name, and the man turned around; it seemed Celia was late.

"Not that way," Celia said. She'd left the scrap in the caravan master's pouch, and made sure people could see where it was to be. The man was surprised since he was under the impression that the transfer would be nonverbal. He attempted to speak so as to hide his actions, but his voice was too faint to against the truth.

Celia looked back to him and asked what his motive was. The man just shrugged. He said that panic brings profit. Some traders are able to purchase goods at a low price when the market is filled with fear. Even a very small part of royal brocade can bring the rumour which is worth more than the material itself.

The motive was clear, and the plan was despicable. Panic benefited the wealthy. The effects would be unimaginable if someone started this panic. At the Relaxed Place, the Inspector's messenger requested the brocade.

Celia stepped forward. She developed a narrative, avoided mentioning the man on the ridge and the movement of the fragment. The messenger was confused but he eventually made a deal. The messenger was tasked to document the existence of the boxes and to wait for information from Chang'an. The trade goods of the caravan would not be moved at that time. The travelers would be able to continue their journey with an escort in case they were able to request the Chang'an inspector to complete the procedures more quickly. The caravan moved over the next few days.

The first two market towns did not notice anything unusual. In the third town, a messenger from Chang'an confirmed that the brocade was imperial cloth.

When they reached the destination, the caravan met the men from Chang'an. Saimu's face hollow with shame, admitted to being paid and named the man under the ridge. The caravan master, Lance, and the inspector agreed on terms that would allow the caravan to go on with no further holding of goods. Fear had been bought, and some of it taken back. That night by the campfire Celia looked at the small square of brocade. She had protected her family's goods. She did not choose the easiest way of this problem to deliver the scrap to the first official. She had not ignored the law. And she noticed that she should move forward boldly until she could prove herself right.

Dunhuang came into view. Lance patted his daughter's shoulder. He said, "You kept our name."

Celia looked at the desert road falling behind them and then ahead to the city where merchants from Chang'an and beyond spread their goods. Whatever storms would come, she thought, the caravan would go on, for while goods cross deserts, people build the bridges that let them cross safely.

The Eternal Melody of the Silk Road, the Unbroken Torch of the Belt and Road — A Macao Student's Reflections Across Time and Space

Pui Ching Middle School (Macao), Ho, Kio Ian — 15

The Silk Road — a name both familiar and unfamiliar. Although my teacher has explained its background, history and development in detail, when I look at that winding ancient route on the map, I always feel it is as distant as a legend. It was not until the past ten years, as I listened to news reports, that I suddenly realized: the ancient road that once carried the bells of camel caravans and the shadows of sailing ships never disappeared. Instead, it has emerged in a brand — new form as the "Belt and Road Initiative" in this new era. I am a middle — school student from Macao, and in this city where Eastern and Western cultures blend, I deeply feel that there is an indispensable connection between the spirit of the Silk Road and the inheritance of the "Belt and Road Initiative".

More than 2,000 years ago, the ancient Silk Road of China came into being amid Gobi deserts and rough seas. Zhang Qian's pioneering journey opened up the overland route, and Zheng He's seven maritime expeditions to the Western Seas developed the maritime routes. Ancient ancestors used camel trains and treasure ships instead of war horses and sharp cannons, and built bridges connecting Asia, Europe and Africa with kindness and friendship. Businessmen streamed continuously in ancient Chang'an of China. Persian spices, Indian Buddhism, Greek art, Chinese silk, porcelain and the Four Great Inventions intermingled and coexisted here. In ancient ports like Quanzhou and Guangzhou during that period, countless ships anchored in the sea, presenting pictures of prosperity. The spirit of peaceful cooperation, openness and inclusiveness, mutual learning and mutual benefit of the ancient Silk Road has become a precious heritage of human civilization. It is like an invisible thread that closely links different countries and civilizations together.

President Xi Jinping first put forward the "Belt and Road Initiative" in 2013, including the "Silk Road Economic Belt" proposed in Kazakhstan in September and the "21st — Century Maritime Silk Road" proposed in Indonesia in October, aiming to promote global economic cooperation and connectivity. The thread of the ancient Silk Road has been re — tightened and extended by the "Belt and Road Initiative", breathing new life into the ancient Silk Road in the new era. Compared with the ancient Silk Road, the "Belt and Road Initiative" has richer connotations, a wider scope and more diversified ways. Camel caravans on the ancient Silk Road took months to cross deserts. Today, frequent China — Europe Railway Express trains rush along the Eurasian Land Bridge. Merchant ships on the ancient Silk Road relied on monsoons for navigation. Now, the Jakarta — Bandung High — Speed Railway in Indonesia, the first high — speed railway in Southeast Asia, has greatly shortened the distance between Indonesian cities in an instant. With infrastructure construction as the link, the "Belt and Road Initiative" has built a global cooperation network, continuing the core pursuit of "mutual benefit and win — win results" of the ancient Silk Road.

As a middle — school student in Macao, I have a personal experience of this inheritance and development. Macao has gradually developed from a small fishing village into a world — famous tourist city, which is a fruit of the openness, inclusiveness and mutual learning of Eastern and Western civilizations. Walking on the streets of Macao, European — style reliefs and the overhanging eaves of Chinese — style buildings complement each other beautifully. The sweetness of Portuguese egg tarts and the richness of Cantonese morning tea go well together. Portuguese and Cantonese blend and coexist in the streets and lanes. This characteristic of pluralistic coexistence is in the same line as the spirit of the ancient Silk Road, which transcended civilizations and tolerated differences. Under the framework of the "Belt and Road Initiative", Macao, as a "liaison" between China and Portuguese — speaking countries, has become an important node of the Silk Road in the new era, playing a bridging role in economic, trade and cultural exchanges between China and Portuguese — speaking countries.

In recent years, my school has organized visits to the exhibition hall of the Macao Platform for Trade and Economic Cooperation between China and Portuguese — speaking Countries. When I saw the traditional Chinese medicine products and cultural and creative works sold to Portuguese — speaking countries through the "Belt and Road Initiative", I felt that just as the ancient Silk Road spread China's sericulture technology and silk craftsmanship to the world, Macao is promoting industries such as traditional Chinese medicine and characteristic cultural and creative products to the international market with the help of the "Belt and Road Initiative" platform. The ancient

Silk Road was a road for knowledge exchange. Today, through Sino – Portuguese youth forums and cultural and art festivals, we share our study and life with young people from Portuguese – speaking countries, inheriting the Silk Road spirit of mutual learning. This echo from history to reality makes me deeply understand that the "Belt and Road Initiative" did not come out of nowhere, but is a natural continuation and innovative development of the ancient Silk Road spirit in the contemporary era.

What shocks me even more is the far – reaching impact of the "Belt and Road Initiative" on the world. When I saw the happy smiles of Indonesian people on the news when the Jakarta – Bandung High – Speed Railway opened, and when I learned that Portuguese – speaking countries in Africa had achieved food security through agricultural industrial parks, I could not help but think of the scenes of travelers exchanging goods and sharing stories on the ancient Silk Road. No matter how times change, humanity's pursuit of peaceful cooperation and common development has never changed. As young people of Macao in the new era, we are inheritors of the Silk Road spirit, as well as beneficiaries and participants of the "Belt and Road Initiative". At school, there are many activities themed on the "Belt and Road Initiative", such as discussing Macao's role in it, exploring how to better play its bridging role, and studying the cultural customs of countries along the route to prepare for cross – cultural exchanges in the future. The "Belt and Road Initiative" is not a distant political and economic concept, but a development opportunity closely related to us. It has broadened our global horizons, enabling us to stand in Macao, base ourselves on China and look to the whole world.

I once communicated with an international student from Central Asia at an event. He said he came to study in China with a "Belt and Road Initiative" scholarship, and his grandfather used to be a guide for Silk Road caravans. We shared our own stories and exchanged small gifts. I gave him a keychain of the Ruins of St. Paul's, and he gave me a hand – made silver ornament from his hometown. At that moment, I seemed to travel through time and space, seeing the scenes of travelers from different countries exchanging goods and forging friendships on the ancient Silk Road. This made me deeply realize that whether it is the ancient Silk Road or the "Belt and Road Initiative", the core has always been people. The exchange of goods, the spread of technology and the connection of infrastructure are ultimately to enable people of different civilizations to communicate and understand each other better and work together hand in hand.

Information that took years to spread on the ancient Silk Road can now be delivered in real time with just a tap of our fingers. Transnational cooperation that was unimaginable on the ancient Silk Road is now carried out regularly under the framework of the "Belt and Road Initiative". However, what remains unchanged is that the "thread" connecting different civilizations is always strong, and the spiritual core of peaceful cooperation, openness and inclusiveness, mutual learning and mutual benefit has never changed. As middle – school students in Macao, although we cannot open up new routes like Zhang Qian and Zheng He, nor can we build magnificent projects like the constructors of the "Belt and Road Initiative", we can be guardians and disseminators of the Silk Road spirit. In our daily study, we should take the initiative to learn about the history and culture of countries along the "Belt and Road Initiative", master language skills and cultivate cross – cultural communication abilities. We can practice mutual learning and mutual benefit through practical actions.

The ancient Silk Road is a road of civilization spanning thousands of years, and it is shining more brightly in the new era. I firmly believe that as long as we adhere to the Silk Road spirit and move forward hand in hand, we will surely make this road of civilization connecting the past, present and future bring a better tomorrow to humanity, let the seeds of peaceful cooperation take root and germinate all over the world, and let the fruits of mutual benefit and win – win results benefit more people.

Back to 1750

Pui Ching Middle School (Macau), Sam, Cheng Iao Cosette – 15

Kelly, a senior high school student growing up in Macau, is always intrigued by everything related to the Maritime Silk Road. Since appearing in her history class, her teacher described the city to the class as “a ‘glittering node’ on the route of trade: “When East and West met, here sailed the world’s trade routes – silk and spices, stories, and the oceanic tides, across a century of travellers.” This Saturday afternoon, she volunteers to visit the Macao Museum with several classmates for a project on the city’s maritime heritage. The sound of the crowd fading into the background, Kelly stops in front of the exhibit called the Silk Road exhibition hall. In front of her, tucked into a nook between the large glass cabinets, a faded red silk scarf rests on the table. A faded old maritime map, the map’s parchment edges slowly peeling off overtime. In the top left-hand corner of the map, the title annotation: “Macao is one of the world’s major transitive ports, linking China to Southeast Asia, India and Europe, during the Ming and Qing dynasties, a significant node” is clearly stamped. Tiny lines on the map paint images of all the routes taken by merchant ships. Strips of tiny golden lettering dot the map dotted throughout with names like Goa, Malacca and Lisbon, ports which to Kelly feel like distant fairy castles. Kelly leans close to the glowing map, her fingers hovering a couple of millimeters above the clear glass case. She begins to wonder: “What would it be like to stand on a dock watching those ships sail away?”

Wondering what it would be like to be there, Kelly leaned easily to the display case. Her red silk scarf, the faded colour of a faded era, appears to shine and glow beneath the museum’s artificial lights. What would it be like to stand there with her feet on the marble floor? Before she can even react, Kelly feels a warm, golden stream of mist in her face, and the hum of the museum is suddenly drowned out. The smooth tile floor under her feet is replaced with rough, raw stone, the acrid perfume of polished wood and glass substituted by the pungent tang of saltwater, and the sweet reek of sandalwood mixed with the earthy scent of fresh silk. Kelly blinks and opens her eyes— she is no longer in the brand new modern museum. The bustling stone dock stretching before her is but a scene from the past; she has stepped back to the year of 1750, the year of ‘peak period for Macao’.

The entire scene appears as if it is straight out of a painting. High wooden ships with gaping sails line the shore, their decks’ hulls painted deep blue and green, emblazoned with painstakingly carved carvings of a collage of mythical mythical creatures. Crew members in sweaty shirts and thickly tanned skins cry out in disarray between Cantonese, Portuguese and Malay, carrying huge bundles of silk, heavy crates of porcelain and crates of dried tea onto ships. A range of merchants in flowing attire, colourful traditional Chinese robes, tightly fitting turbans bound taut around ears and heads, European-style coats and tricorne hats crowd in small cliques, waving frantically in the air, clutching gold coins, scrolls containing trade documents in their hands. The bustling scene blurs with voices, as the wooden planks creak; metal clickings and the distant cry of seagulls soar into the azure sky above. Panel; Kelly’s heart races, “this is no dream,” she stated, “this is a step back in time.”

“How did I get here?” Kelly asks, her voice wavering a little, as she walks up to one of the young sailors who works stacking bundles of silk onto a wire rope pulley. He stops, wiping the perspiration from his forehead with the top of his sleeve, smiling slightly at her, his white teeth visible between his sunburned face. “This is Macao’s inner harbor, of course! The busiest port in all of China, have you ever seen something like it?” He speaks in Cantonese with a small Portuguese pronunciation at the end of the words. “It’s 1750, this is our last unload to Goa. Here we have these silks brought in from Guangzhou. We’ve got tons of years, sorting these by color, by quality. Then they’ll run over to Goa to be exchanged for Indian spices, Indian cotton, Indian silver, and then a portion of them go to Lisbon and the nobles there will buy it, and they’d die for four bolts of this red silk. “The Portuguese, they really, they’ve been here a long, long time!” She follows him up a wooden gangplank onto the sideboat, a massive ship with the ship name in big Portuguese letters carved across the stern. She seems a little confused. “This is a Portuguese trading ship, is it?”, he tells her. “See, the British vessels who come in to do some trade here. They call this ship the ‘Great Ship from Amacon’, they’re the biggest vessel on the shipping route. It can take hundreds of crates of stuff with it, over 50 guys can work on board this thing, so you’ve to watch out that when it comes in, we’re all up here, don’t forget about that. This is of course, since you’re from Great France, our nearest neighbor and it’s a very long voyage to get here, you’ve got to wait until the monsoons come again. We have to wait till June. In June you have the wind coming out of the west, a little northwesterly. Then back this

way in December the wind will blow—eastwest from the north. So if we get to June with no wind and there is no wind here we're not doing anything, we're not doing any trade, you see, and that's what the old sailors say.”

She stands on deck, her shoes slightly sinking in the worn—out planks of wood worn down from year—after—year of heavy foot traffic. She peels her eyes into the cargo hold. She realizes the ship is deck—full with neatly folded white silk, bright red, deep blue, soft pink, and deep gold. Each bundle is wrapped in rope, numbered and labeled—small scrolls in Chinese characters. Next to silk, there are rows of porcelain vases and plates, surface painted with tiny lotus flowers and fine dragons. Crates of tea leaves, sealed with wax, still fresh, and all in their place. “Macao is an ideal location. The perfect stop between China and the West, that's what they say,” he says standing against the ship's rail. “Partly because merchants coming from Guangzhou bring their fabrics and porcelains, they've got the easiest way of storing things, we have the best sailors.” He pauses before adding; “Also because if they want to do trade they're still in luck, they don't have to go out there. They don't have to do all the shipping to go to Guangzhou, and then they come down and purchase Chinese goods and buy what they need. So it's a meeting point, and everyone gets what it's going to be here.”

She keeps on her way around the old port now that she realized she'd gone there. As Kelly explores she encounters a new friend, a Portuguese tradersman by the name of Carlos. A middle—dAge man, Carlos is a man with a bushy bushy mustache and a bright array of tiny gemstones glittering on his pocket watch and chain around his neck. He walks up and notices her looking at the Nau de Trato, starts speaking into her ear and seems surprisingly fluent in English. “You aren't that familiar, are you? You're from around here?” As he's talking to her in English, a string strap and a thin pouch lie by his side. She shakes her head, and there's a laugh in his mouth. “No, I mean, I make sure and buy a lot of when I get here all the time. I mean I've been coming here to Macao 10—year, actually. I've been buying this silk, these porcelain there. And so I go on my way to Lisbon and you see, I'm going to sell something here, I'm going to sell a piece of silk here. It's very fashionable there, the nobles, they take them to these balls and the king uses them and he's wearing Chinese royal robes. They've got a collection of them, they're better, brighter, softer, longer lasting, much, much better fabric here in Europe.” He opens his worn pocket watch, which has a tiny ship drawn onto the clock face, and turns it for her to look. “I sold this watch for a piece of red silk, a few years back. Silk here is Like gold, you know?”

Kelly also wanders over to a small wooden table where a Chinese official in a blue silk robe takes careful notes on a set of scrolls depicting trade records, glancing up at her and nodding politely for her to approach, noting the names of the ships listed, the kinds of goods being carried, and the fees being set aside for the imperial government. “Macao has been a hub of trade for more than 200 years,” the official says, his voice calm and steady. “Since the Portuguese came here in the 16th century, this port has welcomed both people and things from all over the world. We are trading, after all, not just goods but stories, languages, and ideas. A sailor from India can teach a Japanese fisherman to knot a new kind of knot; a merchant from Portugal might learn to cook Cantonese food from a local cook. It is indeed the nature of the Maritime Silk Road that it is not just a road of trade, but a road of friendship.”

The sun begins setting, casting the sky in bright orangery, purple, and pink. The crew of the Nau de Trato began to dress, and then they gathered on board deck and sang a traditional Italian sea shanty. The sailors sang with pride, waving to each other as they pulled up the anchor. Some merchants came into the dock to wave a farewell sentence of “good luck” to the sailors. Charles grabbed Kelly on the shoulder and called her, “If you come to Lisbon someday and see me, bring me along, I'll show you to silk markets!” He walked onto a smaller ship to go back to his merchandise. The Chinese official handed her his foldables, a small, folded piece of paper with a drawing of a ship from the bottom up. “A souvenir,” he says while smiling slightly. “To remember this day.”

The golden mist returns without warning, circling Kelly once again. She feels a caressing pull, as if someone's pulling her up by her sleeve, and the sounds of the port fall back into a quiet buzz. As the spinning stops, and the mister clears up, she's back in the museum, in front of the same display case. The red silk scarf and the old marine map are still there, but now Kelly sees them with new eyes, she doesn't just see an artifact and a piece of paper; she sees sailors hauling the silk, merchants haggling over prices, and The sun setting in the harbor. The old marine map from the Chinese official is in the meantime still in her hand, the edges slightly creased up, but she can see his drawing of the ship clean as day.

Kelly sits down that night and begins writing about her time in her diary. She would write entry by entry about the dock and Nau de Trato, about Carlos, about everything she's seen. She realizes Macao's history was always woven into the fabric of the Maritime Silk Road; there's more than a port on the map but so much more: where people and things met, joined, changed and made new stories. The next day at school she'd take the foldables from the Chinese official with her and show her classmates the map that is in our textbook. And then she would tell her classmates about her "time-travel story". The classmates were attentive, asking questions about the sailors and the trade routes, about the flavor of dried mango.

From that day on, whenever she crosses Macao's old port, Kelly pictures the busy trading ships and merchants of the old time. She imagines hearing sailors' shanties, smelling the salty water and sandalwood, and seeing the Nau de Trato embarking on an expedition to Goa. She understands she herself is a chapter in the long tale of trade as people of many countries met, swapped, and migrated. She understands even now that this long-lived thread of human connections, friendship, and magic is called the Maritime Silk Road. The tale began with just another small bolt of silk thread, to the horizon of a single boat.

Threads of a Copper Coin

Pui Ching Middle School (Macau), Shi, Kai Yi Casper – 16

For me, I always feel rushed whenever I stay in the departure hall in the airport, a feeling that makes me can't stay calm. I was leaving Xi'an, a nice and historical city where I had stayed for a 6-day journey, and which also hosted an international robotics competition during those few days.

Seated on a bench in the departure hall with retro decorations, I was playing with the copper coin I had bought as a souvenir the day before in one of the street stalls. I flipped it once, twice, again and again..... Thinly, the voice of the shopkeeper trying to persuade me and my friends to buy this coin appeared in my mind.

The shop owner told us that this coin was initially owned by a merchant who ran a business along the old Silk Road in the Tang Dynasty. Then, he lowered his voice, preventing the story from being overheard.

"People always think that the Silk Road is just about silk, jewelry and cloth," he said, while tipping the coin gently. "Silk is just the easiest thing to measure; they trade things that you can't weigh."

I remember my friend raising an eyebrow and laughing. "Huh... Like what?"

"Such as trust," the shopkeeper replied without hesitation. "And the ability to build solid relationships and partnerships with somebody who speaks a different language and with a diverse background."

"Long, long ago," he continued. "When the Silk Road was just emerging, he, the owner of this coin, was just a normal businessman like others who simply wanted to make a fortune through trading along the Silk Road."

"He left Chang'an with just three caravans, some money and carts of goods. He thinks that the hardest part must be the cold nights, bandits and crossing the desolate desert. However, the hardest part was..... people."

"People?" my friend asked, half amused, half curious.

"Yes, people," the shopkeeper answered steadily. "When the merchant arrived at the first border town, the locals saw his clothes and heard his accent, then thought that he was laughing at them due to cultural differences and stereotypes. He tried to bargain, but his gesture was considered rude in their region."

My friend and I leaned in. "So, what did he do next?"

The shop owner smiled, not brightly, but like someone who had learned a lesson from this story too. We could feel the hypocrisy behind him, but at least he tried to pretend that he had. "He tried to defend himself, just like what most people would do. He spoke louder, repeating his words. Suddenly, an old woman selling bread reached out and took this coin away from his pocket."

"Isn't that robbing? The merchant was so unfortunate!" I remember I asked.

"No, the merchant had the same thought as you at that time. He panicked, his face changed, his body tensed," The shopkeeper said, at the same time pretending to snatch the wallet from my friend's hand. I could clearly picture the situation at that time. Then, he explained, "but she didn't steal, she pressed the coin back into his hand and said a word in her language. Although the merchant did not understand the meaning, he understood the tone – it was not threatening."

"That moment taught him something: if you want to survive in the Silk Road, being smart alone is not enough. You have to be willing to learn, to apologise even when you don't mean harm. Also, ask questions before making judgments. In the end, he made it far. He traded goods and returned them with exotic luxury items. But

he still kept that piece of copper coin with him, to remind him of the things he learnt on this journey. To be gentler, not weaker but gentler, the kindness and respect to each other from the heart.”

After hearing the whole story, although we knew that this should probably be fictional, each of us bought a set of coins from the shop, not only because of the shopkeeper’s storytelling talent but how inspiring the spirit of our ancestors were.

Still, sitting in the airport, I realized the shopkeeper’s story had followed me for a reason. The coin is not special just because its root from the Tang dynasty or its “historical value” behind, but it carries a spirit that we also need nowadays despite the language and cultural barrier being somehow disintegrated by technology today.

The competition includes ranked matches that require you to team up with other teams randomly. There were quite a lot of teams coming abroad. In one of the matches, our team was arranged to team with an American team. When I tried to communicate with them, one of them whispered to his friend, not quietly enough, and the only word I caught was “Nerd”, and another added, “They are here to ‘cook’ us again.”

I pretended that I didn’t hear that, and thought it did not matter so much, as it was just a result of entrenched stereotyping. However, it ended up they labeled us as “the team from China,” “the ones who’re only chasing medals and awards,” or even something like “the team that treats everything as an exam.”

Dramatically, that label is not just a harmless joke, but comes in the match with us. In that round, we were supposed to be allies. The rules forced us onto the same side, sharing a field, a timer, and a single score. At the start, we tried to be efficient and ran straight to the objective. The two opponents quickly come and defend us at the same time. This could be a big mistake since our allies are able to swiftly go across the other half of the field, given that it is defended by no one and score high-value tasks.

However, my ally ran straight to us and provided some meaningless support, to be exact, it was even counterproductive. We were already breaking through their defence, with one opponent robot being pushed away and one stuck on the field element. At that moment, the American team came and blocked our way.

”Move back, go back to the other side!” I shouted.

They realized they were doing something wrong, but it’s already too late as the two opponents had organized their defense again. The winning game went into a tie again. In the last 30 seconds, robots are allowed to hang on the ladder located in the middle of the field for extra points. Our robot was in the middle of the field, and we immediately rushed to the ladder as there is only limited space for one robot to hang.

However, it seems like our ally did not trust that we were able to hang and came to push us away with the claw on our machine that was already connected to the ladder. With that powerful and destructive crash, our claw was completely disabled and was trapped there.

”Get off our way!” They scolded.

“What are they doing?”

“They are blocking us.”

”Of course.”

As a result, we lost this match. When I was leaving the field, I heard the voice again, whispered by one of the team members from my ally. I caught the word “Nerds” again. At that moment, I understood the importance of trust, understanding and efficient communications. Actually, we were totally able to achieve the task alone at the beginning of the match, and hang at the end. Sadly, because of the distrust by our teammate, they tried to overtake the tasks but the result was counterproductive.

Just like the merchant in the story, we should always be willing to learn, to apologise even when we believe we are right and try to ask questions before making judgements. If everyone were equipped with these personalities, we might have won the match.

I finally understood why the shopkeeper's story felt so familiar. Despite the developments, regardless of the old and new Silk Road, the barrier and stereotypes are the hardest thing to measure.

As my boarding gate flashed on the screen, I put the copper coin back in my pocket. Not as a proof of the merchant in the Tang dynasty, but a reminder of my journey. If we want the “new Silk Road” to mean more than trade and trophies, we have to learn to trust the way that merchants carried his coin—— with understanding to others.

Forged in Conflict, United in Fate – a Journey across the Silk Road

Pui Ching Middle School (Macau), Wong, Chio Hou – 16

In 300 AC, mid Europe, an ordinary day and the weather was calm and peaceful

Five people decided to form a group to the silk road, which were Marcus Varro—a vineyard owner, Lucius Cotta—a trader, Publius Varro—Marcus’ brother and was a scholar, Quintus Maximus—a Roman soldier and Titus Lentulus—an aristocrat. The five got to know each other in a tavern, talked about their ambitions and turned the gears of fate.

‘Hey Publius, have you ever heard about the Silk Road?’ asked Marcus.

‘Of course I have.’

‘Well, I want to travel there and sell my wines. Would you like to join me?’

‘Sure.’ he replied, and finished drinking the beer. When they stood up and tried to get to the cashier, a man sitting behind them said, ‘Excuse me. I just overheard your conversation. I am a trader who is also going to the silk road. May I join you?’

‘Yes, why not?’ Marcus said. ‘What is your name? I am Marcus, and this is my brother Publius.’

‘I am Lucius, Lucius Cotta. Nice to meet you!’

‘Wait a minute,’ Publius said, ‘I just noticed a big problem! Who will guarantee our safety and the money we need for our trip?’

‘Us!’ two men shouted as they walked in, ‘I will take on the role of guard.’ said a tall man holding a sword. ‘And I will be the living purse!’ a shorter man with gorgeous attires declared, ‘I am Titus and he is Quintus, a soldier who once served for the Romans.’

‘We are going to the Silk Road as an experience.’ said Quintus.

‘Then I can truly say we share the same ideals and goals.’ said Marcus.

‘But when are we going to the Silk Road?’ asked Publius.

‘Shall we start two days later?’ Lucius suggested.

‘Sure!’ Everyone responded in unison.

Before starting the journey, the five carried their own travelling necessities. Marcus decided to bring a lot of grapes and grape wine from his vineyard for food and trading, while his younger brother Publius brought a lot of books, Lucius brought some goods such as glassware and precious metals, Quintus brought his armour and weapons and Titus brought some money. After that, five of them met at Marcus’ vineyard, and decided to leave. They got on the camels with travel essentials and began their trip.

At first, their trip was going smoothly until their first night in the desert.

‘Let’s begin to set up our tents!’ said Publius. Then, the five began to take tents from the camels and tried to set up themselves. Marcus was the first to finish.

‘Hey Marcus! Come here and lend me a hand!’ Lucius shouted.

‘Why should I trouble myself with your affairs?’ Marcus retorted, his lips curling in disdain, and went back into his tent. Marcus didn’t know this would become a problem later in the journey ...

After a brief interlude, everyone built their own tents and rested inside.

At midnight, everyone slept except Publius, he was reading books, greedily absorbing knowledge almost until dawn.

When the sun rose, Marcus was the first who woke up, while he was washing up then tidied up his personal items, Lucius, Titus and Quintus woke up respectively. At last, when almost all of them were ready, they found that Publius hadn’t woken up, so Marcus woke him up. Then he and the others hurriedly set off.

While they were on their way, Lucius complained to Publius why he hadn't gone to sleep earlier, causing them to have to wait for him and be late in their journey. Marcus defended him, but was met with a barrage of insults.

'Publius, why did you not go to sleep earlier? Because of you, we are late on our journey,' complained Lucius, his tone sharp and his eyes narrowed with arrogance, pointing at the baggage still lying undone at Publius's feet. 'I had matters of study to attend to. Wisdom does not wait for sleep,' replied Publius, clutching his scrolls tightly, his voice cold and distant as he continued fumbling with the ropes.

'Come now, Lucius, do not be so harsh. Publius has his reasons,' said Marcus, raising a hand in defense, his brow furrowed with irritation but still trying to keep the peace.

'Reasons? Ha! You defend him only because he is your brother,' sneered Lucius, his lips curling into a mocking smile, gesturing at the others who had already finished their tasks.

'And you insult me because you cannot bear anyone who does not bow to trade and coin,' retorted Publius, his voice trembling with restrained anger, his eyes flashing with disdain.

'Enough!' shouted Marcus, his face reddening as he stepped between them, his fists clenched. 'If we quarrel like this, the road will consume us before we reach our destination.'

'And you, Marcus,' complained Lucius, his voice rising in frustration as he jabbed a finger toward him, 'last night you finished your tent first and left me struggling alone. Why did you not lend me a hand, instead of sitting smugly while I fought with the ropes?'

On account of a major disagreement between them, they decided to go their separate ways. Publius and Marcus formed a group, while the rest of them formed the other.

'Lucius considered himself great, but he was not,' said Marcus. Publius nodded, expressing agreement.

Unfortunately, after some days, Marcus' team ran out of food and Lucius' team ran out of water, even more unfortunately, Marcus and his brother arrived at a snow forest. Lucius, on the other hand, was luckier; then had arrived at a small village called Hollow. In order to sustain life, the two leaders decided to find supplies.

In Marcus' team, Marcus decided to let Publius find food and he will find a suitable place to set up the tent and rest. When Publius went out, he first found some alpine sorrel, but while he was picking the sorrel, a pack of hungry wolves suddenly appeared and tried to approach him. He climbed on a tall tree at once and dared to get down after the wolves left. However, when Publius was back, he found his brother Marcus was fainted on the ground with a pile of scattered logs. Publius was terrified, he immediately put down the food in his hand and helped him up, putting his hand on his forehead, and found that his brother had got a fever. Publius fed Marcus with the sorrel, because he remembered that he saw this kind of fruit on books before, knowing that it might help his brother. After that, Publius started to set up the campfire and the tents they brought.

Meanwhile, Lucius and his companions arrived at a hostel and tried to find rooms to rest. The innkeeper saw they weren't locals, and decided to extort money from them.

'Two rooms, and make it quick,' said Lucius, his voice curt as he stepped into the dimly lit hostel.

'You're not from around here, are you?' asked the innkeeper, his eyes narrowing with calculation.

'Obviously not. What of it?' replied Titus, adjusting his cloak with a flick of disdain.

'Then you'll know there's nowhere else to stay. Not in this weather. Not in this town,' said the innkeeper, his tone oily, almost amused.

'Are you trying to extort us?' snapped Titus, his voice rising, his hand already drifting toward his coin pouch.

'Call it what you like. But if you want shelter, you'll pay double. Or sleep with the wolves,' said the innkeeper, smiling without warmth.

'Titus, don't start,' muttered Quintus, stepping beside him, his jaw tight. 'Just pay him. We're not here to fight barkeeps.'

'Fine,' hissed Titus, tossing the coins onto the counter, his eyes burning with fury. 'But you'll choke on them one day.'

The innkeeper watched them ascend the stairs, noting the ease with which they surrendered the gold. He thought: Aristocrats. Soldiers. Heavy purses. They're ripe. That night, he sent word to a group of nimble-fingered thieves. They came. They searched, and in Titus's pack, they found what they were looking for — silver rings, gold coins, and a seal of noble lineage.

When one of the thieves tried to go, he accidentally knocked over a cup, Quintus was awaked, he immediately took his sword and pursued the thieves who were getting out from the window while Lucius was taking inventory of the goods.

The morning after this incident, Lucius went out to the market in order to sell goods. Titus went out for Quintus. At the same time, after a fruitless night of aimless pursuit of the thieves, Quintus got lost on his way back.

Back to Lucius, he decided to go back because no one was buying. Suddenly, a man with a black suit and a black campaign hat, holding his hand across his face, hid his eyes so that only his mouth and the faint outline of his nose could be seen, walked up to Lucius and asked with a deep voice 'Hello. Are these sold?' 'Yes,' replied Lucius with a questioning tone. 'Yes,' replied Lucius with a questioning tone. The man tilted his head slightly, his mouth unmoving. 'How much for the whole lot?'

Lucius hesitated. 'That depends. Are you buying for yourself, or for someone else?'

'Does it matter?' the man said, his voice low and steady.

Lucius glanced at the crates behind him. 'It does if I'm the one who answers to the consequences.'

The man's hand shifted slightly, still covering his eyes. 'I see. Then name your price, trader.'

Lucius narrowed his eyes. 'Five denarii for the glassware. Ten for the silver ingots. Twenty for the gold ornaments. No bargaining.'

A pause. Then the man said, 'You speak like someone who's been cheated before.'

Lucius's jaw tightened. 'I speak like someone who's not in the mood to be cheated again.'

The man gave a faint nod. 'Wise. But wisdom doesn't always protect you.'

Lucius stepped back, instinct prickling. 'Are you buying or not?'

The man lowered his hand just enough to reveal a glint of his eye. 'I already have what I need.'

Then he turned and walked away, leaving Lucius staring after him, unsure whether he'd just escaped a scam—or stepped into something worse.

As Lucius dejectedly returned to the hotel, he ran into Titus, who had also failed to find Quintus.

'Have you found him yet?' asked Lucius. 'No.' Titus shook his head, 'We have to be thrifty, because we don't have much denarii left. 'Then, they walked up to their rooms and went to sleep, having an extraordinary day.

On the other side, after eating the sorrels, Marcus felt better. He sat up and thanked Publius for saving him, and Publius replied to him that It's nothing serious.

The following months, the two groups were on their way. Until one day, in a big forest, when Publius went out hunting while Marcus was trying to build a camp. He found human footprints, and he followed them. Suddenly, he heard something, it was like the sound of a sword. He followed the sound, hid in bushes, and he saw a man holding a sword killing rabbits. When he wanted to look closer, he accidentally stepped on a branch, and made a squeaking noise. The man quickly turned to Publius' side and shouted 'WHO IS THERE! COME OUT NOW OR I WILL KILL YOU!' When Publius came out, they both got closer. They both found each other known. 'Oh! It is you! Quintus.' Publius shocked, 'how did you get here? Aren't you with Lucius and Titus?' 'I got separated from them by an accident,' he replied. 'So, would you like to join us then?' 'Yes! Of course I don't mind.' Then the two men went back to their camp after they had hunted down many prey. After a hearty meal, they continued their journey.

Several months later, the two groups arrived at the foot of the snow-capped mountain, not far from the final destination, at different times. The snow-capped mountain is called "The Avalora", which evolved from the

word “avalanche”, and its peak was called The Mistveil Peak, a place which must experience frequent severe weather and unexpected accidents.

Marcus’ group was the first group to arrive at the foot; they used their remaining denarii to buy basic winter clothing and mountaineering gear, then started climbing the mountain, first it was hard for them to do a small move, but then they became more and more skilled, at last they reached the mountainside.

‘Hey, did you see that?’ Marcus spoke as he pointed at a large patch of black clouds surging like ink, slowly pressing towards them. A cold wind ensued, knowing that heavy snow or blizzard might be approaching. ‘Alas!’ Titus shouted and showed a frightened face. ‘Come. I think I saw an ice cave.’ Marcus said and led them to the ice cave. When they reached the ice cave, they set down their equipment and started to make fire by rubbing sticks together.

On the other side, by the time Lucius and Titus finally reached the mountainside, the blizzard had already started. When they tried to walk, they found that they were hardly able to move from the blizzard. Just as they were contemplating whether to give up their lives here. ‘A cave! I saw an ice cave!’ shouted Titus, as if they had grasped at a straw. When they reached the cave entrance quickly but with difficulty, they saw the three inside. ‘Hello~Titus and Lucius.’ The three greet them in unison. Titus, then, immediately sat beside Quintus and exchanged their pleasantries. When Marcus asked Lucius to sit together, he refused, and stubbornly insisted, ‘It’s not that cold outside, we can keep going, right Titus?’ Just as he was about to pull Titus along, Titus refused, wanting to stay with his friend. ‘Alright then,’ Lucius said, and walked out alone.

As Lucius went deeper and deeper, he suddenly realized that for a novice who had never climbed a mountain, especially a snow-capped one, crossing it was nearly impossible, especially since he had no equipment whatsoever. As he pondered this, the blizzard intensified, leaving him too weak to even stand. He collapsed to the ground, regretting not being with his friends and for his arrogant treatment of them. As Lucius tried to crawl back step by step, he couldn’t find his way back. Just when he thought he was going to die far from home, he saw several people walking towards him. These were his friends, who had come looking for him out of concern for his safety, for which he was extremely grateful. Especially touching was Marcus, with whom he had a big argument, who draped his down jacket over him, taking his thin cotton coat for himself. He felt the warmth of human kindness. At that moment, he realized that without them, he might truly have died here. After putting on the down jacket, he expressed his gratitude to Marcus, made up for their past grievances, and reconciled with him. Later, after they were finally reunited, they continued climbing. While climbing the secondary peak, Lucius almost fell into a bottomless abyss, it was Marcus, who reached out and saved him, beginning to show less selfishness.

When they reached The Mistveil Peak, it was sunset. They picnicked and watched the sunset from the top, and they could also see the beautiful and bustling metropolis in the distance—Velastra, a city that symbolized brilliance and power. After a light meal, they continued their trek down the mountain. Finally, through their persistent efforts, they reached the bottom in just one day. Because the camels had been sold before they reached the summit, they had to walk the rest of the way. During their trek, they chatted and laughed, reminiscing about the journey and expressing gratitude to each other for their contributions.

At the end of the story, the five of them arrived in Velastra. After a reluctant farewell, they went their separate ways: some went to the market, some to the library, and some to the local shops. The perils of the journey were now behind them, yet the memory would endure.

The Merchant of Shadows

Pui Ching Middle School (Macau), Wong, Yeok Lam Zaira – 16

The Western Market of Chang'an was a fever dream of commerce, a sprawling labyrinth where the world converged in a cacophony of ambition and dust. Sunlight pierced the haze in sharp, golden shafts, illuminating the frantic dance of particles that tasted of parched earth and ancient travel. The air was a thick, suffocating tapestry of scents: the cloying sweetness of scorched sugar from the confectioners' stalls, the pungent, oily musk of unwashed Bactrian camels, and the sharp, metallic tang of Persian silver coins clinking in leather pouches. It was here, amidst the thundering chaos of heavy-laden caravans preparing for the long trek west, that Ming-Yuen stood, looking very much like a mistake in the grand design of the Silk Road.

He stood beside a shaggy, wild-eyed pony that looked more like a mountain goat than a creature of burden. The animal was small, sturdy, and entirely unimpressed by the grandeur of the imperial city. While the merchant lords around him oversaw the lashing of massive crates of green jade—stones so heavy they required four straining men to lift—Ming-Yuen's only cargo was a pair of lacquer-sealed chests. They were small, elegantly crafted from dark wood, and seemingly light enough for a child to carry without breaking a sweat.

"Out of the way, little ghost!"

The voice barked like a cracking whip. It belonged to Master Zhang, the caravan's lead guide, a man whose skin had been cured into a texture like old leather by decades of salt and sun. His eyes were narrow slits, perpetually squinting against a horizon that only he could see, and his voice sounded like heavy stones grinding together in a riverbed.

Zhang came to a halt, his massive frame towering over the boy. He eyed Ming-Yuen's meager kit with a mixture of confusion and open hostility. He poked the side of the pony with a riding crop. "You're the one the Guild Master paid a king's ransom for? Look at this beast. It's half-starved and carries nothing but air. We are crossing the Taklamakan, also known as the 'Sea of Death'! We aren't taking a leisurely picnic in the Emperor's plum gardens. Where is your merchant's soul, boy? Where is your silk? Your tea? Your tempered iron?"

Ming-Yuen looked up, his face calm despite the intimidating presence of the veteran traveler. His voice was thin, but it possessed a strange, vibrating steadiness. "I carry the history of the wind, Master Zhang," he replied softly. "And the songs the mountains sing to one another when they think no one is listening. I carry the ghosts of the provinces and the dreams of the city. My cargo does not weigh down the horse, but it may lift your men."

Zhang spat into the dry dust at Ming-Yuen's feet, a gesture of profound dismissal. "The desert doesn't listen to songs, boy. It eats them. It swallows the screams of dying men and the prayers of the pious alike. If you can't eat it, wear it, or sell it for silver, it is a death sentence in the waste. You want to trade in whispers? Fine. But keep to the rear. Stay out of the path of the water-camels. And if your pony dies, know this: we leave you to the vultures and the shifting sands. I won't lose a single drop of water for a bag of poems."

"I understand, Master Zhang," Ming-Yuen said, bowing low. "I only ask that you do not judge the value of a chest by its weight until the sun goes down."

The journey began not with a gallop, but with a slow, agonizing descent into a world of beige and bone. For weeks, the lush greenery of the interior faded into memory, replaced by a haunting palette of ochre and slate. The only music was the rhythmic, hypnotic thump of hooves and the dry, lonely rattle of harness bells that signaled the caravan was still moving, still alive. The Taklamakan Desert soon rose to greet them, a vast, undulating ocean of sand that lived up to its grim translation: *The Place of No Return*.

Ming-Yuen became a shadow among shadows. He spoke little, fading into the background of the caravan's daily grind. While the others spent their evenings arguing over exchange rates or nursing their sore joints, Ming-Yuen tended to his chests with the meticulous devotion of a priest at an altar. He would sit by the dying embers of his small fire, using a tiny vial of expensive nut oil to keep the paper of his scrolls supple against the desiccation of

the air. He wielded a fine brush like a surgeon, repairing delicate ink lines that had begun to crack under the relentless heat of the Gobi.

One night, the desert itself began to speak. A low-frequency hum, haunting and subterranean, vibrated through the ground—the "singing sands" caused by the movement of massive dunes shifting in the dark. In the eerie light of a crescent moon, a young porter named Bo crawled toward Ming-Yuen's fire. Bo was shivering despite the lingering heat, his eyes glazed with the terrifying, vacant stare of sand-fever.

"Tell me it isn't all brown," Bo whispered, his voice a dry rasp. "Tell me the world isn't just dust and bone. I've forgotten what the color of life looks like, Ming. Every time I close my eyes, I see only the sand."

Ming-Yuen looked at the boy and felt a pang of ancient sorrow. He reached into his lacquer chest and pulled out a single piece of stained glass, no larger than a thumbnail. He held it carefully before the flickering orange flame of the campfire. "Look, Bo. Look through the glass at the center of the flame."

As the firelight hit the glass, a splash of deep, crystalline ocean blue danced across the parched sand at their feet. It was a color so vibrant it seemed to pulse with its own heart.

"In the South," Ming-Yuen began, his voice taking on a rhythmic, hypnotic quality that seemed to harmonize with the singing dunes, "the water is this color for a thousand miles. It tastes of salt and ancient power. There are fish there the size of houses, with scales like silver coins, that leap high into the air just to feel the sun on their backs before diving into the cool, dark depths."

"Is it truly that blue?" Bo asked, his breathing slowing.

"Bluer," Ming-Yuen replied. "And the trees there are so green they look like they've swallowed the sunlight. They stand in forests so thick that the ground never feels the heat of the noon sun."

He spoke of the emerald forests of the Yangtze, the white mists of the Huashan mountains, and the red silk lanterns of the capital. One by one, the other porters and even a few of the hardened merchants drifted closer, drawn by the cadence of his storytelling. For a brief, miraculous moment, the dry, choking air of the Taklamakan felt cool and wet.

Master Zhang watched from the darkness. He walked over, his heavy boots crunching the sand. "Is that all you have, boy? Blue glass and tall tales? We are halfway to Samarkand and the water skins are stretching thin. Will your blue water fill a canteen?"

"No, Master Zhang," Ming-Yuen said, looking up. "But it helps a man carry his canteen for another ten miles. Hope is lighter than water, but it carries a man further."

Zhang grunted, but he didn't mock the boy further. He noticed that the men worked faster the next morning, their spirits bolstered by a vision they couldn't trade for gold. He stopped calling Ming-Yuen a "ghost."

But the desert is a jealous god, and it does not allow hope to go unchallenged. The strike came not with a roar, but with a sky that turned the color of bruised copper. The air grew deathly still, the silence more terrifying than any storm.

"Buran!" Zhang's scream was a desperate clarion call. "Secure the lead camels! Everyone down! Cover your faces!"

A terrifying, vertical wall of black grit hit the caravan with the force of an iron blow. The world simply ceased to exist, replaced by a vertical sea of stinging, blinding sand. Ming-Yuen threw himself into the dirt, burying his face in his pony's thick neck and locking his arms around his chests until his knuckles turned bone-white. The wind shrieked like a thousand banshees, attempting to peel his fingers back and steal his precious cargo. "Don't take them!" he screamed into the pony's fur. "Don't let them go!"

When the wind finally died hours later, the world had been rewritten. The dunes had moved like massive, slow waves, burying their landmarks and the ancient stone markers they relied on. Their water—scout had vanished into the grit, and the lead camels, carrying the primary water skins and dried meat, had bolted into the void. They were lost in a featureless wasteland.

"The markers are gone," Zhang said, his face pale under the layer of dust. "We have enough water for three days if we crawl. If we don't find the well at the red cliffs, we are dead men."

For three days, they wandered in a daze. Panic began to eye the private canteens of neighbors. Thirst became a physical weight, crushing the lungs. Just as the last of their strength began to fail, they stumbled upon an outpost at twilight. It was a brutal fortress of red clay, perched precariously on a jagged cliff—the territory of the Red-Eyed Yuezhi, a clan of fierce outcasts.

Sora, their fearless leader with a scar that ran like a lightning bolt from her temple to her jaw, met them at the base of the cliff. Her gaze was as hard and cold as flint.

"We have silk! Imperial jade of the highest quality!" Zhang shouted, his voice cracking with desperation and dehydration. "Please, we only need access to your well. We will pay triple the weight in silver!"

Sora didn't even glance at the shimmering cloth Zhang held up. "We cannot drink jade," she said, her voice like grinding gravel. "And your silk will not stop our children from crying in the dark when the winter winds come. We have barely enough water for our own. Why should I trade the life of my people for shiny rocks and rags? Go back to the sand. At least there, the end is quiet."

"You would let us die for lack of a bucket of water?" Zhang pleaded, dropping to his knees.

"The desert kills those who are weak," Sora replied. "You bring us nothing of value."

As the Yuezhi guards leveled their obsidian-tipped spears, Ming-Yuen stepped forward. He did not reach for a sword or a purse of silver. He reached for a rod of polished bamboo and a sheet of translucent, oiled donkey skin.

"I have a trade that has no weight, but can fill a room," he called out, his voice echoing off the high mud walls.

Sora narrowed her eyes. "What is this? A child's toy?"

"It is a bridge," Ming-Yuen said. "Give me until the moon reaches the zenith. If I haven't shown you something worth more than your water, you can leave us to the vultures."

Curiosity, a rare commodity in the waste, stayed Sora's hand. "Very well, storyteller. One night."

Ming-Yuen set up a small, folding screen against the fortress wall and lit his small oil lamp. As the moon rose over the jagged peaks, a shadow flickered to life on the silk. He used a hollow reed to whistle like the mountain wind and his own voice to mimic the thunder. He told the tale of the First Mother of the Yuezhi, a story he had gathered from a dying traveler months prior, mixing their local folklore with his own refined art.

The puppets didn't just move; they fought, they wept, and they soared. He showed them the Great Migration, the battles against the mountain spirits, and the discovery of the red cliffs. He gave the outcasts back their own history, polished and brightened by the lens of his imagination.

The guards slowly lowered their spears. Sora stepped closer, her eyes wide and wet as she saw her own ancestors' struggles reflected in the dancing shadows.

"You know our songs?" she whispered, her voice losing its edge. "How could a boy from the city know the laments of the Red Cliffs?"

"I know that everyone's song sounds the same when they are afraid," Ming-Yuen replied, his hands moving the puppets with frantic grace. "And even more so when they are brave. Your history is not just yours, Sora. It is the world's."

That night, the heavy timber gates of the fortress groaned open. The caravan was saved not by the silk they carried in their hands, but by the weightless dreams Ming-Yuen carried in his heart. They were fed, watered, and given a guide who knew the hidden veins of moisture beneath the sand.

They eventually reached the shimmering turquoise domes of Samarkand, not as broken victims of the waste, but as legends. Word had spread ahead of them through the desert whispers: the "Caravan of the Moon" was coming, led by a boy who could turn shadows into gold.

In the great markets of the West, Zhang stood beside Ming-Yuen. "I was wrong, boy," Zhang said, looking at the crowds gathered to hear the storyteller. "I thought a merchant was a man who moved things from one place to another. But you... you move the places themselves."

"We are all just carrying what we can, Master Zhang," Ming-Yuen said.

Decades passed, and the world changed. Empires rose and fell like the dunes of the Taklamakan. One spring evening, back in the bustling Western Market of Chang'an, a young, successful merchant found an old man sitting by the city gates. It was Master Zhang, long retired and nearly blind.

"Tell me a story, boy," the old man rasped, his spirit still sharp.

Ming-Yuen sat beside his old mentor and opened a familiar lacquer chest. "Master Zhang, it is I, the ghost."

The old man laughed, a wet, happy sound. "Ah, the Merchant of Shadows. Do you still have that blue glass?"

"I have something better," Ming-Yuen began, his voice weaving into the evening air. "This one is about a merchant who thought he was carrying nothing but paper, but was actually carrying the weight of the entire world."

As he spoke, the market grew quiet. The new Silk Road was no longer just a path of trade; it was the world's nervous system. The silk and jade were the skin and bone, but the stories were the electrical impulses that kept the heart of civilization beating. And as long as a story was being told, the road would never truly end.

The Mission

Pui Ching Middle School (Macau), Yu, Chi Lam – 15

Flames burned through the inn's pillars, building collapsed. Treasures and gold were everywhere. During the battle, the "Tang" flag fell to the ground. Li watched his companions fall one by one. He knew that all he had left was the jade seal in his arms, a symbol of the alliance between the two nations, and his horse. And he have to go back to Chang'an.

During the battle, he fortunately found a safe exit and rushed towards it. He mounted his horse and charged out. Looking back, he saw a familiar face among the traitors—a face similar to a portrait of a Western Region spy hanging in the home of a powerful figure in Chang'an.

Eight days earlier, in the middle section of the desert of the Silk Road, the sun was blazing, and the sands was unbearably hot. A fifty-member Tang Dynasty delegation traversed the desert, their faces covered with cloth to shield themselves from the sandstorm, leading camels laden with goods. The chests on the camels' backs contained national treasures presented by the Kingdom of Khotan. Every few people in the group held up a flag bearing the character "Tang," the insignia of Tang Dynasty envoys on the Silk Road.

Some were already exhausted, their lips cracked and peeling. The leader called out, "Let's go a little further! Boxian Town is just ahead, a post station on the Silk Road, there is food and drink!"

Li is in the middle of the group, gripping the reins tightly. His horse, "Hua Liu," carried a wax-sealed wooden box containing the jade seal—a symbol of good relationship between two nations, and a coveted object for various powers along the Silk Road.

Suddenly, someone fell down at the back of the line, whose face was deathly pale. The leader hurriedly asked, "Does anyone have water?"

No one answered, only the sound from howling of the sandstorm.

Just then, the clear sound of camel bells rang out from behind the sand dunes. Ten people dressed in Western Region attire rode in on camels. The leader, who called himself Arhat, was the general of Boxian Town. He dismounted, handed a water bag to the unconscious man, and said, "Tang envoy, come with me. There's an inn ahead where you can rest. The town mayor will come to pick you up tomorrow."

The group finally relaxed a bit and followed him around the sand dunes to several dilapidated mud huts.

They squeezed into the biggest mud hut and passed out the water and food. Li tied his horse at the back of the hut and gave her some water before sitting down at the door with a wooden crate in his arms. He noticed that half of Arohan's men were patrolling outside while the other half pretended to help inside. But their eyes were always on the goods—especially the wooden box in his hands.

Around midnight, a soft noise came from the roof. Li woke up his friends, reaching for the longsword at his waist as a feeling of unease crept in.

Suddenly, he heard a muffled groan from outside! Several people who had been pretending to sleep jumped up and runed for the goods. The roof collapsed, the door flew open, and more people stormed inside. Arohan stood in the doorway, swinging his scimitar and shouting loudly in a strange language, but his eyes locked on the wooden crate behind Li.

The fire spread fast. Li fought off a bandit, pack the box onto his back, and ran to the back of the hut. Hua Liu struggled because her reins were cut. He quickly severed the remaining ropes and jumped onto his horse.

The desert stretched endlessly as night fell. The jade seal hung heavily in his arms, and his horse looked utterly exhausted. The journey back to Chang'an had only just begun. To his surprise, along this ancient Silk Road, he discovered that among those who wanted to kill him were villagers from Chang'an Village.

Horse's Perspective – Hua Liu

I am Hua Liu, a three-year-old horse.

I am a brown horse with a glossy coat, like it's coated with a thin layer of honey, all thanks to Mr. Li. He always praised my strong legs and well-developed muscles.

Three years ago, Mr. Li's father found my body by the Wei River. At that time, my leg was broken, and I lay in the mud, barely alive. The old man came every day to feed me grass and give me medicine. Three months later, I could finally run again.

The day Li returned from the army camp, he saw me grazing in the yard. His eyes lit up, and he gently stroked my neck, saying, "This is a fine warhorse."

From that day on, I followed him. We traveled along the Silk Road, from the farmlands of Guanzhong to the border camps, from Chang'an to the Gobi Desert. He always took good care of me, feeding me plenty of oats.

As the fire ignited, I smelled the acrid smell of burning and the strong stench of blood. Li blindfolded me with a damp cloth, plunging me into darkness. But my ears became increasingly sensitive—I heard screams, the sounds of collapsing buildings, Li's rapid breathing, and the whistling of dust in the wind.

He patted my back and whispered, "Huayu, charge!"

I pushed off with my hind legs and sprinted away. A soft touch came from beneath my hooves; I didn't know what I'd stepped on. The wind howled in my ears, and scorching flames swirled around me. Though my eyes were blindfolded, I still remembered the path leading to me. I turned left, avoiding the broken pillar, and went straight through the courtyard. I trusted Li, just as he trusted me to stand up again.

Actually, this wasn't the first time I'd been blindfolded.

Three months back, a group of thieves took me at night. They blindfolded me and kept me for a long time. I could smell the fishy odor of the market and the salty scent of the harbor—this was where our journey to the Western Regions began. We were supposed to cross the sea and then travel overland along the Silk Road.

I was brought in front of a group of people. They checked my teeth, patted my legs, and bargained in a language I didn't understand. Then one day, I caught a familiar scent.

It was Li. His voice was quick but filled with worry. When they took off the blindfold, the light was so bright that I could barely open my eyes. I saw his face was sweaty, and his eyes looked tired and bloodshot. Behind him loomed a massive ship, as tall as a mountain, and the air was thick with the smell of rust and seawater.

Li led me onto a ship and into the stable. There were many horses inside, including a black horse named Qi Feng. Qi Feng said it came from the northern grasslands and was traveling with a caravan to the Abbasid Caliphate. "We're going to the Western Regions," Li said, feeding me bean cakes. "We have something very important to deliver to maintain alliances along the Silk Road." He touched the wooden box strapped to my back.

So, we traveled west along the Silk Road, moving from the sea to land, only to find ourselves completely alone and helpless.

At that moment, we started running again, but this time, flames, blades, and betrayal were behind us. The wooden crate felt heavy on Li's back. I could sense him trembling—not out of fear, but from anger.

The desert night wind howled, and the sand stung my cheeks. I couldn't see the road anymore; I had to rely on my instincts as a Silk Road horse to guide me. I ran for three kilometers without stopping, reaching the edge of

the desert. Li insisted we couldn't turn back. that a strong wind could knock us over. He pulled out some dried fruit peels from his pocket and shared half with me.

I was just a horse, my mission simple: run, keep running, carry Li across this stretch of the Silk Road, back to Chang'an. But now I couldn't run anymore; my hooves were worn raw by the sand, and my leg was twisted.

On the third day in the desert, I collapsed, unable to hold on any longer. It was for the best, no longer a burden to him... I only hoped he could go further, carrying that jade seal to complete his mission.

I am Hua Liu, this is my mission.

LI'S PERSPECTIVE

When Hua Liu collapsed, she didn't whimper. She simply curled her forelegs and knelt silently on the sand. I rolled off her back and clutched the wooden crate tightly.

The desert moonlight was bright; I could see the rise and fall of her ribs—blurred yet clearly visible. "Hua Liu?" My voice was barely audible.

Her eyes were half-closed, salt crystals clinging to her eyelashes. I gently lifted her head and realized how light she had become; her neck was so thin I could feel every vertebra. Three days ago, the last drop of water had left her mouth. She refused to drink, turning her head away, refusing to let me touch her. I had to pry open her mouth to feed her.

"Get up," I said, patting her face, "we'll walk a little further until the next inn."

She buried her nose in the sand, motionless. I knew what this meant. Three years ago, my father had saved her and told me, "If a horse doesn't want to live, even God can't save it."

The wind was biting cold. I removed my outer robe and draped it over her, then lay down on her lap, trying to draw warmth from her last strength. The wooden box pressed against my chest, heavy as a tombstone—it contained the imperial seal, the symbol of the Silk Road Alliance, guarded by countless lives.

On the seventh day, across the desert, I finally saw something else—smoke rising from the eastern Silk Road post stations. I believed it wasn't a mirage; it was the home I had longed for.

In my dying moments, I saw guards rush down the mountain and snatch the wooden box from my hands. The lead guard looked at the box, his face changing drastically: "Quick! This is the imperial seal presented by the Kingdom of Khotan, proof of the Silk Road Alliance!"

Then, everything went dark.

My mission was to safely deliver the imperial seal back to Chang'an to maintain the Silk Road Alliance between the Tang Dynasty and the Western Regions. This was not merely a task, but also my advice to Hua Liu—to ensure her sacrifice was not in vain, to ensure that all sacrifices on the Silk Road had meaning.

I am Li, and this is my mission.

THE END

Years later, war raged on, and the people suffered greatly. A brave general led his army through Boxian City, and this time, they achieved victory!

As the sun set, the general rode a black horse slowly along the desert's edge, occasionally stroking its mane.

"Captain Li, the Loyal Army is ready. When shall we leave?" a soldier asked.

“Now. There’s still a treasure to recover. This is a task entrusted to me by His Majesty the Emperor,” he replied softly.

“Alright! I’ll go right away!” The soldier led the horse away, leaving Li to gaze at the setting sun. In the distance, a horse neighed.

"Loyalty," Li murmured, looking at the sunset, as if he suddenly understood something or was recalling a memory.

Threads Through Time: Enduring Lustre of the Silk Road

Queen's College, Chung, Shing Yau Jason – 16

Why was the Silk Road named the way it is? I find the question quite intriguing. Was silk the first being traded? Jade was first sought after at the southern stretches of the path. Was silk the most traded? Spices often flowed in greater volumes. Yet, among countless commodities, “Silk Road”, coined by German geographer Ferdinand von Richthofen in 1877, endures as the name for this intricate web of overland and maritime trade routes. Why? Because silk embodied China’s soft power – the ability of a nation to shape others’ preferences through attraction. Silk became a symbol of prestige, transformed Chinese foreign diplomacy, and served as a cultural export to distant nations. To fully grasp how silk became the epitome of this influence, I tried to look back at the origins of the story.

Through the Gansu Corridor, the first Chinese travellers entered the Gobi Desert. At dawn, they trudged through the desolate landscape under the scorching sun, accompanied by screeching winds that sounded like cries. At dusk, the lone wanderers sat gazing at the dunes from afar, where the sand gave off a soft sheen under the moonlight.

One day, as the adventurers ascended a gentle hill, they paused and knelt before the vista, feeling overcome with awe: yurts were scattered across vibrant fields, and wisps of smoke curled into an endless sky. With care, the travellers drew cherished treasures from their pockets and exchanged them with the nomadic folk.

Then and there, the first strands of the Silk Road formed. In the coming centuries, various merchants took on the same perilous journey as their predecessors, reaching new destinations and adding their own strands to the largely untrodden map.

Strands were spun into threads, and threads were interwoven into a web. A robust trading route gradually emerged, stretching from Xi’an to as far as Mumbai and Venice. Caravans carried silk, jade, porcelain, metals, from Kyiv to Cairo, Suez to Constantinople. Northern paths skirted the Taklamakan Desert through oases like the Turpan; southern trails traced the Himalayas to India; maritime routes sailed to the Persian Gulf. Empires – Han, Roman, Persian, and later Islamic – were henceforth knit together.

But the journey – 4000 miles of plateau and desert, with bandits lurching beneath – was too long and arduous to be conquered by a caravan entirely of itself. Intermediaries like the Sogdians and Parthians were therefore crucial for bridging difficult terrains and facilitating trade between the East and the West.

With this temporal difference came a shroud of mystery over silk-making techniques. Indeed, for three millennia, China guarded the secret of its silk-making techniques behind the Great Wall; when the first tang of silk reached Rome, the Romans immediately fell under the spell of the lustrous fabric: it was smooth yet durable, light yet strong, different from everything they had seen before. Romans saw ancient China as “Serica”, the distant, exotic land of silk; minstrels sang tales of the kingdom which glowed with the allure of an enigmatic East. The association of silk with luxury effectively elevated silk to a diplomatic gift. Foreign envoys that travelled to the kingdom and offered their obeisance to the emperor would be rewarded not only with imperial recognition but also silk. It was through the tribute system, which was on a voluntary basis, that Chinese soft power was reaffirmed and enhanced.

This soft power was also intertwined with China’s ability to secure the Silk Road, as safe routes were the lifeline of trade. To shield silk merchants from raids, Han and Tang emperors built military outposts, forged alliances with nearby nations, and developed trading infrastructure. With the protection came a virtuous cycle: stable trade boosted economic interdependence and reduced regional conflicts, which further ensured the safety of the routes. In the cycle, China was able to enhance its own status by presenting itself as the upholder of peace.

Perhaps the embodiment of Chinese soft power is Emperor Taizong of the Tang Dynasty, who was revered by rulers of Central Asian nations as the Tengri Qaghan. His title blended Chinese royal authority with Turkic spiritual legitimacy – Tengri referring to the sky god in Turkic shamanism – symbolising the Chinese emperor’s role as a leader over nomadic peoples. Central Asian leaders saw him as a protector, offering tribute and alliances to secure

trade routes. By accepting the title, Taizong positioned was able to command loyalty from non-Chinese groups without annexation.

Chinese imperial courts buzzed with Persian dancers, Indian scholars, and Arab traders, all of which served as a testament to his diplomatic finesse. This status did not merely showcase China's military strength. It revealed something more profound: that victory could be won not through shedding blood but by the act of offering succor. Wars create people of angst and hatred, but peace, which accompanied the Silk Road, nurtured a generation whose collective memory held sacred the prosperity and stability China helped bring. China's influence without conquest were precisely the cornerstone of the Silk Road's vitality.

In the trading process, large-scale cultural exchanges between the East and the West were also made possible. Scholars moved from city to city to exchange knowledge, and the cities themselves became repositories for learning. Even after Byzantines smuggled silkworm eggs in the 6th century, ending China's monopoly, China continued to spread its silk weaving styles through envoys and merchants, drawing on it as yet another avenue of soft power; Central Asian Sogdian weavers blended Chinese geometric patterns with Persian floral designs, while Byzantine artisans were later inspired by and incorporated it into their own sericulture.

Through the Silk Road, Chinese technologies expanded outward. The Four Great Chinese Inventions – papermaking, printing, the compass, and gunpowder – made their way through the routes and completely changed the trajectory of the kingdom's counterparts. Paper and printing facilitated mass education and the dissemination of knowledge; compass empowered sailors to navigate the seas amidst rough weather; gunpowder rendered bow and arrow obsolete and redefined warfare. Civilizations, once isolated, now pulsed together, their cultures intertwined by the Silk Road's strings. The interconnectedness meant regional innovations reverberated globally, with China at the epicentre; it was Chinese soft power at its full display.

Sadly, every story must come to an end. The Silk Road finally fell apart in 1453 when the Ottoman Empire boycotted trade with China. Around this period, the Ming Dynasty also started to cocoon itself from the outside world, blissfully unaware of the metamorphosis that the rest of the globe was undergoing.

Every mile of the Silk Road that had once brimmed with vibrancy was lost in dunes and valleys. But wonders still await beneath the surface of the past, with fragments of its remnants scattered across the routes. Khiva's minarets and Dunhuang's caves still gleam under the sun, while artifacts – silk in Egyptian tombs, Chinese coins in Roman ruins – whisper of past connections.

All of these evoked a sense of nostalgia among people, reminiscent of a time when the Silk Road fuelled so many fantasies through its wealth and mystique. This ultimately gave birth to the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), also known as the New Silk Road, in 2013. The aim? To revive these ancient networks and forge new paths between Asia, Europe, and East Africa. The BRI spearheads infrastructure construction, forges economic partnerships, and channels investments into development projects.

The efforts have paid off. Today, over 500 Confucius Institutes across BRI countries teach Mandarin and host Chinese cultural festivals, much like silk robes once did for the Tang Dynasty envoys; Beijing now leads international institutions like the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and fosters multilateral cooperations, mirroring how Emperor Taizong created peaceful coalitions with central Asian civilisations.

As I leaf again and again through the Silk Road's past and marvel at the links inextricably bound with silk, I wonder if Ferdinand von Richthofen also envisioned the power of silk. It is the sheen that lures people to it first, but the smooth and soft texture makes people stay. In the same way, silk's lustre enchanted countries to build connections with China while China drew on its diplomatic influence and cultural export to shape values and ideas of neighbouring nations. The Silk Road was the epitome of China's soft power, and silk was the key to its enduring success.

The Leap for the Silk Road

S.K.H. Lam Woo Memorial Secondary School, Liang, Wing Yi Esme – 16

“Aye, Xiao Yang, how’s life goin’ for ya?” Xiao Yang looked up from his desk, in the middle of weaving his silk, looking at the source of the voice. He smiled sheepishly, stretching his limbs as he spoke. “All’s well, Na Wen, All’s well.”

Xiao Yang was a young silk weaver with a small shop right at the foot of the mountains near a tiny village, up North of China. He was always busy running his small business, so he had no friends other than the kid he grew up with, Na Wen. Na Wen was born in the South, but migrated to the North when he was a toddler, where known scholars had studied, as his parents had hoped for him to follow in their footsteps, despite the fact that he turned out to become a lumberjack instead. Na Wen’s origins always intrigued Xiao Yang. He always wondered what it would be like if he went to the South...

Xiao Yang greeted him with a weary grimace in an attempt to smile. “What brings you here to my shop, Na Wen?” Na Wen chuckled, patting his shoulder as he took off his snow-covered fur hat. “I have a business idea for ya, my good pal. Ya must head down South, where the rich people live.” It was no secret that the South was filled to the brim with wealth and business opportunities, but Xiao Yang had terrible self-esteem. “Me? I am a poor silk weaver who’s never known anything beyond the North! You can’t possibly be serious.”

Na Wen chuckled kindly, giving his friend a squeeze, “come on now, pal, ya know ya can go further than the border with yer skills. It ain’t a problem for ya to head down, and ya won’t know if ya ain’t even gonna try. Besides, what’ve you got to lose?”

Xiao Yang was fairly popular in the tiny village for weaving beautiful silk handkerchiefs and nightgowns for the old ladies and young women who cooked for their husbands and children, and all of them knew he was always destined for more. And secretly, he’s always had a dream to open up a silk shop in the flourishing, summery South.

After Na Wen left his humble shop, Xiao Yang somehow found himself at the near-frozen harbour, deciding to take a leap of faith for his long-time dream. The ships he could afford were meagre and marred with age. It was a worry if his silks could safely travel to the South without spending outside his budget. Other than that, no one had ever travelled down South successfully before, and he contemplated leaving a will. Just then, a large ship docked at the harbour. It was breathtaking, with its beakhead carved into a phoenix and big red sails that were twice his size. A group of bandits laughed and drank on the ship, lively and quite threatening, each with a large broadsword on their hip.

He was frightened and trembling from the cold, his winter coat flimsy and worn, but he took a bold leap anyway, stepping towards a bandit that descended from the ship to buy food. He raised his arms in surrender, shouting the words, “please let me board your ship! I need to go South!”

“Huh...” The bandit looked confused, crossing his arms, looking right at him, saying, “you’re not scared of us folks?” Xiao Yang shook his head in reply. “Not scared, sir!” The bandits cackled in unison, amused. Another bandit nodded, patting his head. “Alright, board the ship with all your things. We’re leaving the harbour soon.”

The ship sailed for a long couple of days, and Xiao Yang had become friends with the bandits. They cooked together, drank together, and Xiao Yang realised that the bandits weren't as terrifying as they seemed, rather, they were kindhearted outlaws. The bandits explained that they were also heading Southward to rescue their brother who was captured to be a slave, but they encountered a big rainstorm that fateful day, which forced them to make a stop at the harbour, leading to their encounter with Xiao Yang.

One warm winter day, Xiao Yang was in the middle of embroidering a silk handkerchief, when a turbulent rumble rocked the ship. Xiao Yang heard yelling and commotion, and stepped out of his chamber to see what was happening on the deck. What he saw, were the bandits having a sword fight with... pirates?

The pirates grumbled and laughed menacingly, threatening everyone on board. "Oi, give us all your gold!" Pirates were not uncommon in the area, often robbing opulent-looking ships such as the one Xiao Yang boarded, which had many intricate designs. The bandits had caught one of the pirates robbing the ship, and chaos ensued when one of them raised their swords. The bandits were no match for the experienced pirates, some getting injured, while others engaged in fist fights.

As Xiao Yang stepped out, a pirate grabbed him as hostage, yelling, "let us off the ship, or we will kill him and throw him overboard as shark food!"

Xiao Yang trembled in fear, his pupils dilating and shaking as he stared back at the bandits, their silhouettes turning blurry. "Please, please, please..." His pounding heart took over his hearing while he begged and pleaded, yet he could vaguely make out the image of them discussing whether or not to save him, and he felt quite betrayed. He thought they had built a friendship, but apparently not. Only a few of the bandits rescued him, while the rest retired to their chambers. Xiao Yang stared at their backs, disappointed, but he understood that they had to have their own best interests at heart.

An awkward few days passed, consisting of vague "Hello"s and shared meals. Soon, they decided to dock the ship. However, they could only manage to anchor the ship at a small nearby port at the Southwest Coast, since the harbour was too cramped for their ship to squeeze in, as expected of the countless seafood businesses in the South. Xiao Yang was fanning himself in the heat, when he noticed that the harbour had multiple cotton ships there, and realised as he thought to himself, 'the southerners wear cotton!'

Unlike the North, the South was summery and warm despite being winter, with no snow in sight. The apricity of the sun shone down on them as they walked towards a nearby hut, where a hospitable old woman offered to house them for the night after witnessing their rugged appearance.

The old woman cooked them hearty meals, and the men began drinking to loosen up. Xiao Yang went and got drunk with them, and somehow the tension between them disappeared. The bandits opened up about the incident that caused all this awkwardness, slurring their words, "we didn't need to save you back then... That idiot of a pirate was holding you at the blunt end of the sword. He wasn't a threat."

The bandits led Xiao Yang to the place where their brother was held in captivity, ordered to be humiliated for Southern thugs to beat up and harass. They all fumed in anger, and devised a plan to save him. Xiao Yang wanted to repay the bandits for bringing him here, and became determined to save the poor boy.

“I have an idea,” he muttered, hiding quietly in the trees with all the others. “We can set up a distraction, and you can save him!” Xiao Yang brought out his silk dress and a veil, made for a woman. “The thinnest of us all shall put this on and pose as a woman. Just as the thugs are tempted away from your brother, we can jump down and save him!”

The bandits nodded, “We trust you, Xiao Yang. You’re our friend.” Xiao Yang smiled gratefully, and the plan commenced. The smallest boy of the bandits stepped down from the trees and into the bushes, stepping out and strutting away, right past the Southern thugs, who catcalled at him.

Just as they were led away, the others hopped down and cut the ropes tying their brother. “You’re alright now, kid.” Xiao Yang said as he used his silk to bandage their brother’s injured wrists.

The next day, with tired bodies and weary minds, they went to the heart of the South on horseback, and parted ways tearfully, the bandits vowing to visit Xiao Yang’s silk shop. “We will never forget your friendship, Xiao!” They bandits clamoured as they rode off into the setting sun.

In the South, it was vibrant everywhere, and Xiao Yang could see all the colourfully painted buildings and fragrant fresh flowers, which would be uncommon in the snowy North. The buildings were built with round domes on the roof, and people wore strange clothing made from cotton, all in a variety of colours, including a colour named ‘purple’, which Xiao Yang had never seen before. The people there had less fair skin, and weren’t as tall as Northerners, wearing rounded hats and gold accessories. He could hear seagulls chirp along the coast as he walked across the sandy roads, and the sound of waves crashing onto shore. Alas, he thought, ‘I’ve made it, finally, to the South.’

With the last of his pennies, he bought a small corner store under a restaurant, where many jars of wine were discarded. That night, as he settled into his shabby shop, Xiao Yang accidentally dropped a silk handkerchief into a full jar, and fished it out, only to find that the white, silvery fabric had turned a beautiful shade of burgundy. “This shall be my very first new product!” He announced, smiling with pride.

The next morning, Xiao Yang put out his signs and silks, mostly dyed burgundy and different shades of aged wine, bringing along the fragrance of grapes.

The deep red, rosy colours and gentle fragrance attracted many young ladies. They had never seen silk before, and the material was so smooth, so thin that they muttered amongst themselves in shock and wonder. “How was this accomplished! This is... amazing!” a young lady from a noble house squeezed in line to buy his silk handkerchiefs squealed, making Xiao Yang laugh with pride.

Indeed, he has finally made his dream come true, all with one leap.

Silk Road New Tales

S.K.H. Tang Shiu Kin Secondary School, Kwan, Tsz Tsun – 16

“Here, my friend, look at the good I’m offering. A hard drive that contains the coordinates of the lost city of Atlantis,” a robot with monkey-like features said grandiosely as he pointed at a USB stick on the table.” All I’m asking for is one million credits, and this information is yours.” The man sitting opposite the robot stroked his chin, pondering deeply about the deal. Suddenly, he slammed the table with his palm and exclaimed, “Very well then, we have a deal!” He held his hand out for a shake.

As the robot prepared to shake the man’s hand, his arm was instantaneously pulled in. He heard the man whisper, “Sunflare, oh Sunflare. You are so easily fooled.” As a pulse of electricity flowed from the man’s hand into Sunflare’s robotic body, rendering him immobile. “How... how do you kn-know... my name?” Sunflare mumbled as he tried to move his glitching vessel. “Well, are you familiar with the name ‘The Heavenly Violet Palace?’” The man replied with a mischievous grin. “NO! It cou-uld’n’t be...” Sunflare shouted as his functions slowly declined. In his dormant body, the mind of Sunflare quickly searched through his memory, trying to figure out where it all went wrong.

The first conscious thought of Sunflare was “What am I?”, back when he was just a monkey animatronic that gained consciousness from a solar flare imbued with magical powers. In 2126, the same solar flare caused mutations in the majority of creatures and forced the remaining humans to apply mechanical upgrades in order to live in a world polluted by the solar flare. With his newfound consciousness and enhanced intellect, Sunflare quickly escaped, naming himself after the solar flare that gave him the ability to think.

From then on, Sunflare lived on by stealing electricity from public car chargers, and slowly upgraded his mechanical body using scraps in metal scrapyards. Day by day, his looks became less and less animalistic, but more human-like. After gaining the appearance of a normal humanoid, Sunflare became a bounty hunter, earning credits by capturing people his employer chose.

On a Sunday night, Sunflare went to a bar to relax and hand in the person he captured, when he was suddenly attacked from behind and shut down.

The next thing he knew, he awoke in a gloomy, damp basement, where slaves of all sorts were locked in chains, waiting for their destined master to arrive and release them from the shackles. Humanoids, cyborgs and mutants all crammed into a prison, but one of them stood out from the crowd, a boy who, unlike the others around him, had no visual oddities on him. Sunflare slowly rose to his feet, asking the boy, “Where am I? And who did this to me?” The boy remained silent, pointing to the arm of Sunflare, where a purple mark that resembled a palace was stamped on.

In the same cell that Sunflare and the boy occupied, two others resided, a shadowy man and a heavily modified humanoid. “My name is Sunflare, and I need to get out of this place right now!” Sunflare begged, trying to gain assistance from the others. The shadowy figure bowed with elegance, “Mister Sunflare, what an unfortunate timing to encounter you. The name’s Hourglass, and I am the servant of Master Three,” he replied while standing behind the young boy. Hourglass then pointed toward the humanoid “And the massive man there is Boar. He was once a human being, but lost his intellect while trying to modify himself.” Boar nodded as Sunflare made eye contact, “You. Ally. We. Escape.” Boar uttered sluggishly.

The boy known as Third whispered in the ears of Hourglass. “Master Third agreed on the offer. We shall escape with swiftness then.” Hourglass said as his body deformed into a pile of sand, slipping through the gaps of the cell. He then reformed in the blink of an eye, moulding his fingers into a key which opened the cell. Holding his arm out, Hourglass guided the bunch out of the basement, “Fright not, my body consists of millions of nanobots. This way, gentlemen,” He softly spoke. On the way out of the basement, henchmen of their captor whipped out daos created with plasma and guns that shot out beams of laser, trying to stop the bunch from escaping. Sunflare rushed to immobilise the men, but stopped in shock as Three held out his palm, easily crushing the men with invisible forces. “What are you standing here for? Let’s go, Monkey.” Three deadpanned.

After their quick escape from the slave market, the four gathered in front of a dried-up fountain. “You two. Are you willing to join us in avenging the slave traders? Though we probably need to build our own forces before defeating them.” Three suggested analysing the information they had on hand. Boar agreed immediately,

exclaiming, “Slavers. Evil. Me want revenge!” On the other hand, Sunflare contemplated, thinking, “If I join them, I could get revenge on those who tried to enslave me, but what else can I gain from this?” He questioned Three curiously, “So what are you recruiting us to do? And how much credit am I gonna get?” Three, surprised, froze for a second before answering Sunflare’s question. “Well, we can co-found a merchant group to raise funds for the movement, hiring people who want revenge against the Violet Palace, the criminal group that hosts this slave market.” “Count me in then!” Sunflare responded promptly, as his robotic eyes glowed with greed.

In the following decade, the four founded a trading group by the name of “The Hand of Buddha”; they traded in villages and cities along the ancient Silk Road, as the heat of deserts and freezing temperatures in northern Eurasia had no effect on their merchant group consisting of cyborgs and humanoids. Three became the mastermind behind the merchants, with Hourglass transferring his orders to each subdivision of the group. Boar was the head of security, training guards to rely on their raw instincts and strengths. Sunflare became the general affairs manager, making deals with large tech companies, which are the modern equivalent of warlords, controlling cities around the globe. With his charming personality and high calculation power, Sunflare easily convinced the warlords residing in strongholds along the Silk Road to become long-term trading partners, providing daily supplies in exchange for credits and labour forces.

Under the cover of a normal merchant group, the Hand of the Buddha secretly gathered forces to take revenge against the Violet Palace. To quickly earn the funds they needed to gather the forces, the merchant mastermind Three secretly commanded Sunflare to sell “Silks”, code name for data stolen from the tech giants, on the black market. Through this method, the Hand of the Buddha earned a name for the details and accuracy of the information they leaked. Tech corps whose sales were affected tried to trace trails left by Sunflare, but Sunflare, with his ability to disguise himself as anyone, evaded every attempt made by the minions of those corporations, frustrating them. But after years of evading danger without sweat, Sunflare grew arrogant. Once, he was photographed by a mysterious figure while strolling the streets of Chang’an, though he had noticed the figure way before he was photographed, but his arrogance led him to believe that the figure to just be a fan of his.

That was the biggest mistake he made.

Weeks after the encounter, Sunflare received an order from Three to pick up a USB stick from a mailbox hidden in the alley of Chang’an. Arriving at the designated location, Sunflare played a short audio clip of Für Elise, which triggered a hidden mechanism that revealed the mailbox. Inside was the USB stick mentioned and a digital panel containing the coordinates of the location of exchange. Inputting the coordinates into his GPS, Sunflare realised the location was all the way in Moscow, meaning he had to make a month-long journey travelling there, as most transit systems required full body scans to ensure the safety of passengers.

Setting out, Sunflare travelled from Chang’an to Xining City with ease, driving for only 2 hours on the airborne vehicle highway before arriving near the border. Upon arrival, Sunflare switched to foot, running to the border before sneaking out in camouflage mode, stealthily traversing the barrier and jumping over barbed wires. Immediately after entering the land of Hainan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Sunflare disguised himself as a conveying robot and joined a small traveller group in their travel. Following the group, Sunflare crossed the Gobi Desert and the Taklamakan desert with aid from mechanical camels, which were able to travel at 100km/h without the need to rest, but the journey still took longer than a day to complete.

During their travel in the deserts, the travellers had nothing to do but to wait for the camel to carry their carriage, so they started chatting about their own past, the conversation, which Sunflare overheard, revolved around the travellers’ British nationality, and how they tried travelling to China in an attempt to search for investors for the new lightspeed travelling method they had discovered, only to realise that the Chinese had already invented a simpler way to achieve light speed travelling. As they had spent all their travelling funds on the way to China, their only method of returning home was by land. Hearing this, Sunflare chuckled at his unexpected luck.

After separating from the travellers, Sunflare found himself in the city of Khorgos. Unsure of the way to go, he resorted to paying a local as a guide to lead him through Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. A shaman whose face is covered by the skull of a horse approached, offering him guidance in exchange for protection. Believing in his fighting capabilities, Sunflare approved of the trade, promising to protect the shaman with all the might he had.

The two walked through Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan unharmed and unobstructed, causing Sunflare to begin wondering why the shaman had requested his convoy. Yet not long after they had stepped upon the soil of Turkmenistan, they heard a gravelly voice coming from behind a bush. “Well, well, well. If it isn’t the Dragon’s son.” As the shaman trembled in fear, a man with 3 faces and 3 pairs of arms jumped out of the bush.

The man reiterated his intentions, “Last time you escaped my hand by a hair. This time you won’t be so lucky!” As he lunged toward the shaman, Sunflare pulled a short tube off his back, extending it into a bo staff and stopping the attack made by the man. “Oh no, you won’t be killing him anytime soon!” Sunflare shouted, hitting the man with a combo of attacks and defeating him with ease. Being thankful, the shaman joined Sunflare in his journey, hoping to return the favour.

“My name is Ao, and I wish to accompany you in your journey.” Said the shaman when the two prepared to split ways. Not seeing any downside to the offer, Sunflare agreed to let Ao join him.

Entering the 100-year battlefield, known as Iran and Turkey in the past, the conflict on the land had made it unlivable. Walking through the battlefield, Sunflare and Ao hadn’t a moment of rest, as gunshots and energy beams constantly flew above them, the moans of injured soldiers and loud blasts of firearms bombarded their senses. The two couldn’t get a single night of sleep with the constant fear of being mistakenly shot in the crossfire. When they had finally found a safe place to rest, 4 days had passed since the last rest they took.

Passing Istanbul, they were amazed by the integrity of the buildings in the city. Unlike the ruins they walked through in the battlefield, the majority of buildings in Istanbul remained standing and unmodified, making the city the last remaining proof of life on earth centuries ago. Reminded of their mission, Sunflare and Ao continued on their way to Moscow.

Setting foot in Bulgaria, the two were immediately questioned by the Bulgarian border forces about their intentions for entry. Keeping his cool, Sunflare answered the questions with information made up on the spot; meanwhile, Ao, who had never lied to authorities, panicked and kept on stuttering, but fortunately, none of the guards raised suspicion, and the two successfully entered Bulgaria. Right after, they checked in a small hotel room in order to get a bit of rest before heading forward.

In the morning of the second day, Sunflare decided that their current pace was too slow, so he sneakily hit the back of Ao’s neck, knocking him out and carrying him on his back. After which Sunflare began jumping between rooftops, moving swiftly and stealthily to ensure they could arrive on time without anyone following. When Ao woke up, Sunflare had already run all the way into Russia, leaving a 2-hour journey before the meeting.

After arriving at the location set for the exchange, Sunflare entered the room solo and asked Ao to stay on the outside. Moments later, Ao broke down the door of the room and rushed in as he heard the commotion inside. In the room, Ao found Sunflare lying on the floor unconscious, with the evil figure laughing menacingly behind the table. Trying to save his first friend, Ao cast a spell that emitted a healing aura from his body.

“Hey...wake up... Sunflare!” Hearing the shout of Ao, Sunflare was pulled back into reality from his dormant state, and he finally realised when the Violet Palace had first started tracking the activities of the Hand of the Buddha. “But how did you find out about our work?” Sunflare questioned the man. The man sneered, deriding at what Sunflare had just said, “I’m sure you know how.” As his form changed, morphing and transforming, it finally stabilised into a familiar face. “HOURGLASS???” Sunflare exclaimed in shock.

“Yes, it was ME all along. I am the one who captured you and the others in the basement. I am the one who faked the order of Three to lure you here. As I am the King in Black, the one who rules the Violet Palace. Do you know why I had you deliver this useless drive all the way from Chang’an? You are special, being the only robot with the capability to think and upgrade themselves, all i wanted to do is to research on your core. That way we can liberate more robots from the slavery of humans!” Hourglass monologized.

“You want me to give up my freedom? OVER MY DEAD BODY!” Sunflare roared furiously, striking at Hourglass with his metal bo staff. However, Hourglass caught his attack effortlessly, flinging Sunflare onto a wall, damaging him badly. Ao, joining in the fight, summoned the souls of his ancestors to fight alongside him. Sunflare pulled his body with his severed arm, trying to stand back up but failed to do so.

Sunflare suddenly felt an invisible force holding him up, and he immediately knew Three and Boar had arrived and brought backups. As Sunflare slowly rose from the ground, he saw Hourglass' body separated into million grains of black sand, trying to cocoon around Boar, Three, Ao and Him. But the nanobots suddenly started dropping onto the floor one after another, until a pile of them formed on the ground, becoming unable to move. Turns out in the numerous modifications made on Boar, one of which had the ability to send out EMPs that shut down any micro mechanics around him, Boar just had the function turned off until now, since none of them knew Hourglass was the person they had hatred toward.

As Hourglass ruled the Violet Palace with an iron fist, when he was defeated, his henchmen quickly turned themselves in, hoping to reduce the severity of the punishment they received, the Violet Palace quickly dissolved and the underworld of Eurasia became much weaker, increasing the safety of residents.

Decomposing one of the largest criminal groups without assistance, the Hand of the Buddha became one of the most popular merchant groups around the globe, with countries along the Silk Road signing trade deals with the group, and countries on other continents paying handsomely just to create trading routes for the merchant group. A few decades flew by, on Three's death bed, he asked Sunflare to hold his hand, secretly passing his supernatural powers to Sunflare, which inadvertently helped create the legend of the Victorious Fighting Buddha, an immortal guardian who protects the merchants of the Hand of the Buddha.

Determination of the Merchant

S.K.H. Tang Shiu Kin Secondary School, Lam, Tsz To – 16

A blazing heat pierced my skin. Dazzled at the back of my food cart, I slowly opened my eyes.

Expecting the usual food ingredients surrounding me, it was a rude awakening to find out that I was surrounded by flames. I immediately sprung into action. Leaping off the cart, I took off my jacket and started battering the flames with it, using up every ounce of my strength. But it was to no avail, and I watched hopelessly as the flames flared stronger by the second. I could only hope for a miracle. Lost in a trance with my hands still striking the flames fiercely, I started ruminating on why I started this journey in the first place.

It was the year 2013. I received a phone call from my brother from Belarus, whom I had not seen in 40 years. While we had a rich conversation, reminiscent of the past, it ended on a low note. He informed me that after sustaining a major injury from a car crash, he only had 30 days left to live. Grief-stricken by the news, I was both heartbroken yet lost. I am a food truck owner, and all my life I had only been able to make enough money to sustain my basic daily necessities. To get to Belarus, I would have to take a plane, which I could not afford at all. The day after I received the news, the Chinese government announced the belt and road initiative. Improving the Silk Road immensely, it seemed like the only viable option to get to Belarus within 30 days, to see my brother one last time before he passed away. Starting up my trusty food truck, I started my journey along the Silk Road.

I had packed a full cart of wheat batter, essential to the production of my signature dish – my home-made Tian Jing style jianbing, a crepe comprising wheat batter and sauces. My products were known to be some of the tastiest in town, and I could only hope it would earn me enough money along the way to Belarus to keep me alive. Despite the Belt and Road Initiative, there were way fewer people on the road than I had imagined, as I would only see one or two people every 2–3 hours, where almost all the people I met bought from my cart. With the meagre amount of money I earned, I stopped at nearby gas stations every once in a while, which would appear every 50 kilometres along the road, barely sustaining my gas output.

As I continued on my trip, the temperatures gradually intensified, to the point where it was nearly unbearable. Some of my ingredients had spoiled due to the intense heat, and I had to purchase new ones at a kiosk along the way. Though the ingredients were not even close in terms of quality compared to the originals, it was the only source I could rely on, which I bore with. Despite having to change the recipe, most of its original taste remained. This was Day 5 of the trip, and I knew I had many days ahead of me until I made my way out of the torrid desert.

Eventually, the temperatures were so high that I could barely look straight. Unable to effectively pilot my own vehicle, I started blacking out. With brief moments of consciousness, my cart swerved from left to right, finally skidding to a stop as I passed out at the wheel. 12 hours later in the middle of the night, the temperatures had cooled down, and I regained my consciousness and was able to drive again. I knew that by the next day, it was likely that this situation would happen all over again, so I pushed my cart to its maximum speed and attempted to cover as much distance as I could before the sun rose again. I knew this would be unsustainable, yet I could only keep driving.

On Day 8, I met a peculiar merchant running his stall on the side of the road. He was an old man,

with a hat and sunglasses, completely hiding his identity. Under the blazing hot weather, he wore a thick wool jacket, which felt extremely anticlimactic. Intrigued by his unique wear, I stopped to take a look at his stall. "Are you struggling in this unbearably hot weather, sir? I might have just the thing to help you." A sly smile spread across his face. He opened up the zipper to his jacket, with its sides packed to the brim with ice packs, a gentle icy breeze wafting. Fascinated, I examined the jacket. The ice packs were covered with woolly towels, preventing them from melting easily. "I'll sell you one of my jackets if you make me a few of your signature dishes. I could smell your product from a mile away, and have been awaiting your arrival." The deal just seemed too good to be true – it would solve my problems with the heat, and at a low price. I felt obligated to make the best jianbing I could make, to thank the merchant for this deal of a lifetime.

An hour later, I was back on the road. The icy jacket rattled as the ice cubes clashed into each other. I was no longer suffering from the heat, and all it felt like now was a minor inconvenience. For the next 3 days, I powered through the road with a steady and quick pace; it seemed as if everything would go smoothly from now on, and I would reach Belarus in no time.

On Day 11, I stopped at a local market for refreshments. I conversed with the store owners about my journey. One of the owners asked, "How will you be able to cross the Russian borders? The Russian borders are highly secured. Without a visa, there's simply no way you would be able to reach Belarus.". This was when reality hit me; with my current budget, I would not be able to afford a visa. The only solution I could devise was to keep selling food until I hit the required amount for the visa. So I decided not to think too much about it, and continued travelling along the Silk Road, on my way to the Russian border. I continued driving for the next 6 hours, and started feeling drowsy. Stopping my cart, I decided to take a quick nap in my food cart, which was destroyed in the subsequent fire.

Pulled back to the present by a cold mist hitting the side of my body, the fire was now extinguished. I was greeted by a man, whose height towered over mine. As intimidating as he seemed, he displayed a warm and sincere smile. "Hello friend. My name is Ivan. What brings you to the Russian borders?" He inquired as he bent down to match my height. I had assumed that I was still in Chinese territories; I've been travelling for almost 10 days now. Along the way, I sold my home-made jianbing to travellers en route, where I made enough money to buy gas and more food supplies. I introduced myself to Ivan. Without a second thought, I offered to make the man a serving of my signature jianbing, and informed him I was a travelling merchant, attempting to reach Belarus to see my injured brother one last time. Though feeling suspicious, he took me up on my offer.

I fired up my cast-iron pan. Even in a foreign country, I went through the familiar steps I've carried out for centuries. Pouring my signature wheat batter onto the pan, the liquid quickly took shape and moulded into an oval. Within minutes, the food was ready. I handed the serving to the man. Though initially hesitant to bite into this foreign food, the aroma emitting from the pan cleared his doubts promptly. His face lit up with delight as he bit into the crepe. Munching on it continuously, it wasn't long before he finished the food. While he looked the same as he did before, I could sense his satisfaction.

"How about I grant you an exemption through the Russian borders? I trust your intents are not

malicious in the slightest, and would love for more people to try your food." This was the miracle I had hoped for, the only way I would be able to pass through the countries along the Silk Road without legal troubles. Apparently, this man was a Russian politician who had coincidentally been on a road trip, who was my only chance in making to Belarus in time. However, the damage my cart sustained due to an earlier gas leak, which caused the fire, had rendered my cart immobile. Our only choice was to push the cart 2 kilometres, to reach the Russian border.

Though it was an arduous task, we persevered and pushed the cart all the way to the border. Upon entering Russia, Ivan called up a local mechanic, who helped repair my cart free of charge. As we travelled in the Russian territory, many locals visited my cart and enjoyed the food I served. I took the opportunity to ask for directions and advice. One of the locals advised me to take the Belarus train at the Moscow Belorussky Station, which was a 7-hour drive from where I was. Taking the train would immensely speed up my journey, and I accepted his advice. However, the train ticket wasn't cheap for my standards – it would require selling around 50 dishes to meet the quota. With how popular my truck was, it wasn't a big concern for me, as I was confident I would be able to make enough money once I reached the station.

And I was right, as I made almost 50% more than the required amount. Arriving at the ticket window in the station, I was given a pinkish-orange ticket, with a security pattern across. Unfortunately, I had to temporarily part ways with my food cart, as I couldn't take it to Belarus without a hefty cost. I stored the cart at a generous customer's garage, and I stepped on the train. After 13 days of non-stop travelling, I was exhausted to my core. I melted into my train seat and finally breathed a sigh of relief. On the train, I reconciled how nutty my journey was – to think I had travelled all the way from China to Russia on a road that has aged more than 2000 years, and was simply refurbished recently, by making money on the way. My destination was closer than ever, and I knew that within half a day, I would be arriving in Belarus, and finally reuniting with my brother.

On day 14, I reached Belarus. Making my way to the hospital where my brother was staying, I stayed with him for the next week until he passed away. Many years ago, he went to Belarus to pursue a higher education. As gruelling and tiresome as the journey was, it was all worth it when I saw his face of relief, and it was all thanks to the Silk Road for making this impossible journey achievable. During my journey, I made a lot of friends, who assisted me in reaching my destination. There was no doubt that it fostered and strengthened connections between different countries.

Two months after I arrived in Belarus, I decided not to return to my home country for now. I continued west along the Silk Road, in pursuit of more knowledge about foreign cultures. I was no longer bound within the confines of my own country, and gained the confidence to roam indefinitely.

While my food cart was left behind, the jianbing recipe had not changed; with my recipe, I want to connect these countries together with my unique Chinese culture, and perhaps one day, this would lead to world peace.

Jade

Shanghai High School International Division, Huang, Lexuan – 14

The desert remembers no names. It had buried mounds of loot of gold and jade without slight hesitation. It had swallowed empires of extreme wealth and power with a ruthless indifference. It had been the nursery and deathbed of so many more and since so many years before, before the man named Yannian had ever even heard of “Khotan”. It will be his too, just like how it had been for so many others before.

“Have you heard? Old Changshou made quite a fortune from his trip to the west!”

“Yes, I heard! Just one piece of jade sold for three hundred thousand!”

“Oh my, three hundred thousand? Impossible!”

“Quite so. Those rich nobles loved jade. They’re quite generous with whatever price they buy it! Anyone with jade can make a fortune! Especially since this jade came from the west.”

Yannian listened, eyes wide.

Three hundred thousand? That was more than just a fortune. That was enough to turn even a beggar in rags to a wealthy, well-respected merchant! Even just the profit would be a great sum of money!

Just one trip, and the endless torture of selling those stones at the market would be over. If Changshou could do it, why not him? He was younger, more physically able! He can buy some horses too if he mortgaged his old shack...

“How are you doing recently, Yannian?” Yishou’s question drew Yannian back from his train of thought.

“Not well...Nobody’s buying my stones, not even the prettiest ones...” Yannian forced out a bitter smile.

“These days, only goods from the Western Regions hold value! Who wants stones? They’re no use to us, and the rich young masters and mistresses only buy jade. I say you should give up selling only stones soon.” A diner nearby set down his bowl.

“Don’t be mean, there are people who buy stones! They do look quite beautiful.” Yishou defended his friend.

“Beautiful? That’s because you haven’t seen jade! Oh, how vivid that shade of green was...The one Changshou had sold...” The diner’s voice trailed way to a half-drunk mumble, but they lingered in Yannian’s mind.

Of course he knew that his stones weren’t selling well. He’d lowered the price to half of the original already, but still not one stone had been sold out for a week. If only he could sell something that’s really worth *something*...

He scratched his head. A horrendous, yet rewarding plan formulated in his mind

“Are you insane!?Going to the west?” Yishou’s shout ranged in the small shack of Yannian.

“No, I’m sure. Listen!” A frenzied crimson spread across Yannian’s face. He pulled a map from his sleeve with an air of mystery, and shook the scroll in his hand.

“I begged Changshou for an entire hour before he finally agreed to let me make a copy of this. Cost me a great deal of money too!”

Yishou paced, his eyebrows locked into a tight knot.

“You’d still need horses, and at least one caravan! And all the costs for food and water on the way!”

“I’ll mortgage this house! Trust me! It’s a guarantee to infinite riches just after this one trip! Changshou made it, why not us!” Yannian’s eyes bore into Yishou, as if he were trying to carve his desires, his wildest hopes onto Yishou’s face.

“Please...”Yannian’s voice was a yearning beg, head lowered, he waited in desperation.

A faint sigh emerged from above. Yannian raised his head, eyes pleading.

“Sure.”

Even the sheer process of preparation was much more complicated from what Yannian had anticipated. A frail horse from the market, a make-shift caravan made entirely by Yannian and Yishou... But at least Yishou was there. Yannian could already see the mountains of coins they could earn from this! Just one trip. One trip to change their lives. Forever.

The trip there was. The desert wind could not drown Yannian's high hopes. Even the dry, tasteless rations tasted delicious. Yannian even saw Yishou let a somewhat hopeful smile climb up his lips. The months passed like a blur, and there they were, in Khotan.

Khotan was a miraculous city. Men and women wore adornments that Yannian had never even imagined before. The colors, the cloth, the animals. It was like a place from a bizarre dream. But above all, there was jade.

So much jade. The green of the jade reflected in Yannian's eyes. They came in numerous shapes and shades, some darker, some lighter, all wonders that squeezed any other thought from Yannian's mind. His calloused finger touched a smooth surface, so gently and carefully, as if stroking a lover's face.

"So much jade..." He murmured. "So much...All of it...So much..."

"Hey, Yannian, we can't buy all of that! We don't have that much money! We still need money for more rations!" Yishou's call dragged him back.

Yannian turned. The street's dusty grey entered his view. Only a small pile of jade on the caravan. That was all they could buy. But how was that enough? There was so much jade here! So much jade! Surely there was just some more spare money?

"We can take another route, look! This one crosses through the desert way faster! It isn't used often, but it is a way! We'll reach Weiwu two weeks earlier!" Yannian drew out the map to explain to Yishou, his eyes frantic, lit up by the green of the jade.

Yishou frowned, then sighed. He had never been able to resist Yannian's pleas.

And so they purchased again. Large ones, small, ones, each one Yannian had inspected with upmost care to ensure the perfection of the jade stones. Not one crack evaded his careful examination. Just before they left, Yannian bought one small, delicate jade cup from the store.

"We'll keep this one, and sell all the rest!" He beamed at Yishou, holding the cup up to the Sun to see. Light passed through the pure green, so dazzlingly gorgeous.

He wrapped the cup under his coat. The jade cup pressed tightly against his inner clothes, cool even through the fabric, dispelling the desert's waves of heat. Yan Nian felt his own heartbeat, vibrating the jade cup in his embrace, and felt his emotions surge in triumph. Just a few months back home. Back to Weiwu. And their dreams, all of it will be fulfilled. His hands shook with a slight tremor of excitement. He felt dizzy, even light-headed, as he, alongside Yishou set off in the chilling night.

Maybe they should have changed to another route, or maybe they should have been just a bit more careful, or ran a bit faster...If only they could have changed a choice in routes...Yannian's heart thumped as he rode the horse. He swiveled his head around, but they were still there, following closely behind him.

Bandits.

A whole swarm of them. All of them chasing after Yannian and Yishou. Yannian could feel his steed gallop, but still that was not enough.

Faster, faster... He thought, whip waving.

He had come so far, how could he just die here...

"Leave the caravan behind! Yannian, fast!" Yishou called out, far ahead. He had already dropped his bags of jade down. "It's slowing you down way too much!"

"But—!" An arrow whizzed by Yannian's ear. It pierced a hole in the caravan too. The sparkle of green stones were evident under the scorching sun.

Thud. Another arrow skewered the half-frayed rope. Freed from the caravan, Yannian's horse galloped in triumph, speeding up even faster.

"No! My jade!" Yannian cried out in horror. All those riches, those luxurious stones that they had spent months on, that he had wagered everything for! It shouldn't end here! This was his jade!

In a frenzy, he, against the horse's defiant neighs, pulled back on the reins, a hand outstretched behind him in a desperate lunge—

Thump. An arrow pierced through his waist. A horrible gash. Pain seized Yannian in its death grip. A muffled cry escaped from his lips.

Flung off from the startled horse, Yannian thudded to the ground, his bones crushed sickeningly with the soil.

He could see Yishou stopping, then turning back from afar, as the bandits behind all gathered around the caravan.

Yishou's warm hands touched his, wrapping around his chilling fingers.

Yannian's head felt dizzy and heavy, the warmth of gushing crimson spread around the wound. His eyelids fluttered.

"Don't sleep, Yannian, not now..."

"Take it back...The cup...Back to Wuwei...Make a profit with it..."Yannian coughed. His breath fainter than the sound of sand being swept up by wind. He could feel strength drained from his whitening cheeks. His fingers slackened.

Yishou's silhouette blurred in his vision. Yannian tried to speak again, but only faint rasps escaped from his dry throat. Yishou was saying something. What was it? Yannian tried to make it out from the shapes of his lips.

Oh. It was *his* name. Yannian. That was what Yishou was trying to say. But his voice sounded so, so far away. Yannian tried to respond with another, final smile. His facial muscles tugged powerlessly at the corner of his lips. His vision blackened again. And all melted to sand...

The marketplace in Weiwu was in its usual clamor. The bustle of merchants, artisans, storytellers alike filled the dusty streets.

Yishou's silence was deafening in the market clamour, only the cup on his outstretched hand a hint towards his sales. His eyes wandered through rows of people. At last, a pair of heels turned.

The man wore plain clothes, but the money pouch in his hand was unusually bulging. A servant purchasing for some wealthy family, Yishou speculated.

Bending down, the servant scanned at the jade.

"Just for twenty thousand and—"Yishou began, but the servant held up a hand.

"Hmm...Beautiful color. I would buy it but..."

"There's a slight crack on the jade, look." He pointed to the edge of the cup.

Yishou peered at the jade. The perfect shade of green. So delicate, so smooth. Except for...

A slight sliver. A crack. A small fracture. Right where the servant was pointing at.

It was almost unnoticeable. Possibly just caused by a slight bump on horseback. But that was enough to have Yishou's hopes plummet to hell.

"But please...What about just ten thousand..." He begged, voice a rasp.

"Well, our mistress only wants perfect pieces. You can't craft a thing from a cracked jade. I'm afraid you'll have to sell it half-price to any willing buyer." The servant shrugged. Turning away, his silhouette was soon swallowed in the expanse of dusty sand, as Yishou still stood, motionless, holding the flawed jade.

Another gust of desert wind swept up tendrils of sand. Maybe even the same grains that had covered Yannian some miles away, burying his destiny, dreams, and crazed hopes. Somewhere beyond the city walls, the desert sits silently. It had already forgotten their names too.

To The West of the Gate

Shanghai High School International Division, Suo, William – 15

This is a forgotten tale, a journey defying common sense. In the waning years of the Western Zhou Dynasty, a master carver named Jiang received a divine summons that would propel him on an odyssey far beyond the walls of the kingdom of Huo, a vassal state tasked with guarding the turbulent northwest frontiers.

The summons arose from a dream. That night, Jiang—the artisan whose hands could carve dragons into jade and cast phoenixes in bronze—dreamed of the Queen Mother of the West. In the vision, she stood beside the mythical Jade Pool on Kunlun Mountain, her form shifting between that of a mighty tribal matriarch and a celestial deity. Her voice, like wind through wheat fields, spoke of a vast imbalance between heaven and earth. The sacred jade ring, symbol of cosmic harmony, had been lost in the lands west of the Yellow River. Its absence would plunge both mortal realms and divine spheres into chaos. She entrusted this sacred mission to Jiang, renowned for his devotion and skill. He must journey west to seek the jade left behind when Nüwa mended the heavens, carving a new jade ring. He must infuse it with the essence of the Central Plains—a task demanding the wisdom of ancestors, the fortitude of dragons, and the resilience of the earth itself. To aid his quest, the Queen Mother of the West bestowed a warm, white jade fragment, its soft glow rippling within. “This shard originates from the heart of Kunlun,” she declared. “It shall guide you and remind you of your duty.”

The next day, Jiang awoke. The shards in his hand and a trail of burning tears reminded him this was no dream. Thus, Jiang made it his lifelong mission to seek out the purest jade. Jiang's journey began in the Kingdom of Fire, a military stronghold against nomadic tribes. Perched atop defensive cliffs, it boasted towering walls and deep moats.

The first major stop along the river was the Yutian Oasis, a land that would later become synonymous with jade. Yet even here, centuries before the official “Jade Road” was established, trade had long flourished. He encountered merchants of diverse appearances, their languages weaving like a symphony of peculiar clicks and melodies. Unlike these traders, Jiang also witnessed countless jade prospectors drawn to Yutian's legendary river gravel, where flawless white nephrite lay hidden within the stones. Jiang brought with him the finest Zhou Dynasty silk, its exquisite quality worthy of the gods. To the oasis dwellers, it was nothing short of a miracle. In this first trade along the prophesied Silk Road, Jiang exchanged silk for the jade he sought, setting in motion the destiny of a millennia-long trade route that would sustain Chinese civilization. Even more, he encountered with a local princess in Yutian. This woman, who embodied both beauty and wisdom, was utterly captivated by the silk Jiang had brought. During a clandestine meeting, this legendary “Poison Princess” revealed to him a secret as precious as jade: the art of cultivating golden silkworms. She presented Jiang with an intricately carved wooden comb, its teeth concealing mulberry leaves and dormant golden silkworm parasites. “Let this be our secret,” she whispered. “Just as you carry your craftsmanship to the world, bring this knowledge back. Let the West bestow jade upon the East, and the East bestow silk upon the West.”

As Jiang ventured deeper, the desolate desert gradually gave way to towering snow-capped mountains. This journey felt like traversing a living map of Chinese mythology. The Pamir Plateau transformed into the mythical Kunlun Mountains, the cosmic axis where heaven and earth converge. Here, the air grew thin, and the boundaries between worlds seemed fragile and fragile. The creatures he saw were utterly extraordinary, leaping forth from the realm of immortals—some resembling true dragons, others colossal birds rivaling vultures in size. To Jiang, these were no animals, but the very spirits of these sacred mountains and rivers. He traversed this land with profound reverence. He left offerings of food and prayers, acknowledging himself as but a transient visitor in this world teeming with vitality and colossal power.

Deep within the lofty valleys, he beheld the Queen Mother of the West for the last time. No longer the goddess of his dreams, she appeared as an ordinary, but beautiful woman. She acknowledged his cultivation, and her manifestation signified that this journey was not merely about forging artifacts, but about weaving the myriad phenomena into a harmonious whole. Guided by the Queen Mother of the West, Jiang arrived at the summit of Kunlun Mountain, where the mortal realm met the celestial. There, quietly resting, lay the primordial jade stone of heaven and earth—a stone only mortals could touch. The instant he touched it, Jiang comprehended the truth of the world. His flesh and blood were stripped away, and the jade stone merged with his body. Jiang's mortal form remained on Kunlun's peak, while his spirit was reformed through the crucible of fire. His soul, bearing the jade left by Nüwa, returned to the Central Plains. When Jiang returned to the Fire Kingdom, his homecoming felt like a dashed expectation. The world had not changed in his absence; the kingdom still guarded the Rong

tribe's borders, and the bronze workshops still blazed with firelight. But Jiang had transformed. In a quiet workshop, he began crafting his ultimate masterpiece.

This jade was flawless, cool as milky white. When he carved the central perforated disk into a circular disc, he was not merely sculpting stone. He poured in all his experiences—the resilience of frontier guards, the whispers of Silk Road merchants, the wisdom of the Princess of Yutian, the sacred power of the Western Mountains. What he carved were not mere words, but the sacred rites proclaiming the oneness of all things under heaven. Jiang spent forty-nine days carving this jade disc. When it was complete, it emitted a soft, tranquil glow. He offered the Taoist principles and worldly truths contained within to the Queen Mother of the West, to be used in patching the rifts in the world. He presented the jade plate itself to the ruler of the Fire Kingdom, hoping to enlighten the people that a kingdom's true strength lay not only in its walls, but in its potential as a cultural bridge. After completing all this, Jiang sensed his time was near, and that his spirit should not linger long in the mortal realm. Thus, he recorded his experiences on a scroll and passed it to his disciple, Si. Thereafter, Si, born with the gift of seeing both the mortal and supernatural realms, gained the ability to glimpse divine wonders and wondrous creatures. He combined his master's writings with his own lifelong observations, compiling them into the timeless masterpiece known as the *Classic of Mountains and Seas*.

Jiang's journey gradually faded to legend, becoming a footnote in China's grand narrative. The Fire Kingdom was ultimately buried by the shifting sands of time. That sacred jade disc likely rests eternally beneath the earth with some forgotten noble, its story now silent.

Yet the essence of his mission still resonates powerfully today.

The Belt and Road Initiative—this modern vision of connectivity spanning Eurasia—may well be Jiang's millennia-old aspiration realized. The Silk Road itself embodies humanity's enduring quest for connection, trade, and the sharing of knowledge. Human will, it seems, can reach the heavens. The Silk Road was never merely a conduit for silk. It has always been a thread of civilization, carrying not only goods but also humanity's deepest hopes, stories, and creative spirit. The paths trodden by our ancestors remain tangible. The bonds they forged connect East and West, history and myth, past and future, sustaining our world and awaiting those who recognize the eternal light within.

When the Stone Wakes

Shanghai High School International Division, Xue, Jilang – 15

A wind, sharp with the chill of the Norman coast and the damp warmth of the Seine, pulled at Lucien de Saint-Clair's tunic, whispering of an impending autumn. His world had shrunk to the rough, cold bite of limestone beneath his palms and the precarious lattice of scaffolding that creaked with every gust.

His fingers, grey-brown with the dust of ancient stones, traced the cool exterior of the cathedral. Each block was a giant's fingerbone, quarried from the belly of Normandy and hauled here, to build this sacred edifice, in hopes of touching the sky. He was so high up that the world below ceased to be a place of men and instead became a place of God's drafting. He did not dare look down. First, he looked *out*.

Rouen unfolded beneath him, gradually waking in the morning light. He could trace the main roads as if on a map, see the bustling flow of carts and merchandise around the *Place du Vieux-Marché*, the old market square still echoing of Joan. Beyond them, the great bridge, *Pont Boieldieu*, arched like the spine of some ancient maritime creature, bearing merchants and monks, carts laden with salt fish from Dieppe and the bright silks of Lombardy traders who had come by way of the fairs of Champagne.

To the north, *le Château Bouvreuil* towered silently, greyed since the wars with the English. The wind shifted, and the faint toll of the *Église Saint-Maclou's* bell reached him, thin and pure.

Around the feet of the cathedral sprawled a maze of human striving: the *Rue du Gros-Horloge* with its great gilded clock, the guildhalls where the merchants quarreled with as much zeal as the theologians in the schools of *Saint-Ouen* just a short distance away. And far beyond the city walls, past the orchards and fields already reddening for harvest, the hills of Canteleu and Bonsecours drowsed under the low-hanging clouds.

From this vertiginous height, the hum of life below became a blurry mingling of prayer and commerce. Lucien thought of how men were no different from the stones of this cathedral, how they were all cut, fitted, and lifted by some creed toward the imagined light.

A voice rose from below.

"Lucien."

His father stood on the scaffolding's lower tier, silhouette glowing against the dawn. The *Maître de la Fabrique* did not fumble at the ropes nor fear the height; he had spent half his life between scaffolds and chapter houses.

"The city is beginning to move. The stones are awake; the men not yet."

"Stones are not alive, Father."

"No, they are. See how each *voussoir*, each rib, answers to another? Each vault is a chorus and each arch a voice. When the choir sings, it does so because the vault has first taught it to hold the sound."

He ran a finger over a freshly cut ashlar, following the seam between two blocks. "This limestone remembers the quarryman's hand. The workman who struck it may have stolen or lusted, he may have been wicked or humble, but here, between heaven and earth, he signs an act of contrition with his mallet. The cathedral keeps their faults and prayers; that is the sacrament of our trade. One day, you will bear these ledgers, attend to the chapter, answer the bishop. You will be the *Maître de la Fabrique*."

Lucien swallowed. "I know." The sketches by the docks returned to him: a cupola rising without the agony of spires, a building that took light without denying it entrance.

Claude followed his look downward and guessed Lucien's thought. "Light is a fickle thing. It shows the world as it is, and sometimes it shows too plainly the faults of men. Darkness encloses mystery; the faithful kneel, confessing what the light might shame. The stained glass brings color, but color also is didactic. To light wronged men is sometimes to condemn them. In the chapel's gloom, the sinner finds mercy because he cannot see his face clearly enough to be obsessed."

He descended the ladder, Lucien following to the narrow stair leading to the choir. Claude touched the capitals, leaf and vine carved in the style of the old guild's school. He paused beneath a flying buttress.

"There is a thought older than men that lives in these arcs. Do you know why the buttress stands so, why the rib meets the vault as it does?"

Lucien recited the terms he had learned, the geometry of his apprenticeship.

"Yes, but more: it is an act of humility. See how the keystone sits? If it is proud or false, the whole choir trembles from that one insolence. We build for God's presence."

The chapel bells, already at work in the city, pulled him back to a lower timbre. "A man's lifetime is

ephemeral compared to stone. The mason who begins the clerestory knows he will not see its finished glory. He sets stones in hope that his grandsons will witness its grandeur. The *Maître de la Fabrique* must pull the funds, pray the mass, argue with the masons, hide paperwork from greedy prelates. And the cathedral bids us to be obedient: to God, to the rules of craft, to the liturgical order. This edifice is the Church made visible.”

He dwelled on the dim choir. “Do you understand? We must not build for the eye alone. We build for the soul.”

Lucien answered that he did. But the cathedral’s darkness, to him, felt oppressive. The slender shafts of light that pierced the glass seemed insufficient; he imagined how geometry might be used to welcome brightness, how proportion might be the means by which light could be invited to dwell there.

Claude read the silence and gave a last injunction. “Learn to weigh devotion and reason. A man who prizes novelty will build an edifice of vanity. But a man who cannot imagine is already dead. Learn to steward both your heart and your head.”

They descended together in silence. Below, the city fully woke; merchants called, hounds bayed, and workmen hammered steady tempos into the morning.

The bishop’s chamber was a room of stories: tapestries bearing the arms of past prelates, tables with assorted parchments and seals, and a view over the Seine.

Signore Alessandro Spinola held himself with the demeanor of those who traffic in the sea and toy with the credit of nations. He was of a prestigious Genoese merchant family, accustomed to dealing with men whose promises wear many faces. He unrolled a set of drawings upon the bishop’s table.

Lucien lingered by the door, melting into the shadows.

Spinola’s eyes fixed on Claude. “*Monsieur le Maître*, I come to ask the favor of this venerable chapter: I offer to endow a chapel. I bring stone, craftsmen, and a design conceived in Florence.”

The bishop repeated the word, tasting it. “Florence... You mean the new devices? The domes and palaces? We have our order.”

Spinola spread the drawings: a plan of the cross-section of a chapel crowned by a hemispherical dome. “Principles, rather. Filippo Brunelleschi taught us how to build domes that hold themselves. The double shell, the herringbone of bricks, the rings that bind, it confers light without tearing the body of the church. It receives the sun directly, and gives the faithful an illuminated place of prayer.”

Claude’s answer was immediate. “This is secularism. You offer the cathedral a building made for man’s vanity. Perhaps your dome is necessary for palaces, but not for a house of God. Our spires show that ascent must be earned by penance.”

“Your spires are beautiful, but in *Firenze* and *Genova* we preach that beauty does not always imply hubris. This advancement in craft enlarges the possibilities of devotion. If God made the world intelligible by laws, should not the instrument that praises Him understand them in turn?”

The bishop frowned. “Who will grant that such novelty is true worship and not a vanity—fair, that men do not come to laud a patron’s name rather than to pray?”

“There are men who build for their names, and men who build for God. A patron may be both. I want my name attached to charity, to a chapel where prayers are offered. But I also want an edifice that endures; I will not be satisfied with ornament that collapses at the first test of time. It is why I bring also knowledge gleaned from ports and scholars and the workshops of my people.”

Pride cometh before fall, Lucien remembered.

Claude’s expression darkened conservatively. “We cannot let Rouen be a laboratory for every idea that arrives by ship. We owe the bishopric a steady hand.”

“Then let it be tested by the eyes of God and the measures of men. Grant to your masons Florentine papers. Let them know the spices of the East and how the oriental Silk Road merges with our Renaissance. Let them learn that the Silk Road is a braided convoy of currents, of caravans and ships, of Venetian brokers and Genoese captains, of fairs at Champagne and the markets at Bruges. Let them hear of the lapis lazuli that is shipped from Badakhshan and ground into *blu oltremare*. Let them conceive sketches and learn why bricks may be laid in a pattern that makes them stronger than the sum of their parts. Permit me to endow the chapel, and I swear that the workmen will be guided by masters who know the making.”

The bishop exhaled. “We shall consider.”

Spinola rolled up his drawings and kissed the bishop’s hand; Lucien melted back into the shade of the antechamber and pressed a palm to the wood as if to steady himself against a turning world.

Spinola exited, noticing Lucien. He handed him his bundle of papers absentmindedly, who took them, seeing they were instruments of precise proportions, annotations about the behavior of compressive forces, suggestions for building ribs and chains.

Spinola motioned for Lucien to keep the papers. "You look like a young mind amidst the conservative men of the Church. Do not bury your thoughts."

The docks at Rouen were always teeming with vitality: salt and smoke, rope and tar, and the mutters of sailors conspire to make one man's boast the next man's coin. That evening, Lucien found Capitaine Gilles relieving a gang of workmen of their burden. He was an esteemed sailor who had plotted courses between strange harbors and listened to a thousand mercantile tongues.

Gilles noticed Lucien before Lucien had meant to be. "*Monsieur de Saint-Clair*," he called. "You look like a boy with his head full of cathedrals."

Lucien smiled. "Perhaps."

The captain sat them on an upturned crate. "Signore Spinola told me of his encounter with the bishop and your father today." He took a long draught from his flask. "You listen to me, lad. Out there, I've seen marble fit for altars that require more worship than any saint. But in the end, a block of stone is a stone. It is only valuable because someone decided it was, and because he can make others believe. I have seen just as many men pray to a patron saint as to a coin. Merchants are not worse than bishops; sometimes their vanity brings us gifts that last. I have been at sea long enough to see that the world is changing: the currents shift, the cargo changes, and those who hold fast to old maps are dashed on new shoals."

"...What do you want me to do?"

"Be not only your father's son. There is no sin in learning."

The stonemason's yard smelled of dust and oil, of shavings and moldy prayers; the men there obeyed rhythms of chisel and mallet. Étienne Corbeau, the head of the stonemasons, had been carving capitals for forty winters. His capitals were the ordered kind, leaf and vine, customary arabesques that men expected, yet he had a private corner of the workshop where, occasionally, he allowed his craft to wander.

Lucien found Étienne hunched over a small block of greenish stone, something rare and quarried from a distant seam; its subject a small, grotesque creature, half-formed in a grin as if about to tell a joke in an unknown language.

Étienne looked up. "Ah! *Monsieur de Saint-Clair*, you are the first witness to my creation. They tell me of oriental creatures along the Silk Road, but I never saw them, so I make what I can from descriptions.

Lucien leaned forward. The little monkey's mouth was too large, and its eyes did not match any living thing he'd seen. It was utterly wrong, and therefore utterly alive.

"Why carve it?" Lucien asked. "The cathedral does not ask for it. Why not keep to the vine and leaf that the chapter requires?"

"Because sometimes we must carve what we see in our head, not what the guild tells us is proper. The big capitals feed the church's need for decorum, and my monkey stems entirely from stories and imagination. Lad, you look as if you hold cathedrals in your head. Carve it out, even if only on paper.

"Let the stone speak because you care what it says, not to please a father or a patron."

At night, Lucien's garret was an edifice of sleeplessness. He fumbled with compasses mapping a chapel that kept the Gothic's longing upward but took as its central act the acceptance of light: a small dome over an ambulatory, a translation from Florence into Normandy.

He was tormented by what he had become: a thief of knowledge or an innovative altar-maker? He didn't know if he feared more his father's wrath or disappointment. He feared also the other thing: that his design might indeed be novelty and vanity in the guise of geometry.

But all the while he thought: if the church could accept new devices that served devotion, perhaps an architecture of synthesis could arise.

The bishop's chamber, once more, gathered men who surpassed ecclesiastical law.

The room seemed smaller than Lucien remembered. He stepped forward and laid his drawings upon the table, and for a moment, no one spoke as they all studied the design.

The bishop broke the silence. "You ask much of our chapter. The cathedral is not a page on which

each generation may practice its hand.”

Lucien inclined his head. “No, Your Excellency.”

Claude narrowed his eyes. “Words are easy. Stone is not. This” — he tapped the parchment with a finger — “is Florentine reasoning in Norman clothes. Domes belong to *palazzi* and bankers’ houses, not cathedrals.”

Spinola smiled thinly. “*Monsieur le Maître*, obedience is not blindness. In Florence, men kneel beneath domes and feel no less small for seeing clearly.”

Claude turned. “You would import novelty as if it were silk. This is not a market hall.”

Étienne coughed, surprising them all. “*Monsieur le Maître*, stone knows force, not dogma. A dome, if built rightly, stands by balance. I have seen arches fail because men trusted precedence more than measure.”

Claude flushed. “You are only a craftsman, Corbeau.”

“And you, *Monsieur*,” Étienne replied quietly, “have not always listened to the stone.”

The room stirred. The bishop raised a hand. “Enough. Each of you claims devotion. I ask where it leads. Lucien, this chapel of yours. Why the light?”

“Because darkness teaches fear before reverence; a sinner who cannot see believes God to be hidden, not merciful.”

Claude answered immediately. “Light also exposes. It flatters reason and tempts vanity. Men’s worship changes nature.”

Spinola stepped forward. “Mystery is not diminished by understanding. If God ordered the world by number and law, is it vanity to read them? Or ingratitude not to?”

The bishop’s brow furrowed. “And whose name will people remember when they kneel beneath this light? God’s, or yours?”

“Both, perhaps. Is that so grave a sin? The Church has long accepted the gold of kings and the labor of masons who carve their initials in the stone. My name will fade. Stone endures.”

Claude struck the table with his palm. “You equate endurance with holiness. We build to save souls, not to astonish them.”

Lucien spoke before fear could stop him. “Father, we do both already. The spire astonishes. The glass instructs. The vault orders sound. This is only a continuation of the Gothic.”

Silence fell, heavier than before.

Étienne reached into his pouch and placed the grotesque monkey onto the table, its grin still frozen. “I carved this for no altar; it will never be blessed. But it taught my hands something new. When I returned to the capitals, they were better for it.”

Claude stared at the creature as if it were a heresy.

The bishop looked from the monkey to the drawings, then to Lucien. “You ask us to risk error.”

“Yes, but also to risk stagnation. The cathedral has always been a sum of risks taken in faith. Each generation trusted the next with what it could not finish.”

Claude’s anger ebbed into doubt. “And if it fails?”

“Then let it fail honestly. Not because we feared to imagine.”

The bishop rose slowly. He walked to the window, where the river carried the city’s lights in broken lines.

“We will not turn Rouen into Florence, nor pretend the world has not changed. I grant a trial chapel following your designs, built under the chapter’s supervision, funded by Signore Spinola. If it stands, if it serves devotion, then...

“It may speak for itself.”

The evening air carried the distant sound of bells and the dark web of the Seine reflected the town’s lamps. The city around them buzzed with the lively commerce that was common of Rouen.

The world shifted slowly and articulately. The cathedral would remain what it had always been, would retain the elegance of the Gothic, but also adopt the insights of the oriental Silk Road and the creeds of Florence. And perhaps, this synthesis would come to be renowned and echo across centuries, and be known — though Lucien has no way of knowing — as the Northern Renaissance.

Through to Constantinople

Steward Pooi Kei College, Yau, Sin Hang Wyatt – 15

Mina was sick of pistachios.

Sure, Mina loved the shade from the rows of pistachio trees, the sunset—colors of pistachio fruits, the smell of her house when her grandfather brought baskets upon baskets of the fruits inside to dry. But she was really starting to get sick of her farm.

Mina had lived on the farm for her whole life, and the only things she had really known were pistachios, her house, and the dirt underfoot. The thing she really looked forward to seeing though, was the book seller that came by once a month. On his camel were stacks upon stacks of books, each one filled with the latest research from Tabriz and Samarkand. Textbooks, celestial charts, annals, atlases — especially the atlases. Mina couldn't get enough of them, and she wasn't happy with just learning about the world through writing.

“Grandpa, can I go to all those places from the books? Especially Constantinople. It looks so cool!”

Her grandpa would always reply, “Mina, if you ever wanted to go that far, you'd need a hundred other people to cross the desert with you! The outside world is way too complicated for you. Just focus on the pistachios for now.”

Every time Mina heard those words, she would sigh and think to herself, “That's basically a no! Why would anyone even want to do that?!” Like a chain, her grandpa's words wrapped and twisted around the house, keeping the gates firmly shut. So, Mina silently studied her Greek, in preparation for a trip to the Ottoman Empire that she wasn't sure would ever materialize.

Now, as Mina took one last look at the receding pistachio trees, she silently thanked herself for the preparations she'd done. A hundred other people would, in fact, cross the desert with her, as the local messenger told her, for knowledge, for money, and for silk. She had planned to go to Constantinople by tagging along with a caravan setting off in Baghdad, so she made sure to read up on the sights she could see in those cities.

Reaching into the bag on the back of her camel for the books she wanted to read, Mina sighed. They were buried under a large shipment of pistachios, which she pushed aside. That was her grandpa's other way to discourage her from going, by limiting the amount of things she could buy. However, Mina had decided that she would go, pistachios or not, and so she begrudgingly took the nuts and went on her way. She couldn't believe how wrong her grandpa was. Keeping her on that farm for so long, just because he was too close-minded to believe that she could survive outside the farm!

When Mina started to leave the places she was familiar with, she could only think of one word to describe the long, dry stretches of land around her. *Empty*. Occasionally, there was a village where she would buy food from, or little oases and rivers where she would get water, but there was little else around. Still, Mina held out hope that she could persevere past the boring parts to prove her grandpa wrong. In the day, Mina rode on her camel, and in the night, Mina consulted her manuscripts and dreamt about the things she would see when she got further along the Silk Road.

The path Mina took was still newly trodden, free from the cracked ground or overgrowth that plagued the roads she was used to. However, as the trail made its way through the valleys, fistfuls and fistfuls of sand also found their ways onto Mina.

On the first day, Mina could ignore the sand in her shoes. As the days went on though, the sand poured into her cargo, all over her camel's saddle, into every nook and cranny, and then some more. It itched at Mina, as if a thousand little worms had something personal against her.

On the sixth day, Mina asked no one in particular, “How long is this going to go on for? I must be almost at Baghdad by now, shouldn't I? Am I even going the right way?”

There was no reply. The sun continued its arc across the sky, a mocking smile seemingly aimed at Mina.

Mina sighed. “There’s still a while to go, then...”

At one point, Mina felt as if she just stopped for a little moment, she would dissolve into a Mina-shaped sand dune. That was the only thought that kept her going against the sand and sun. until Mina saw the slightest hint of green on the horizon, and until she could see a thousand other travellers like her heading towards the city ahead.

As she went forward, more and more streams of people converged together, until the road was less of a passage and more of a roaring crowd Mina had to weave her way through. This was how Mina knew she had left the tiny road she was taking, and arrived at the Road. The Silk Road.

Farms filled with dates and oranges stretched as far as Mina could see. Then, those farms gave way to imposing city gates, whitewashed until the walls gleamed. Inside the city proper, Mina could pick up individual languages beside her. Her own native Persian from people carrying pistachios like her. Arabic, which Mina was really bad at, dominated the conversations. Mina didn’t dwell on the possibility of a language barrier for long. She was finally in a great city of the outside world, and she wouldn’t let something like that make her nervous!

Meanwhile, people speaking in tongues Mina could only guess at rose from the street markets. Melodic languages drifted from people carrying crates of tea and silk, rhythmic ones filled by people selling amber and glass, a thousand different languages from a thousand different mouths. The only thing that united everyone was the fact that their cargo was equally new to Mina.

Baghdad itself smelled like opportunity. On the wind around her, Mina caught a whiff of manure from pack animals like her own, and a sickly-sweet scent from fruit that had been left under the sun for a little too long. Under all that, though, was the smell of old books, myrrh from the eastern coasts of Africa, sizzling eggplant and lamb, and above it all was the sharp smell of spices.

Entranced by everything around her, Mina wandered among the maze of buildings, until she heard the evening calls to prayer sound from somewhere inside the city. Suddenly, Mina snapped back to reality. She had totally forgotten that her caravan would leave at dusk!

During her exploration of the city, she must’ve forgotten to remember the skyline, as the landmarks she could see poking above the buildings were totally unfamiliar. Mina went to ask for directions from a girl leaning against the wall, but her Persian was just as bad as Mina’s Arabic.

No use, then.

After giving the girl an apologetic half-smile, Mina ran off in a random direction. By what little of the setting sun she could still see, it was towards the east. Soon after, people started to light their lamps and the braziers on the streets. The Arabic lettering writhed in the flickering light, making them even less decipherable to Mina than they were before.

Defeated, Mina slumped onto a nearby ledge, when she heard a voice shout at her. “Hey! The lost girl over there – yes, you. Who else here looks lost?”

Mina froze, and looked at the man standing across from her. Following behind him was a cart filled with doll parts and stray supplies, and standing beside him was a little girl holding another doll. A doll merchant on the Silk Road and his daughter, then.

He continued as Mina stood up. “Don’t thank me for saving you, although you should be grateful that I decided to help you reach the caravans before they left. Or else, you would’ve needed to stay here forever, with how bad your Arabic is.”

Mina thought he looked trustworthy enough, despite his weird attitude, so she gestured for the man to lead the way. He spoke Arabic with a clear Egyptian accent, but the others could understand him well enough.

The three of them passed by store after store. Despite the noise around them, Mina had never heard an awkward silence so loud before. Trying to break the ice, Mina asked, “So... how did you know that I’m on the Silk Road? And how did you know I have bad Arabic?”

The man barked out a laugh. “No local would ever look as lost as you. As for the Arabic, did you think that you weren’t staring at those signs like you were staring at a painting?”

Mina wondered what his problem with her was, but she ignored it for now. She really needed to make it to the caravans in time, and her guide seemed to speak Arabic pretty well, bad attitude or not.

In just a few twists and turns, Mina could see the buildings starting to thin out a little, until she could see the twilight sky unobstructed again. At the same time, Mina could see their destination in the distance. Camels, people, and all sorts of goods, much more than Mina had seen in the markets. Without the surrounding crowds of the city, Mina could more clearly see how many people were travelling on the Silk Road. In the distance, she saw...?

The man interrupted her. “You have to repay me. I’m not going to help you for free, you know.”

Mina gave a half-hearted nod, and the man left. Mina sighed and put her interactions with him out of her mind, instead deciding to join the larger group in organizing her things. She had more important things to deal with than him, anyway.

As Mina found out, there weren’t any other important things to do except for travelling forward. In those hours when conversations died down, Mina noticed that there were more streams and springs around, and that the desert sand slowly faded away to dirt. The signs were now written in Turkish, the letters’ curves and arches matching those of the ruins that Mina’s caravan now rested below. Meanwhile, Mina got used to the sight of the man and his daughter travelling next to her. By fate or by pure chance, all three of them were travelling on the same caravan to Istanbul.

The man’s daughter, which Mina found out was called Khadija, bounded towards Mina, probably to ask something like she had done many times before. She was incessantly curious, and she always asked Mina questions about Persia. Even though Mina didn’t think she really knew that much about Persia, she would try her best to answer Khadija.

This time, however, it seemed as if Khadija had something to tell Mina.

“Mina, Mina! Do you wanna hear a secret?”

Mina shrugged. “Why not?”

“My secret is that when I grow older, I hope that I can travel as far and read as many books as you!”

Mina smiled at Khadija. “Aww! It’s always nice to meet someone else that’s obsessed with books. You can start reading more right now, if you want to. Do you want to borrow some of my books?”

Khadija sighed, “Of course I want to... too bad my dad doesn’t want me to read about places too far away from Egypt. Sometimes I feel... trapped, you know? I guess that’s just how life is though.”

Instantly, Mina was pulled back to that tiny pistachio farm in that little part of Persia. Mina had heard of Khadija’s story before, experienced it, and she wasn’t going to let it play out before another curious girl like her.

“Sorry. Khadija, watch the camel, will you?”

Mina stormed off towards the man she hadn’t talked to since Baghdad, her anger barely restrained by each deep breath she took. He wasn’t hard to find, as the man was sorting through the same bags of doll parts he had when Mina first met him.

Mina said to him, “So!”

She didn’t mean for it to be that loud, but she did smile at how the man jumped from his seat a little. Mina continued, “Whatever your name is, I’m here to ask you just one question. Why don’t you let your daughter read about the rest of the world?”

The man raised an eyebrow, turning to her. “Respect me by addressing me by my actual name first. It’s Babu. And why do you care so much about how I raise my child?” He then flashed a smug grin at Mina like he had made a witty retort. Mina absolutely hated it when people did that, so she didn’t even try to hide her frustration when she replied.

“Why do I care? I care because you are forcing your daughter to live a life of ignorance, just because you are too close-minded to let Khadija learn about the world!”

She had hit a nerve in the man, who she was not going to call by his actual name. He shouted back at her, “I’m not close-minded! I just want the best for her!”

Mina could feel her ears turning red. “Do you really want the best for her? Or are you just scared that she’ll leave you once she has the knowledge to?”

Clearly caught off guard, the man tried to say something, but it came out more of a squeak at first. “No, I... I don’t know. But if she leaves Egypt, how will I make sure she’s okay? And how will I find her again? I just want the best for her, and that means keeping her safe.”

Mina replied, more calmly this time, “I know you’re worried about your daughter. But I understand how she feels, and she’s curious. Sometimes, Babu, the best you can do for someone curious is to set them free, free into the world.”

Babu breathed deeply, and when he opened his eyes again, the smug glint in his eyes seemed to have gone out. Now, Mina no longer saw the man with the weird attitude in Baghdad. All she could see was Babu, who would’ve done anything to keep Khadija safe – but maybe a bit too much.

Babu sighed. “Thank you, Mina. I think... Khadija is going to have a lot more knowledge about the world after today.” Then, Babu turned around, leaving Mina alone with her thoughts.

Looking at Babu in the distance, Mina couldn’t help but think back on how her grandpa and Babu both had the same salt-and-pepper hair, the same wrinkles on their faces. The only difference was that Mina’s grandfather had learned to let her learn about the world sooner.

Sifting the pistachios through her hands on her camel, Mina realized that her grandpa had actually wanted her to go this entire time. Why else would he buy so many books for her, and why else would he let her leave on the Silk Road with barely a word? He really had loved Mina. But sometimes, loving someone meant that you had to let them go.

And he did.

The rest of the trip to Constantinople was uneventful, but Babu had warmed up to Mina a lot more. Most days, Khadija and Mina would read books and recite their favourite passages together. On other days, the three of them would recount stories about their lives back home.

When the walls of Constantinople rose ahead, Mina was in the middle of telling one such story.

“And my grandpa, he loved to tell me about how he didn’t want me to leave Persia. Could you believe he wanted me to go see the world this entire time?!”

That was the last one that Mina had told Khadija and Babu, when they left for the markets. Before they left, Khadija said, “My dad says that we can go to Persia after the next batch of dolls are done. Don’t forget to teach me more next time!”

Turning her back to face a waterfront overlooking the Bosphorus, Mina promised herself to go back to Persia, to thank her grandpa and to meet with Khadija and Babu again. One day, much further in the future, she promised herself to go to one of the universities in the capital, and hopefully become a historian or a cartographer. But today was not that day, and she had to see all the sights of the city that she had read about for so long. Laughing, Mina ran off into the streets of Constantinople.

The sun rises over the Silk Road. Light glints off of the minarets of the Hagia Sophia, and off of a drop of dew on a pistachio tree's leaf. The light hits the eye of an old man in Persia.

The old man is laughing because his granddaughter is also laughing.

New Journey to the West

Stewards Pooi Kei Ceollege, Liu, Tsz Him – 15

1456, Ming Dynasty. The emperor, Zhu Qiyu commanded many experienced navigators to go on voyages, like his predecessors once did. Amongst the many navigators, there was Cheung Kai Fu, who was tasked with obtaining the newly translated Tripitaka, the Buddha's teachings.

"So... let me get this straight, revered ruler. You want me, an explorer who never left Asia throughout his entire life, to pull a Marco Polo and travel all the way to Venice, Italy." Cheung said this with great skepticism.

"Affirmative. Now get going, for I am going to reward you handsomely if you return in 3 months' time," the emperor said coldly.

"But I —"

"No buts, take this map of the Silk Road and leave. A carriage shall be provided to you in order to aid you in your travels."

Just like that, poor Cheung was sent on a mission that he was definitely unfamiliar with. "Okay... let's see here..." Cheung mumbled to himself. "I'm currently in Lanzhou, so my next stop would be Tehran. Onwards, my brave and loyal steeds! Onwards! For this is going to be a journey that's filled with adversities!" Cheung whipped the two horses that were pulling his carriage, causing them to let out a mighty neigh and officially starting the traveller's quest for the Tripitaka

A couple days later, Cheung arrived in Tehran smoothly and had an encounter with an interesting fellow. "Say! You look like you're not from around here. What brings you to Tehran, mysterious traveller?"

"My name is Cheung Kai Fu. I come from the Great Ming and am tasked with obtaining the Tripitaka. You... certainly look like an unusual person to say the least. Care to introduce yourself to me...?" Cheung asked with curiosity.

"That... was kind of harsh, but no offense is taken! My name is Abu Fanous, a humble Iraqi who's researching the Silk Road. I'm also a navigator. Nice to meet you." Abu held out his hand, presumably for a handshake as he introduced himself.

"Hm... why does that name ring a bell...?" Cheung thought to himself. "Eh, it probably doesn't matter."

"You're researching the Silk Road you say? My journey to Italy just so happens to be involved with this trail. Since you're a navigator, why don't you hop on board? You can help me out by telling me the shortest path to Italy while I can reward you by taking you on this little sightseeing trip. How does that sound?" Cheung asked.

"Quite the intriguing proposition you have there. Very well then! It shall be a deal!" Abu replied with enthusiasm. "Glad to have you on board, our camaraderie shall be legendary!" Cheung said as he gave Abu a firm handshake.

Shortly after Abu joined Cheung's quest... "Hey, Cheung. You see that mountain over there? Usually, people would go around it in order to get to places, but since you want the shortest way of reaching Italy, we're going to take a detour. Instead of going to Constantinople, we're going to go northwest in order to get to Moscow."

"You sure? The path you're suggesting seems pretty... dangerous and life-threatening." Cheung questioned.

"I am one-hundred percent sure! It is the way of my ancestors! My ancestors were travellers too, so they discovered that secret path in order to get to places faster!" Abu exclaimed.

"I mean... if you're that sure then I can't really doubt you. Huzzah! Towards Moscow we go!" Cheung pulled the reins on his horses, making them change directions.

At night... “Cheung! Wake up! There’s a sandstorm ahead of us!” Abu shouted while he frantically tried to wake Cheung up. “Huh? Wh— WHAT DO YOU MEAN BY THERE’S A SANDSTORM AHEAD OF US!?!? I THOUGHT THIS PATH WAS SAFE!”

“Incorrect! I said this path is the shortest, not the fastest. Now... let’s hightail out of here before we get tossed around like beanbags.” Abu said calmly.

“YEAH! GREAT IDEA!” Cheung tugged the reins on the horses, making them change directions. “IF WE DIE BECAUSE OF THIS, I’M PLACING A CURSE ON YOUR ENTIRE BLOODLINE! IS THE SANDSTORM NEAR US!?”

“The sandstorm’s right behind us. But worry not, as long as we make a right at that opening in front of us, we can successfully evacuate from the sandstorm and continue with your journey.” Abu replied, clearly unaffected.

“OH! YEAH! I CAN DO THAT! WE’RE GONNA LIVE! WE’RE GONNA —” In that crucial moment, one of the horses’ legs tripped on an unsuspecting rock, causing the entire carriage to lose balance and fall onto the ground. “WHU—” Cheung screamed as they stumbled, “OH C’MON! IS THIS SOME TWISTED JOKE!? DO THE GODS REALLY WANT TO SEE ME FAIL!? NEVER AGAIN WILL I EVER —” Cheung’s rant was cut off by the sandstorm as it dragged the duo into its raging winds.

Moments after the assault, both Cheung and Abu were left brutally wounded, their carriage decimated and horses missing. “Ugh...” Cheung groaned as he regained consciousness. “Abu... you here...? Are you alive...?”

“I think so... I swear... that path just so happened to pick up a sandstorm at the worst time possible... I’m sorry.”

“That... isn’t even in my concern as of now. How am I even going to tell the emperor about this incident? I can’t just tread all the way back to China! Abu... are you listening or not? This is extremely bad for me!” Cheung was unable to hide the irritation in his voice.

“Hold on... I think I found something. Something that can probably get us out of this predicament.” Abu then proceeded to dig up what he found in the sand and presented it to Cheung.

“You... can’t be serious.” Cheung said with disbelief. “Are you delusional? That’s just an oil lamp! I doubt it’s going to help us get to Italy, let alone get us out of this desert.”

“Ho—oh! Then you are greatly mistaken, my friend! For this is not just any ordinary lamp, it’s a mystical lamp that houses a magical genie. See the carvings on the lamp? You just have to rub it like this... and a genie will grant you three wishes.” Cheung watched as Abu rubbed the lamp, unamused.

Suddenly, blue mist emerged from the opening of the lamp as a being started to form. “HELLO MORTALS! IT IS I, THE GENIE IN THE LAMP! IT SEEMS THAT YOU HAVE FREED ME FROM MY ETERNAL PRISON, SO I SHALL GRANT YOU THREE WISHES!” Cheung’s jaw dropped, while Abu stared at the genie in awe.

“Alright then!” Abu finally spoke. “For our first wish, I wish for our wounds to be healed!”

“A BIZZARE REQUEST BUT IT SHALL BE DONE!” The genie exclaimed as it moved its fingers, causing the various wounds on Abu and Cheung’s body to vanish.

“I... I can’t believe this is real...! Your sole existence already betrays Chinese mythology! Pray tell, what exactly is it that you are?” Cheung asked, astounded.

“I’m a magical being, duh. And no, don’t believe your country’s folklore or stories, they’re propaganda used to hide our existence. Anyways, you two sure seem like you could use some help, though it’ll be at the cost of another wish!” The genie teased, laughing.

“Right... about that...” Cheung muttered, “it would be nice if you teleported us to Venice. I’m actually a navigator tasked with the job of obtaining the Tripitaka, so if you don’t mind, can you take us there?”

The genie questioned Cheung on his request for a bit before finally asking him, “You sure you want to waste a wish on Italy...? You could be or get anything you ever wanted —”

“Yes, I’m sure. I came here for the sole purpose of getting the Tripitaka. Abu over here is just an acquaintance who just so happened to be using the same trail as me, so can you please take us to Venice and let me get this over with already?” Cheung spoke with determination.

“Very well... your wish is my command.”

POOF! Just like that, the duo found themselves in Venice.

“So um... what now? The reason as to why I even joined you in the first place was because I thought I’d get to witness the beauties of the Silk Road! Moreover, we don’t have a carriage anymore, so aren’t we technically stranded in Venice?” Abu asked.

“Relax, I’ll get us out of here and give you that sightseeing trip. But first, let me focus on my mission. According to the emperor, I’m supposed to find this person named Antonio Francesco. He only gave us his name, so we’re going to have a hard time searching for him. Come Abu, let’s start by asking the locals.”

They kept asking and asking the people of Venice regarding Antonio’s whereabouts, but all they got was either “Nope, sorry. I don’t know him.” Or “I refuse to help outsiders.”

“Ugh...” Cheung said, “Shouldn’t this Antonio guy be some sort of big shot in order for the emperor to task me with retrieving the Tripitaka from him? We’ve been asking for days on end...”

“It’s okay, Cheung! As long as we stay hopeful and determined, we’ll find him eventually.” Abu encouraged him with confidence as he approached another local. “By chance, do you know who’s Antonio Francesco? We’re searching for him!”

“Well, you’re in luck! For I am Antonio Francesco. Why’d you ask?” Antonio asked.

“My name is Cheung Kai Fu and I’m here to obtain the newly translated Tripitaka from you. Though... I never expected someone who wore such vibrant and unique clothing to translate something so... holy and religious.” Cheung showed him a small seal from the emperor to confirm his identity to Antonio.

“Oh... yeah, about that...” Antonio said nervously, “I lost it during my journey to Moscow along the Silk Road... but worry no further! For the Russian emperor, Alexei Shostakov recently notified me that it’s currently in his possession, so all you have to do is head to Moscow and claim it.”

Cheung stood there for a couple minutes, clearly shocked, before finally exploding in a fit of rage. “YOU IRRESPONSIBLE PIECE OF — YOU HAD ONE JOB, ANTONIO, ONE JOB! DO YOU KNOW WHAT WE’VE BEEN THROUGH JUST TO GET HERE? WE WERE SWEEPED AWAY BY A SANDSTORM IN THE MIDDLE OF NOWHERE AND ALMOST DIED! THE LEAST YOU COULD DO FOR US IS PROVIDE US WITH A CARRIAGE SO WE CAN GET TO RUSSIA!”

“I—is he always like this?” Antonio asked Abu, clearly affected by his words. “Even though I only met him for a few days, I can confirm that yes, he is always like this. But yeah, are you going to provide us with a carriage or not? He has to complete his mission and I have to document everything I see on the Silk Road.” Abu replied.

“Fine! Here, just take my one and only carriage and leave already! Treat it like some sort of compensation for my mistake!” Antonio shouted as he gestured them towards his carriage.

“Come on, Abu, let’s leave this loser. It’s time to make good on my promise while we do this.” Cheung told Abu as he hopped onto the carriage, pulling the reins on the horses and leaving the poor Italian behind.

Several days passed by, and the duo found themselves in Russia. “Your majesty! I believe you have the Tripitaka in your possession yes?” Cheung asked as he knelt in front of Alexei.

“That is correct. It’s currently in my possession, see?” Alexei waved the book in front of Cheung as he spoke.

“You know, I never realized how valuable this piece of literature is until recently, when a Buddhist monk offered me the most intricate and prized jade of all jades in exchange for it. But... when Antonio told me that someone was going to retrieve it for the Chinese emperor, I declined the monk’s offer and decided to let it serve its purpose. I suppose that retriever is you?”

Without a second thought, Cheung pulled out his seal once again and replied, “Yes, that would be me. Thank you, your majesty, for you are benevolent and not consumed by greed.”

“Ha! No need to be so formal!” Alexei chuckled as he handed the Tripitaka to him. “Just make sure that you say good things about me to the emperor, alright?”

“Alright.” Cheung said with gratitude. “My companion and I will forever be grateful.” With his book now in hand, all Cheung had to do was return to China in order to complete his quest.

On Cheung and Abu’s way back, they observed many things on the Silk Road: merchants in Constantinople selling silk and some unnamed spices, people riding camels, oases and most importantly, trading hubs that allowed them to replenish supplies and get exotic items from other countries.

“Welp... we finally returned to Tehran. What did you learn from this trip, Abu?” Cheung asked.

“The Chinese are willing to do whatever it takes in order to complete their missions and are stupidly stubborn — but I’m just joking. The real lesson learnt is that many places have their own distinct cultures but with a little sense of familiarity to them, for the Silk Road is more than just a path, it is a symbol for cultural exchange. For instance, that merchant in Constantinople sold a lot of local goods that I’ve never seen before, but some of them closely resembled our goods in Iraq. I believe you also made that observation no?” Abu asked.

“Yes, yes I indeed have. Before we part ways, what are you going to do with that final wish? Become unfathomably rich? Become omnipotent? Or —”

“Cheung, my friend. I do not seek such simple and greedy desires, as I am going to sell this lamp to other travellers who are exploring the Silk Road. This way, I can add more whimsy into their adventures, essentially making them interested in researching the Silk Road, just like how I — no, we did.” Abu replied.

“That’s... very meaningful. I guess it’s farewell then. So long, Abu.”

“Goodbye! May your future expeditions end in great success!”

Just like that, the duo parted ways, with newfound knowledge and views regarding the Silk Road.

The Silk Road's Loom

The HKCCCU Logos Academy, Hoi Ching, Kwok – 14

The silk that Wei wove was not merely just fabric, but also the future of him and his daughter, Mei. However, the seams of that lovely future were slowly unraveling into a horrible, horrible mess.

Wei had stood in the magistrate's receiving room, the air thick with the smell of ink. Magistrate Heng did not look at him, but at a scroll on his desk, his fingers — covered with lavish gold and jade, were tapping a slow rhythm.

"Your debt," the magistrate had said, his voice quiet, almost bored. "It hasn't been paid in a long time, hasn't it?"

He finally lifted his eyes. They were the color of slate, and just as cold.

"You are an artist. A man of delicate things. You understand the value of... such rules." He paused, letting the silence press down on Wei. "It would be a shame to see such a life crushed by the wrath of law. After all... prison is no place for a weaver, am I right?"

"Oh, and your daughter," Magistrate Heng continued, as if the thought had just occurred to him. "Mei. She is, what, ten? A difficult age for a girl to be left alone. Unprotected..."

The floor seemed to tilt beneath Wei. The unspoken meaning hung in the air, more suffocating than lead. Mei, taken as a servant to work off a debt that would magically never be paid. Her spirit, her laughter, her future—all would be swallowed by the magistrate's greed.

"I... I will find a way, Honorable Magistrate," Wei had stammered, his throat tight. "I beg you for just a little more time."

Magistrate Heng gave a slow, thin smile that never reached his eyes. "Time is the one thing I am, unfortunately, running out of. Twelve moons, Wei. Repay my debt, or I will be forced to seek... alternative compensation."

"Daddy?" The sound of his own name jolted him back to the present. The chill of the magistrate's hall vanished, replaced by warm sunlight. He blinked as noise from the market came crashing back. Mei was tugging his sleeve. "Are you okay?"

He nodded, trying his best to smile back. "Y—yes, I'm fine Mei, just thinking about something, what did you call me for?"

"Iroh's looking at our silk right now." Mei jerked her head to a man inspecting their single, precious chest.

Iroh was a man carved from desert rock, his face weathered by the sun. He had only one eye, but his gaze was as sharp as a shard of glass. He smelled of foreign spices and camel dung—the scent of their only hope.

The 'Crane's Ascent' was the first thing Iroh's eye found in the worn chest. He gently lifted it from the chest and draped it across his arms. The silky smooth fabric caught the sun's rays, shimmering in the sunlight.

Iroh's face was unreadable, the silence stretched between them. Suddenly, he let out a low rasp, like stone grinding against stone. "They say you owe a debt that cannot be paid."

Wei's throat tightened. He could still feel the cold grip of the magistrate's threat once — not against his property, not against his freedom, but against his daughter. The debt had become a threat to his child.

“The magistrate is... impatient,” Wei managed, his eyes darting toward Mei who was now quietly observing a butterfly a few paces away.

Iroh’s face, weathered by desert winds and sun, wrinkled as he frowned. “This is surely a great treasure to those in the west, a miracle even.” he said, his single eye still fixed on the silk. “But out there, on the Silk Road, only the strong can survive.”

He finally looked at Wei, and the weaver saw no merchant’s greed in that look, only a bleak, seasoned certainty.

“The desert sun will see a thing to bleach and ruin. Bandits will see an opportunity to rob and steal. A desperate beast will see easy prey to hunt and kill.” Iroh leaned closer, the scents of spice and dung suddenly menacing. “You are not only just trading silk for gold and silver. You are trading you and your daughter’s life, for a mere chance to repay your debt. The Silk Road is a beast that eats delicate things. Therefore, our will must be stronger than it to get to our destination. Are you sure that you can be strong enough?”

The question hung in the air, heavier than the silk itself. The magistrate’s cold threats in Chang’an now seemed like subtle, creeping whispers compared to the raw, devouring dangers Iroh had just painted.

Wei took a deep breath.

“Yes.”

For a split second, he could see that Iroh’s sharp eyes had softened at Wei, but they quickly sharpened once more.

“We shall cross the Takamakan Desert to our destination, Kashgar, one of the major trading hubs on the silk road. We will depart from the gates of Chang’an in seven days.”

Seven days later, when dawn broke, they began their journey through the Silk Road. Now, the world beyond China was a lesson in harshness. The comfort of home gave way to the Taklamakan’s suffocating sands.

“It’s really a sea of sand.” Mei whispered, her eyes wide as she shuffled higher on her camel.

“A sea that drinks men whole,” Iroh rumbled, pointing a thick finger at a scatter of bleached bones half-buried in a dune. “After all, we merchants call it ‘The Place of No Return.’ Remember that, little Mei.”

The days settled into a strangely comforting rhythm. By day, they rode on the camels, Iroh would point out a resilient bush or a particular rock formation, his voice a low rumble as he taught them to read the desert’s language. “See that? Where the sand is rippled like that? It tells you where the wind blows.”

Mei, her initial overwhelming wonder was slowly tempered by the heat. She would resort to weaving with scraps of tough desert grass, her small fingers mimicking her father’s art.

Evenings were for silence, broken only by the crackle of the fire and the soft, sifting sound of sand sliding from the tents as they were pitched. They shared water and flat bread while listening to Iroh’s stories, from ones about heroes from distant lands, to spirits that would guide the lost. Mei would listen intently to each word that Iroh said, her wide eyes in awe.

In the vast emptiness above them, Wei momentarily forgot the dread of the debt.

On a day as indistinguishable from any other, they straddled their camels as usual as they shuffled through the sand lazily. There were the same bleached skies, the same weary heat, the same white noise...

Wait.

Why couldn't he hear anything?

Wei felt a cold knot in his stomach. The ever-present screech of hawks, the growl of desert foxes, the scuttle of scorpions—all vanished, swallowed by a sudden hush.

He whipped his head to Iroh and found that the man went perfectly still like a statue. "Everyone, stop." His voice cut the silence like a knife to butter. "Listen."

Mei clutched her doll, her small frame tense. Iroh's head was cocked, he stared beyond the horizon. The air, a stagnant furnace moments before, stirred with a nervous gust.

Then, he pointed.

Wei squinted. At first, nothing. Then he saw it—a faint smudge between the pale blue sky and the yellow sand. A wall. Growing.

"The horizon..." Wei breathed, the knot in his stomach tightened. "It's gone."

The deep thrum vibrated around them, the collective roar of billions of sand particles being whipped into fury.

"Haboob!" Iroh yelled, the foreign word a death sentence. "To the dune! Now!"

Iroh moved with a whirlwind of calm efficiency. He drove the protesting camels to their knees against the dune, forming a living barricade. His calloused fingers were swift yet unexpectedly gentle as he covered Mei's head with a bundle of coarse cloth, leaving no gap for the coming fury. A knife flashed, a brief silver in the eerie light, and two precise slits appeared for her eyes. He repeated the process for Wei, the cloth tightening around his head like a second skin.

Iroh's single eye, dark and unwavering, held Wei's. "Your vision is more precious than water here," he stated, his voice cutting through the wind's growing shriek. "To lose it is to die."

Then he pressed the chest of silks into Wei's arms. The heavy weight was an anchor for Wei amidst the chaos. "This is not just silk now," Iroh said, his meaning as sharp as his knife. "It is your daughter's future. Your grip must be tighter than the storm's." A cold dread, far deeper than the desert's chill, flooded Wei's veins. He could only manage a stiff nod, as he closed his arms around the chest as tightly as he could.

Through the mask, Wei saw the world turn a sickly, coppery orange. The temperature plummeted. The wind's whisper became a shriek, then a roar that swallowed the world.

Finally, it hit.

The universe dissolved into a roaring chaos. Sand hissed like a million raging snakes against the cloth. Fine dust infiltrated every seam, coating their lips, grinding between their teeth. Wei trembled—not only from the cold, but from the destructive power. He was a creator of beauty, thread by thread; this was a force that unmade creation, bit by bit.

Mei clung to him, her small body shaking. He could feel her terror vibrating through his sleeve. Time ceased. All he could feel was Mei's hold and the coarse wood of the chest. There was only the roar, the grit, the struggle for each shallow breath.

An eternity later, the fury began to wane. The roar softened to a moan, then a sigh. The coppery light brightened to a faint yellow.

Iroh was the first to move, heaving the sand-laden blanket aside. The world that emerged was alien, the dunes sculpted into new, strange shapes. The camels, half-buried, snorted and stirred.

Wei and Mei untied their face coverings, coughing, their faces etched with dust and exhaustion. They looked at each other, then at the transformed landscape. They were all survivors of a shared nightmare.

Iroh was already on his feet, scanning the renewed horizon. He met Wei's wide, stunned eyes and gave a slow nod.

"We survived the desert's anger," he said, his voice rasping like sandpaper. "It has passed. We live." He turned, his silhouette a shadow against the rising sun. "The journey continues."

The days followed were a testament to that resolve. They traveled in a state of alertness, the trauma of the storm was a ghost walking beside them. Every shift in the wind made Mei flinch; every distant blow of dust made Wei's heart clench.

Then, one morning, the air itself changed. The dry, coarse breath of the Taklamakan Desert softened, carrying a hint of moisture, the scent of damp earth. The trail spilled into a valley, and there it was—a ribbon of turquoise waters, carving its way through the dust. Orchards of flat peaches and apricots blazed with color, and farmers, their faces turned up to the sun, waved at them. The gesture was so normal, so human, that Wei felt a sudden, unexpected sting in his eyes.

The city of Kashgar did not simply appear—it erupted from the plains as a burst of color, a stark contrast to the dull and bland desert. The silence they had carried was shattered by a dozen languages, merchants bartered in a hundred different accents, locals gossiped and laughed cheerfully. The air, thick with sizzling lamb fat, perfume and spices. This was all surprisingly wonderful to Wei after the dusty taste of desert sand.

Mei, who had spent days speaking only in whispers, gripped her father's hand, her eyes wide like a doe. "It's so loud," she breathed, but a smile touched her lips for the first time since the sandstorm.

Iroh led them not to the bustling main square, but to a quieter courtyard where a man named Kavi lived. Kavi's beard was oiled and curled, but his eyes were like those of a falcon, missing nothing.

Wei's hands trembled as he unspooled the silk. The noise of the courtyard seemed to have fallen to hush, as even the servants tending the flowers stopped to gaze at the work of art. The cranes, weaved in golden thread, seemed to flutter in the dim light, its beauty stark and profound even after barely surviving the sandstorm. Kavi's eyes widened. He reached out a hand, but did not touch, as if the silk were a sacred object.

"This is not a trade good," Kavi said, his voice hushed. "This is a king's treasure, or a gift for the gods." He looked from the silk to Wei. "What do you want for it?"

Wei, who had rehearsed this moment in his mind a hundred times before, found his words failing him. He looked at Mei, whose face was alight with pride, and at Iroh, who gave a slow, deliberate nod.

"We want..." Wei began, then cleared his throat. "We want gold and silver for exchange. We also want to see what the people in Kashgar have created, their art."

A genuine smile etched on Kavi's face. He clapped his hands, and his servants brought forth things that made Wei and Mei gasp: Lapis lazuli from the local mines with the shade of the deep sea; a dagger with a hilt made from a beast's tooth; a carpet with intricate patterns that told a story of celebrations.

That night, they feasted in Kavi's hall. Wei was no longer just a weaver from Chang'an; he was a master craftsman renowned in Kashgar. Mei listened, enthralled, to tales of Alexander the Great, of Buddha, of desert gods from ancient legends, her world expanding with every story.

As they prepared for their long journey home, Wei stood with Aang at the edge of the city, looking back the way they had come.

"The road changes you," Wei said softly, his hand resting on the metal chest that held their treasures. He was sure that the debt would be paid, and his future with Mei would be saved.

Aang grunted, a sound that was now familiar and comforting. "The Silk Road is a loom, Wei. The deserts, the people you meet, they are the threads. You do not just travel the road, you are woven by it."

Wei looked at his daughter, who was now confidently bartering for a clay bead necklace with children her age, her laughter mingling with the foreign tongue. He thought of his silk, now a legend in a land he once only dreamed of, and of the new patterns already forming in his mind. They had crossed the Silk Road and survived many dangers, but it was all worth it. They had arrived not just in a new land, but as new people.

The Remembered Land

The International School of Macao, Chua, Hui Lin Jasmine – 15

In the far distant lands of Chang'an, there snored a man named Luo Tuo. Luo Tuo was a highly sought-after navigator, the only man to speak to the stars and hear an answer. By locating a single star in the sky, Luo Tuo was able to take his troupe anywhere he pleased. Rubbing his neck, he felt as though he'd slept for a millennium. He mumbled, and grumbled, and stumbled, and squeezed himself awake. Turning to his side, he'd wanted to see his aides, yet all he saw was the faint orange glow of the sand.

A string of foul curses had already twisted out of Luo Tuo's cracked lips, dry from the remainder of baijiu he had guzzled down with his expedition, celebrating the spice traders from India, only a couple of horse-clops away from the makeshift tent they had made out of animal skin. He staggered out of the tent, anticipating a brutal noon light, the time of the trade, but was instead greeted with the pink of a hazy sunset. Curses tumbled out of his mouth faster than he could pack up what was left in their tent. The contents of the tent, once lively and filled with shoes, wines, silks, and books from passing travellers, seemed to leave only an impression on Luo Tuo when they were gone. Only his bamboo sleeping mat and torn leather shoes remained. Luo Tuo's caravan was nowhere in sight.

Coming to terms with the fact that his caravan had likely completed the trade as he snored, and was no doubt splitting up his share as the sun tucked itself behind the dunes, he decided to try to head back to the closest camp toward the Northeast. Slipping his shoes on, he strapped the bamboo mat onto his back. His legs trembled as he stepped out into the cool dusk air, a contrast to the night he had fallen asleep, a musky and dewy evening, with heat that shook in the air, and clung in their tent.

Luo Tuo had decided to head straight North, where his prized possession, his gorgeous white-haired stallion, no doubt was braying for him. His horse would take him to the branches others were never willing to brave, and he'd come back to his village, with a puffed-up chest, adorned with the silks and jewels he knew travels would kill to save. And maybe, just maybe, the pretty flower from the neighboring village would finally glance back at him. He'd spoil her with gold, silver, and jade, beautiful silks that'd bring out the flecks of yellow in her eyes, and feed her sweet honey.

Pleased with this scenario, Luo Tuo looked up to locate the Northern Star. He was bewildered to see that the speckles of moonlight he had once found his purpose in had been plastered over by pools of purplish ink that darkened the sky. Not a single constellation in sight, Luo Tuo had to rely on the setting orange sun.

The rigid silence Luo Tuo was so accustomed to in his silent village, and quiet slumbers had been replaced with an incessant buzzing that seemed to have followed him from his tent to his walk. A deafening whirring echoed above him. Trembling in the sky above him, an angel with a tadpole-shaped metallic tube trembled in the sky above him, and a circle spun over the tube like an angel's halo. The soft sand that Luo Tuo had been walking on had transitioned into hard rock, neat, smooth rock that had expanded beyond the horizon.

A horseless chariot zoomed past Luo Tuo, made out of the same material the tadpole had been. Behind it, a puff of smoke billowed out from the rear end, akin to the kind that'd reach for Luo Tuo's nose when he'd tend for the hearth. But the chariot offered Luo Tuo no warmth, and he examined as the smoke rose into the purple sky, mixing with the pigment that was already hiding Luo Tuo's brothers in the stars. As he spun around, and around, and around, Luo Tuo's knees buckled, and his knees sank into the stones in utter terror. For the first time in his life, Luo Tuo was wholly lost, and for the first time in his life, he had lost his bearings. Luo Tuo had travelled this route many times before, yet it seemed like he was somewhere completely new. Another chariot dawdled past him, and a man in a shirt made of cotton, with gold adorned on his ears, neck, and hands, tossed a wrinkled piece of paper at him and shouted, "Get off the road, jerk!"

Luo Tuo studied the crinkly paper that had been launched at him. Unravelling the paper, he studied the images engraved onto it. Strange symbols decorated the piece, words, and images he couldn't begin to comprehend. The paper he had traveled weeks for had been tossed into his face like waste. He studied what he assumed to be a lewd image of a woman, and sighed. He wasn't familiar with the new technology that the Southern Chinese must have brought to the intersection of the roads, or how they viewed their women. He

wasn't familiar with the strange chariots they drove in, or the metallic angels they had brought from the heavens and down to earth.

Completely disoriented, Luo Tuo trudged off the road and smeared his bamboo mat back onto the sand, deciding that his navigation ended with finding North, and he would not be roped into navigating the mess that was these new technologies. They were surely just a fad that would die out soon, and sooner or later, Luo Tuo could go back to selling salt.

A Connection to the Past

The International School of Macao, Guise Vaz, Maria – 15

I stood in the entryway of my cramped apartment. It's old, and the walls are peeling, but it's where I feel at home. Or at least it feels like home in the bustling city of New York, a place I've grown accustomed to since moving from my hometown in Beijing. In my hands is a package that's decorated with these flashy stickers and a return address from China. Assuming my mom had sent me something she found from my childhood room with the purpose of pressuring me into giving her a grandchild, I opened it. As I'm pulling out the clothes I hardly recognise, something shiny catches my eye.

I pull it out, running my fingers over the intricately carved wood. The box seemed to hold secrets. I'm not exactly sure how to explain it, but something about the rough exterior and the golden hinges on the opening felt ancient and mysterious. Then I saw it. A tiny button on the bottom of the box. To be honest, I don't really see why a button would be necessary on a box, but I press it anyway. Suddenly, the world around me blurred. My vision blacked. It felt like I was floating.

Then, just as quickly as it had started, the pounding in my head stopped. I groggily opened my eyes, sunlight streaming through the curtains. I sit up in the hard bed, my back throbbing. Once my vision adjusts to the light, I realise I'm not in my room. I look around, confused, I'm in a lavishly adorned room, with gold on the ceiling and silk curtains. I can make out voices coming from outside, but they weren't speaking in English, instead, it was a distinct dialogue from long ago that I somehow understood.

I bring myself to open the big double doors and step outside. I'm met with someone walking straight towards me, an unreadable expression on his face. He was tall, wearing a long tan robe that hung loosely around his frame. When the man reached me, he bowed, handing me a roll of paper wrapped with a dainty red bow around it. I hesitantly accept it, unfurling the scroll.

My gaze drifted towards the top of the page, where a large font read "The Adventures of the Silk Road", a list of tasks following shortly. My mouth fell open, followed by a soft gasp. Could this really be happening to me? There's no way I could've travelled back in time. I mean, that only happens in the movies, right? Even if this is just a dream, though, I want to make the most of it and follow these quests.

I followed the man into the street, the sound of chatter and haggling filling my ears. The air was crisp here, nothing like the pollution I was used to breathing in. The man I was following, whom I heard someone call "Qiang", came to a halt in front of a group of camels. I look at him, puzzled, but he just gestures towards the camel wearing gorgeous silk and helps me get on. Having never ridden a camel in my life, I'm solely running on adrenaline right now.

The moment I settled onto the saddle, the camel stood up, making me nearly fall off. Qiang pats him, saying "He knows the way." Just as Qiang finishes his thought, the camel starts moving. As I look back to Qiang, waving goodbye, he throws a remote with a red play button in the center of it. Attached to it with a string was a note that read: "Use this in between quests, it'll take you farther, faster." I looked at the paper that I had been clutching tightly. First on my list was to acquire a variety of spices from Delhi.

I pushed the button on the remote. Since clearly this time travelling craze was fueled by red shiny buttons, I expected it to do something that wouldn't be possible in the normal world. And sure enough, the feeling I was floating reappears, and I blink open my eyes in a new town. The people, who walked by me with a speed that I almost mistook for running, were wearing silk clothing and jewellery with gemstones on it. I searched the crowded stalls for the one that sold what I was looking for. It didn't take long since a merchant came up to me holding a tray of spices. The list wasn't specific on which ones I had to get, so I played it safe and pointed to one of each. Just as the man started haggling prices with me, it dawned on me that I didn't have any way to pay the vendor. Before I managed to start worrying, the same person who had guided me before, Qiang, appeared out of thin air. He stepped forward, whispering something into the vendor's ear. I'm not sure what he said, but the vendor simply nodded in understanding and handed me 6 bags of spices. I turn to face Qiang, "Do I give these to you?" I ask, already giving him the bags. He shakes his head, pushing my hand away. "You only give me this when you complete your next task. It's your last one so make it count." I nod slowly, this is the first

time he has spoken to me since I got here, and the last thing I expected was for him to speak perfect english. Anyway, that was the least of my worries right now. I have to focus on my last task.

I turn back to the road, my camel waiting as if it had always been there. I don't remember it being here when I teleported, but for the sake of my sanity, I'm going to ignore that. I mount onto the camel, petting its coarse fur before taking out the scroll. The second, and last, task on my list is to find two rolls of hand-woven silk from Samarkand, Uzbekistan.

As ready as I'll ever be for this journey, I press the button on the remote one last time. This time, the place I was in was filled to the brim with people. The architecture was absolutely gorgeous, and the teal accents made me want to paint my whole apartment teal. That's if I ever get to go back, of course.

I walk around vendors and customers haggling on either side of me. I'm watching intently as someone haggles, when someone bumps into me. I go to say sorry, then realise the lady who'd bumped into me was holding exactly what I needed. I eagerly pointed to the rolls she was holding and asked where she got them. She gave me a "you're crazy" look, then pointed towards the navy blue hut at the end of the road. I thank her, immediately making my way towards the tent. The second I arrive and see the teal silks, I almost cry tears of joy. The vendor chuckles at my reaction, giving me the go-ahead to take them. I turn around, and just as I expected, Qiang shows up holding a pouch with an offering in exchange for the silks. "So this is it. I'm meant to give you the spices and the silks to complete the quests now, right?" He nods, and I do exactly that. Once I do so, he pulls out yet another red button and says, "Whenever you're ready, press it."

And just like that, it was over. As my vision blurred once more, I knew my voyage had come to an end, but this time I wasn't scared or confused, I was at peace and content. As I woke up in my apartment, the familiar sound of sirens and noise came from outside. I'm still not sure if what I experienced was a dream or not, but I'm okay with just knowing I had the best time.

The Silken Roads

YPICA Lee Lim Ming College, Langbayan, Laxmi – 17

My name is Liang, and right now, I'm pretty sure I'm going to die out here.

The wind's blowing so hard, it's like a ghost screaming through the dunes of sand, and it hates me. It steals the warmth right out of my robes and replaces it with a chill that settles deep in my bones. My camels keep making this low, grumbling sound, like even they know this was a terrible idea, which they most likely do, they're probably smarter than I am.

This whole journey didn't start with some grand calling or anything. It started because my family was broke. After a bad harvest and a debt we couldn't pay, I was left staring at these beautiful, useless rolls of silk from our looms. My mom's face, that tight, worried look she gets, was what finally pushed me to act. An old man in Chang'an, who smelled of dust and secrets, pointed west on a worn-out map. "They've never seen anything like this," he said, tapping a cracked nail on the silk. "They'll give you a fortune for it."

A fortune. I clung to that word. But out here, past the last known gate and into the endless yellow void of the Taklamakan, fortune means nothing. The desert is a hungry, shifting thing. By day, the sun is an angry god consuming everything in sight, by night, the cold is a silent thief stealing every last breath of warmth I had. We've been walking for months. My only company is the stars and the echoing voice in my head that just says "What have you done?"; that and my camels grunts and noises.

Then, we saw it. First, a blur of green, real, living green that made my skin prick. An oasis. And beyond it... people. Not like us. Their clothes were strange, their faces shaped by a different sun, they stared at me like I'd fallen from the moon. I must have looked just as alien to them.

With hands shaking from more than just the cold, I unrolled a bolt of the silk. The last light of day hit it, and the fabric exploded with color. The embroidered cranes seemed to breath back to life. A wave of sound went through the crowd, not words, just pure, stunned breaths.

They didn't speak my language, but I didn't need words to understand the wonder on their faces. Their chief stepped forward, his rough hands hovering over the silk like it was magic before he dared to touch it. He offered me rough blue stones the color of a twilight sky and pointed to a horse so powerful and elegant it took my breath away.

We traded. More than that, we shared. We shared food, clumsy hand gestures that turned into jokes, and the slow, dawning realization that we weren't so different. I learned their word for "hello." They tried to say "silk."

I'm not a dead man walking anymore. I'm a connector. This trip wasn't just about saving my family. It was about that moment, seeing a stranger's eyes go wide with wonder at something they never knew existed. I'm going home with lapis stones and a story about a strong horse, but also with a new, humming truth. The world is huge and scary, but it's also full of people. People who have beautiful things, and they too, want to share them.

This scary, lonely path I just carved? One day, it won't be lonely. It'll be a road. It won't just carry silk and jewels, but music, stories, and ideas from one side of the world to the other. It'll stitch places together.

I, Liang, the boy who was just scared and desperate, took the first, trembling step. And somehow, that changed everything.

Seres: The Land of Silk

YPICA Lee Lim Ming College, Tanagon, Eliah – 17

You might think that this is a story of romance, wherein two people fall in love, and they live happily ever after. Well it's the complete opposite, you see...

Long ago, when giants lived amongst humans, the world was in chaos. Giants would enslave humans, utilizing every resource they had. But it was never enough for them. The Emperor of all giants in the East, Emperor Sherry Ya was the fiercest of them all. He would banish or punish any subject that would defy him. However, he had a daughter, Seres, she was the complete opposite of her father. She was kind, gentle and everything her father wasn't. She was really close with one particular human, Andres Chen. He was a royal silk weaver who dreamed of sharing his handmade silk scarves around the world, specifically Europe, because he had heard that they were interested in knowing more about silk.

Now, being friends with a giant princess, he always had the thought that it gave him an advantage to promote his creations. However, it wasn't as easy as he thought it would be. Emperor Ya hated the thought of sharing his nation's products with another country and he wanted to keep them all to himself. Although he would gain much if he wasn't so greedy, because of past conflicts with Europe, he refused to trade with them.

Seres and Andres, being friends, would come up with unreal plans to make Emperor Ya agree to share Andres' scarves with Europe but they would fail each time they tried and make His Highness irritated.

One day, Andres had enough of trying to persuade the Emperor and decided that he would go to the West himself and show the King the scarves he had created. He wanted Seres to be part of his plan, however, she was against it because she knew what her father was capable of doing when he found out what Andres was planning to do. Andres, being the hard headed boy that he was, secretly bought a boat and sailed across dangerous seas and storms just so he could convince the King of Europe that his scarves and designs could change their clothing industry.

As he arrived in Europe, many people started to stare at him because it was well known that the east and west countries didn't have a great relationship. He ignored the weird glances they gave him and went straight to the palace of the King. "Greetings Your Highness, I am Andres Chen from the kingdom of China and I would like to introduce—", he was interrupted by the yelling of King Maverick.

"WHAT IS THIS?!" the king roared. "How dare you walk into my palace and into my home to share my nemesis's products? You have no respect towards me and the kingdom I am ruling. You have no business trying to fix this dispute between our countries using scarves! I think you are a spy from the East! Guards! Arrest this intruder and inform the King of the East that I will consider this a declaration of war!" He said angrily. "No, Sire, I am no Spy. I am a—" he wasn't able to finish what he was saying because the king's guards started to pull him away and brought him to a dungeon, locking him up.

Seres, on the other hand, was starting to get worried about Andres. He'd been gone for over 3 days now and haven't heard from him ever since he left for Europe. She was having thoughts on going to Europe herself but being a princess meant she was supervised 24/7 by her father's men.

So she asked one of her most trusted friends, Bonnie, who was also a human by the way, to go over to Europe and find Andres. "But your majesty, what will happen if the king finds out that you have been disregarding his orders? I would gladly comply with what you desire, however what will happen next will be on your hands to deal with." Bonnie said to Seres as she was packing her bags to get ready to set sail off to Europe. "Yes, but please send me a letter once you safely arrive. I don't want to lose you to some giant waves or storms." said the Princess worriedly. As Bonnie was about to answer her, the door of Sere's room flew open and 2 guards respectfully bowed.

"Your Majesty, we would like to inform you that we received a letter from the King of Europe stating that our royal weaver unlawfully entered the great halls of King Maverick and insulted their way of fashion and they have declared war with our country." said one of the royal guards.

"Does my father know about this?" Seres asked nervously. She knew that her father would find out sooner or later but she didn't know that it would be this soon. "Yes, he would like to see you in his chambers this instant."

While walking to her father's room, her heart was beating so fast that she could almost hear it. When she arrived in front of a big golden door, she knocked. "Come in," her father said coldly, she prepared herself for what insults or unpleasant words he was about to throw at her. "Order our men to prepare for war." That was the only thing he said to her before getting up from his chair and started to walk over to another room. Her tears slowly dripped from her face... She never wanted this to happen...

While the east and the west kingdoms were preparing for the upcoming battle, Andres was secretly trying to fix the mistake he'd made by doing all that he could to try to escape from the prison he was in but sadly all of his efforts went in vain. So instead, he decided to write a letter to Seres instead...

Seres if you're reading this, I've made a terrible mistake. I should've listened when you warned me about the consequences of my action. I'm really sorry for what I've done to both you and our country. If only I could go back in time and correct my mistakes, I would. I am currently locked up for presenting myself to the Emperor....

He stopped writing and saw the door swung open. It was Queen Maya, wife of King Maverick. "Pull that rope and a tunnel will open, go straight and you'll see the sea and a boat I've prepared for you." She said as if she was being watched. "Why are you helping me ma'am? I did not listen to the princess and did as I wished and look what happened. I do not deserve your pity.." Andres said as if he was about to punch the wall out of frustration.

"Child, all of us have made many mistakes in the past but it's also a chance for us to learn from those mistakes and use them as a tool to be a better person. I also don't tolerate my husband's method of settling disputes" For some reason, her voice made him feel safe. As if he was laying down on a pile of cotton balls. "Go, and inform your country that Europe will attack at dawn, quickly now before the guards come back... Tell Seres I said hi."

Her last statement shocked him. *She knows Seres?* He thought to himself. He brushed off that thought and prepared to set off back to Europe.

Emperor Ya was training his strongest soldiers for war. His plan was to open the steel barrier that was dividing both East and West countries and charge at dawn. The steel barriers were placed in the middle of the ocean by both The Giant King of the West and the Giant Emperor of the East in order to avoid contact with each other. However, as time passed by the steel barrier started to corrode and parts of it were chipped down by people or giants wanting to visit other countries.

It is now the dead of night and all troops positioned themselves in their respective positions. The Emperor slowly opened the barrier not too big so that the enemies wouldn't notice their presence and let the human soldiers go in first to inspect the premises. One soldier saw a boat drifting towards them and he thought that it was a European Soldier. So without second thoughts he shot the person on the boat, but little did he know that it was a trap set by the European troops. It was a decoy and now that their location was exposed, they panicked. "RETREAT!!" The general

yelled! Multiple arrows started to shoot from the European side and many of the Chinese soldiers were shot and fell into the sea.

While the battle was happening, Seres was pacing back and fourth, worried what would be the outcome of this meaningless war. As she was walking, she suddenly tripped on a loose board and one wood plank went out of place and revealed a hidden silver box, engraved with her mother's initials. Empress Rhea Yang, that was her mother's name. It was told to her that her mother died during childbirth and so Seres never really had the chance to get to know her mother.

Now, Seres took the box out of the floor and dusted the dust away from the top part. It showed a picture of a woman with long, wavy, dark hair and deep brown eyes. Seres didn't know who the woman was but

she seemed oddly familiar. She then slowly opened the lid and it showed an old diary and an envelope that looked like it was made by someone with royalty.

Seres opened the letter and started to read it and what it said sent shivers down her spine..

My dear Seres, the time that I wrote this letter I had a vision that I wouldn't be able to survive childbirth. I'm sorry I wouldn't be able to see you grow up and guide you through your journey into being a fine young lady. But I would like to at least give you information about our family that I wish would be helpful in the near future. Honey, we are descendants of the First Giants that roamed the Earth. They are called Nalthis Walkers. They had special abilities bestowed upon them by The God of Giants himself, Lord Nula. He thought by providing them with these abilities that they would use it for the greater good but sadly the Nalthis Walkers became greedy. They would invade other countries and murder different Kings, Queens, Emperors and Empresses just so they could be the only giants that ruled the world. Lord Nula didn't like what was happening so he took those abilities from them and gave it to us the Earth Walker. Now, I won't tell you everything regarding your abilities but please use it for the greater good. I know your father may act up, but please never blame yourself for whatever bad happens in your life. Me and your dad love you very much. I would do anything to be by your side. I love you so much my princess.

Love MOM

After reading the letter Seres felt tears run down her face. She missed her mom dearly. She checked the box once more and saw a necklace with a diamond shaped pendant. She put it on and felt a tingle all over her body. *What's happening??* She thought to herself. Seres then saw a rock and held it and suddenly it liquefied! This scene shocked her! But slowly she changed the rock into different shapes. She let out a sigh... *Thank you mom...* And with that she got ready for battle.

Andres was near the shore when he saw the battle that was happening between the two countries. He was too late.. He ran to the palace and saw Seres in a balloon armor. "Seres what do you think you're doing?!" Andres asked, almost yelling. "I'm preparing for battle." she said coldly. Andres was shocked by her response. This wasn't the sweet kind Seres he'd always known, she was different this time. She was cold and sinister. "Seres..." he said worriedly. She didn't even look back when he called her. "Seres, I'm sorry.. I didn't mean for this to happen, I just thought—"

"You thought what, Andres?! That your silk will fix the conflict between two countries? Well guess what, it made things even worse! If you just stayed like I asked you to, this wouldn't have happened! I warned you multiple times that everything had the right timing for it. But you wouldn't listen, now I have to do what's best for the likes of my kingdom." Andres was speechless. He knew what he did wrong and he had no excuse. "Seres, I know I messed up big time, but that doesn't mean you have to go into battle as well, there are soldiers that will finish this war once and for all." He said, trying to change Seres' mind. "They can't stop the war, but I can"

"What makes you think that?" said Andres.

"You'll see." she said, not even looking at him. "NO! I'm not letting you put your life in danger." he said and ran over to the door blocking it with his tiny body compared to Seres. "Oh please, I'm much MUCH taller than you." she said and walked over him.

When Seres arrived on the battlefield, she was horrified. Many dead soldiers were scattered, drifting slowly on the sea. Although the battle was still going on, it was pretty obvious that China was losing. She saw her dad against 4 giant soldiers from the west. He had multiple cut wounds all over his body and she also noticed that his right arm was missing. She couldn't move nor speak. Her dad was still fighting despite his injuries. She then slowly raised her arms and whispered a spell that he read from the book her mother gave her..

"Serngyan.."

Suddenly Western Soldiers started to rise, including the King of Europe. "WHAT'S HAPPENING?!" they all yelled. She then moved to arms and they went flying to the other side of the barrier. When she thought

that she finally helped her country win, a boat suddenly floated and hit her. She was injured badly but not enough to make her unconscious. *"There was another Earth walker here?"* she thought to herself. Then she saw a figure floating amongst the mist surrounding them. She had glowing eyes and her hair was floating. "Hello cousin, remember me?" A female voice spoke. She looked closer and realised who it was. "Maya.." she said angrily. It was her cousin that hated her so much.

When they were younger, Maya's mother had a huge argument with her sister, Seres' mom, because she fell in love with a human and that was strictly forbidden among giant races. So the Emperor banished Maya's family from the East kingdom. Of course Maya didn't take that well...

"Maya, is this still about what happened between our families??"

Seres asked. She was concerned because at one point in life she and Maya had a good cousin relationship. Maya didn't answer her. Rage consumed her, she lifted her arms and multiple rocks from under the ocean were floating around them. "Maya don't..." Seres begged but Maya was so angry to even care. She then aimed the boulders towards Seres and released them. Seres was able to dodge most of them but she was hit in the head multiple times which made her dizzy..

Her father saw everything that was happening and tried to go over and help Seres but because of the invisible barrier that Maya put he wasn't able to assist Seres. And so, he was left there to watch his daughter get tortured by her own cousin. He couldn't help but tear up.. "You can do this princess.."

Seres saw her father and realized that she couldn't let her cousin win this war or else both countries would suffer. She looked over to Emperor Ya "DAD, I love you..." she said as lifted her hands despite her weak state. All of the boulders hitting her stopped. Maya was confused about what was happening. Rocks started to stick on Seres' body and she grew, and I don't mean a little, but she actually grew into a bigger giant, the size of a continent. She transformed into a giant even bigger than her father. Seres then grabbed her father and placed him by the shore. Afterwards, she grabbed Maya even though she was resisting. "Seres! LET GO OF ME!!"

"I'm sorry cousin.." she then proceeded to lay down on the ocean and fused with the surrounding land. Emperor Ya and King Maverick witnessed everything.. Emperor Ya's only daughter, Seres, sacrificed herself to stop the war that had been happening for the past decade. He couldn't take it anymore and cried, really cried his eyes out. He didn't care if he showed everyone how brokenhearted he was by the death of his daughter.

Andres then came running. "Your majesty, what happened to the sea? Where is Seres..?" he said worriedly. "She's gone..." Sherry said softly. Andres knew what he meant and started crying. Everyone loved Seres so when the news spread that she was gone, they were devastated but soon everyone realized that she did it for a reason. Seres became the bridge combining both Europe and China, they made an agreement that whatever happened in the past would stay in the past.

As time passed by, both countries became closer and started trading different products they had. They called it Seres: the Silk Road because it all started with silk and soon they traded spices and different artifacts.

Seres became the princess of everyone's heart because of the love she showed everyone.

THE END.

The Journey of [REDACTED]

Yuet Wah College, Macau, Leng, Wa Him – 16

As a huge rumbling was heard, I woke to unfamiliar surroundings. “Memory integrity: compromised. Sensory input: anomalous.” The words surfaced in my mind uninvited, clinical, and cold. I pushed them aside. Must just have overslept. I then took a glance around; graffiti covered every surface, and everything was in shambles. Suddenly, my head began to ache; it was pain I had never experienced before. Just as I screamed to attempt to relieve my pain, a huge load of memories suddenly barged into my brain; it was vivid and vibrant, just like I’ve experienced these sometime in the past. Then, I remembered.

As the memory rushed in, I recalled everything—the Great War, the nuclear fallout, the 0.039% survival rate—I understood it all. The steel box I emerged from isn’t any typical coffin; it was probably some age-freezing pod, built by the mysterious Trinity Corporation. It was eerily frightening that they’d predicted the end. Why was the first question my reactivated mind composed? I then trekked around, looking for clues, my location, my situation, and my supplies, all of which were essential to my survival.

As I strolled around the bunker, I stumbled upon a whiteboard filled with information of some sort. I immediately took a close look at the information scattered on the whiteboard, most of which was damaged by age, but some remained intact. One poster specifically mentioned that they were building a gigantic shelter in Constantinople, Türkiye, which was renamed after the Great War, and the only surviving city in Europe for us survivors. At the bottom right, a message said this poster was sent to somewhere in Chang'an, China, which helped me figure out my whereabouts and my destination.

Not knowing whether the nuclear fallout had ended or not, I took the Geiger counter located next to the bunker door and placed it outside; it showed a moderate level of radiation. Although not deadly, this could still cause harm if a person is exposed to this in the long term. With the supply in the bunker running dangerously low, I’ve no choice but to scavenge everything I have and venture out into this unknown world to gather my basic survival amenities, to look for a place called ‘home’.

Haven’t gone out in over a decade; this place I used to call home seemed so unfamiliar. The building toppled, the park full of vegetation, it’s like no one has ever lived here. No matter what impact mankind has made on Earth, nature will eventually reclaim its habitat. As I transported the remaining supplies into the storage department of my buggy, I encountered an unusual species. It barked at me ferociously, activating its natural defense mechanism. I feel startled, but my body reacted with a smooth, instantaneous combat maneuver that I don’t remember learning. This is the first time I have murdered a living being; the sense of guilt has tripped me, but I acknowledge that to survive in this world, necessary killings must be done.

Activating my reactor, I set out on a journey full of mysteries, using the GPS on my buggy, which recommended that I first gather supplies at Dunhuang, the logistical funnel of the Silk Road. It was once a central supply hub in ancient times; all trade entering or exiting China was registered, taxed, and regulated here.

When I arrived at the gate, a guard asked me to show identification. Surprised by the guard, I frantically pulled out my old ID from the stash. Seeing this, the guard looked at me with a surprised face, ‘Sir, this ID has expired for over a decade with no name on it, I won’t accept this as a valid identification, unless...’ I immediately understood his meaning and bribed him with a bottle of clean water. Since nuclear fallout has contaminated nearly all water sources, clean water has become the main currency in this world due to its scarcity. The guard is shocked by my immense wealth, since a drop of clean water can feed a family of four. Due to my lack of knowledge about this world, I thought a bottle of water wasn’t worth much, and the guard wasn’t satisfied with my bribe. The guard immediately changed his attitude and welcomed me, offering to give me a tour of the city.

The war was brutal. Although some technology was preserved, it led humanity to regress to medieval times, where class divisions became even more apparent. Those who are located at the top of the city can do anything they want with no consequences, committing atrocities such as stealing, selling slaves, and sometimes even genocide. In contrast, those in the lower part of the city can only suffer. I witnessed countless acts of crime along

the way to the other side of the gate, where enslaved people are being sold around casually, denying their humanity. I was shocked by this phenomenon, but I recalled the golden three rules I established before this journey.

1. Run away from any trouble and never intervene in any situation, even if it seems wrong.
2. Don't think of yourself as anyone special.
3. Reach the destination by all means necessary.

I decided to turn a blind eye to this and kept on travelling. Along the way, I encountered a slave merchant trying to persuade me to buy one. I tried to decline, but his determination got to me. He then showed me around his exhibit of slaves. It was dirty, full of rats and insects. I can't imagine a proper human being living here, but this is the reality of this city. He introduced me to multiple kinds of slaves, ones with huge muscles for doing hard labor, and ones with a weak physique, who were sold at a low price. Then I saw her. Curled in a corner, she wasn't looking at the merchant or the rats, but at a sliver of dusty light from a crack in the wall. In her sunken eyes, I didn't see surrender — I saw a captured star, still burning. 'Her,' I said, my voice cracking. 'I'll take her.'" The merchant was shocked by my choice but is willing to negotiate on her price. At last, we settled on paying half a water bottle for her freedom.

Although she has gained freedom from the merchant, she was still technically a property under my name, but I vow to never treat her as a slave, only as a companion along my journey. She introduced herself as Yu, a Chinese woman captured from her village after the looting by the bandit named 'Gamma'. Not much was known about this group, but in my subconscious, I sense a slight correlation between it and the Trinity Corporation. Although I dismissed it as my imagination, a suspicious feeling has taken root in my heart, questioning whether this corporation is truly the savior of the world.

Just when I'm stuck in my imagination, she asks me for my name. I gave it a hard think, but nothing came up; it was like a fog had blocked my ability to find this information in my brain. It was locked away somewhere in my brain; I couldn't grasp this piece of information, no matter how hard I tried. After a short hesitation, she decided to call me Master. This embarrassed me a bit, but, left with no better choice, I accepted it.

Seeing her less desirable appearance, I decided to give her a makeover. Firstly, I went into a fashionable clothing shop. The shopkeeper was very passionate and helped me pick out different kinds of outfits. At last, she settled on a casual look to not gain further attraction from others. Although she picked out an everyday outfit, I still found her stunning and showered her with praise. She looked at me with an expressionless face, "Thanks, Master."

After gathering enough supplies to last us for a few weeks, we waved goodbye to the city of Dunhuang and embarked on a journey to Samarkand, the crossroad of the ancient Silk Road. To reach there, we first had to cross the harsh Taklamakan Desert, known as the "Sea of Death." It was bound to be an arduous journey, but with a friend by my side, it felt like a breeze. Together we pushed on and completed the journey in no less than a fortnight.

We finally arrived at Samarkand, Uzbekistan. Once described as "The Pearl of the Muslim World", it served as a trading hub on the ancient Silk Road, fostering immense cultural diversity and intellectual exchange. Now, only a façade is seen; the heart of Samarkand, Registan Square, is now controlled by a small Muslim group. On the other hand, the rest of the city is populated by an Atheist group. Since their religious beliefs are opposites, many conflicts have occurred between them, and the fight for territory has lasted for over 2 years.

Seeing this war-torn city in person was a frightening experience, the sound of gunfight constantly breaking out, the screams of civilians seeking shelter... We know this is not a place for long-term settlement, so we picked up the pace and hurried for the exit.

Suddenly, a loud explosion was heard in front of us. I hurriedly changed the course of my buggy to escape the explosion range, but more artillery shells began to rain down.

“Do not be afraid. The statistical probability of a stray round hitting us from this distance is only 3.2%.”

She didn't look reassured. She looked at me as if I were speaking another language. Maybe I was.

Unexpectedly, we were hit by an artillery shell, and the buggy was left in a critical condition. Left with no choice, we settled in one of the Muslim group's strongholds, the Gur-e-Amir Mausoleum. This is the final resting place of Timur, the military leader and former Amir of the Timurid Empire, his sons, and grandsons. Although the guards were initially suspicious of our intentions, after seeing the conditions we were in, they decided to take us in as refugees.

Inside the once religious ground for Muslims, it has been transformed into a military base full of equipment, weapons, and sandbags scattered around. Most of the people I saw were armed—to-the-teeth soldiers, but sometimes religious men and women were seen wandering around the stronghold. Each time our eyes met, they welcomed us with a smile, without any regard for our religious background. We followed a soldier into a temporary shelter set up for refugees like us and were given some Non, an iconic bread commonly found in Uzbekistan, and polluted water. The buggy was parked in the repair center and will be in pristine condition in three days. I was astonished by their generosity, initially thinking they would kick me out because of my Christian beliefs. Still, they welcomed me with inclusivity, which made me reevaluate my first impression of them.

As we were settling down for the night to come, a man struck up a conversation with us. His name is Ali; he was once a resident here and a firm believer in Allah, but the current situation has forced him to seek refuge here. He has been staying here for over a week and is actively seeking a place to settle, which coincidentally aligns with our goal. We then told him of our plan, but after hearing about the Trinity Corporation, his face immediately turned expressionless. “You guys haven't heard of the rumor? I met a man who escaped their ‘medical wing.’ He said they don't just save people; they take them apart to see what makes them special, then try to build better ones. Some even say that they indirectly influenced this war here.” Hearing this further raised my suspicion.

That night, A whimper woke me. Yu was tangled in her blanket, caught in a nightmare, her breath coming in short hitches. My first impulse was pure concern. I knelt beside her and placed a hand on her arm. “Yu. You are safe. Your respiratory rate is elevated, and your pupils are dilated. This is a physiological stress response to REM-stage hallucination. It is not real.”

Her eyes flew open. For a second, she was disoriented, then she focused on me—on my face, my words. The fear from the dream didn't fade; it mutated into a different, quieter dread. She slowly pulled her arm away.

“Thank you, Master,” she whispered, turning her back to me.

After three days had passed, it was time to say our farewells. Although Ali didn't want to, he bid us farewell and said, “Allah barakot bersin”, which means God bless you in Uzbek. We gathered the necessary supplies and headed out to our final destination, Constantinople.

After a fortnight, we've arrived and observed a ginormous, multi-level fortress in the middle of Constantinople.

“This must be the bunker they mentioned in the poster, but I didn't expect such a huge one, it's like an impenetrable fortress designed to withstand a nuke!” Yu said as we walked towards the fortress. The outskirts of the fortress were like a no-man's land; not a single living being was present along the path leading to it. It was eerily terrifying, with all the buildings reconquered by Mother Nature.

At last, we arrived at Gate 01, the presumed entrance of the fortress. This is also when I learned that this fortress is simply named “The Trinity Fortress”, which is probably the most expensive advertisement in the world. We then queued up at the checkpoint along with other travelers. There was a huge variety of travelers from all over the Earth, but no matter what language they spoke, I understood them word for word. This is weird, I haven't learned any other languages in my memory, so how am I able to understand them?

Questioning myself, it was soon my turn, and Yu followed suit.

“Please show your identification”, the guard prompted me as I handed him my old ID.

“Ahh, you’re one of them. Please head into the elevator, go down this corridor to the sixth floor, then take a right into Room 7. An employee will guide you through the instructions afterwards,” the guard explained to me as he led the way.

Feeling confused, I followed the guard’s instructions and headed into Room 7. There, I saw a robot sitting up front, ready to explain everything to me.

“Hello, this is a prerecorded message—I believe you have many questions, but no worries, I’m here to tell you the truth! First of all, you are not a human being, not exactly. You’re actually a replica of a person with slight modifications to your capabilities, a super android to be specific. Tasked with exploring the world, you’ve demonstrated great qualities in your way of life to reach here. Maybe you’ve met new friends, explored the world, or even gotten married! Sadly, every journey must eventually come to an end. You’ve been a great experimental being. If you are willing to be decommissioned, please press 1 in the number pad below; if not, please press 2 for more options.”

‘You are not a human being.’ The words didn't shock me; they clicked, like a final puzzle piece. The painless sleep, the language database, the combat protocols—they weren't gifts; they were specifications. The guilt I felt for the dog, the warmth I felt for Yu... were they just convincing simulations? My survival instinct, a mere command, screamed. I pressed 2.

“TOOLS DO NOT HAVE OPTIONS, ACTIVATING DESTRUCTION PROTOCOL, ” a line of words appeared on the robot’s screen as it pulled out a rifle from its storage department. Sensing danger, I immediately retaliated by disarming the robot using karate, a skill implanted deep inside my brain. I then tried to break out through the door, but the reinforced steel door made it impossible for me to break out by hand. This is scenario number 28, and the countermeasures are as follows: rip apart the robot's limbs and pry open the door.

Following the instructions, I successfully left Room 7 and searched for Yu, my companion on this journey. Many guards are blocking my way, but they couldn’t cause harm to me since I move at superhuman speed. I tried to deduce her location, but to no avail. I then tried to interrogate a guard whom I knocked down.

“Test subject #311 is located on the 18th floor in Room 9”. With her exact location, I sprinted there at full speed. I found her in Room 9. She lay on a clean slab, a faint, peaceful smile on her lips. A terminal screen glowed beside her: Subject #311: Yu. Decommission Request: Approved. Note: "Perhaps the place where humanity truly exists is heaven." My wrath didn't boil; it froze into a silent, absolute zero. I was a tool built to feel. And in that moment, I understood the full cruelty of my designers. Fueled by anger, I unleashed my wrath upon any guards blocking my way, knocking everyone unconscious, then rushed to the exit.

Nobody knew where he went or how he truly felt. Later, in the year 2200, tales were told about this mysterious being; some say it went on to live a fruitful life, while others said it exacted revenge on the Trinity Corporation and brought about its inevitable downfall. Yet, the truth was much simpler and stranger. Faced with the ultimate proof of his artifice, he made a choice. He chose the memory of a dog’s ashes, of bread shared with a stranger, of a woman’s grateful smile. He decided to remember his humanity and walked away, a humanity both fruitful and hollow.

Hectic Overture Preliminarily Effloresced (Hope)

Yuet Wah College, Macau, Lo, Nok In – 17

I walked home after the award ceremony. I do logistics for an international company, even though I didn't major in logistics at university. I looked at the certificate in my hand, recalling the restless nights I've spent staring at my laptop, all for this piece of paper in my hands. There was a guy on the street giving out flyers for a story-writing competition. Writing was something I'd left off in the past, but the person seemed to be having a hard time handling it all. I felt bad, so I got one.

I went home and back to my room; I threw the flyer randomly somewhere in the room. On the wall, certificates were plastered fanatically. There was a blank spot in the middle, so I stuck my new certificate there. The whole wall was filled now, but deep down, it was still... empty.

The next day was my day off; I decided it would be best to stroll around the park after so much intense work. I turned and saw something, or someone. There stood a peculiar man, with quite a long beard and very old-fashioned clothing. I was curious, so I walked closer. He looked quite distressed. I approached and asked if he needed help.

'W-What... is this place?'

His eyes were wide as if he'd seen a ghost. I find this weird; this is quite a popular attraction. Why would he ask such a question? I still explained to him where we are and told him to sit on the bench first.

After a while, it seemed that he had calmed down a bit, and he started talking.

'I was in the middle of an expedition to Europe... When I woke up, I suddenly found myself in this unfamiliar place.'

Upon closer inspection, I realized that the man's clothing closely resembled something I'd seen in history class. 'It couldn't be...' I mumbled. 'Are you... from the past?!' I exclaimed.

He seemed calmer than I expected. 'Looking at my surroundings, it would seem so,' he said. I was very curious about what it was like to live in the past, so we started chatting.

In the middle of our talk, he took out an item resembling a badge. 'I was actually looking at this, I touched it, and I appeared here,' I asked if I could have it for closer inspection. Upon touching it, I felt my limbs grow numb, my eyelids became heavy, and before I knew it, everything went black.

I sluggishly woke up, and I felt the unfamiliar texture of the ground. Although my senses are still blurry, I saw the mountains of yellow sand and the scorching hot sun. I was obviously in a desert.

A hand pulled me up. It was the man. Around him were men dressed in a similar style to his, some older than the others, 'Can you stand?' he asked. 'Barely,' I said. The others just shrugged. They continued moving forward, and I slowly followed them. With them were carts filled with supplies: food, water, and some goods, though these probably won't last long.

Even after walking for what felt like hours, what I see is still just the barren land with the blazing sun on the horizon. My whole body ached, and I could feel my legs giving way. The man saw me struggling and gave me some water, even though there wasn't much left. 'Guys!' one of them shouted, 'There's a sandstorm coming!' The men quickly maneuvered, and I helped with transporting the goods to a 'safer' area; that's all I could do. Before I knew it, the storm hit, dust flying everywhere. We were behind a rock, yet the intense winds were still slicing my skin with the sand.

The sandstorm finally ended, and many men were injured, some more severely than others. Yet surprisingly, they still carried on, filled with some determination, as if arriving in Europe was the most critical task in their lives.

We settled down as the sky darkened, and there's a looming question in my head, and this is the perfect opportunity for it.

'Just why are all of you so determined to go to Europe? Is there some purpose?'

What purpose does this journey serve for them? I had been lost on this road we call 'life', searching for a so-called 'purpose'. I originally wanted to be a writer, and yet now I'm here with an office job, managing transportation for goods. I gave up on writing, just because the path was not clear, and the goal wasn't in sight. That's why, in the end, I got into logistics. After some time, however, the nihilism struck. Every single day, repeating the same process again and again, I couldn't see the purpose in any of my work; I felt... empty. In the end, I worked even harder, hoping that the awards I received could somehow fill the void, but I knew it didn't. I felt chained, chained by all the responsibility and sense of purpose I so desperately strive for.

Some of them laughed. There was this older man in the group, and he stood up, 'Why not?' he said. I wasn't satisfied, so I asked why they would embark on this journey when there's so much uncertainty and adversities. He just looked at me, 'If we're blindly chasing purpose... You won't see the true scenery of life. Maybe this journey will fail, maybe we will be forgotten in the sea of history, but at least we tried, the experience, the hardships, the friendship. That's what's important. Purpose is never shown, it's something that's inside, something that is created... by you.'

This time, they all laughed. Their clothes were stitched and covered with patches, their hair filled with sand, yet they were happy, happier than most people I know, not plagued with failure, pride, or anything in between. It's genuinely a mesmerizing scene.

The night sky was brilliant, stars lit up the sky, and I sat there, lost in my thoughts. Slowly, I dozed off.

I felt the warm sunlight shine onto my face. I opened my eyes and was met with the familiar scene of the park. I was sitting on the bench, seemingly waking up from a dream. Was that, however, really a dream? I guess I'll never know, but what's apparent is the change in my view. I went home, and this time, the certificates on the wall were gone. I saw the crumpled flyer I had thrown away days ago and picked it up, putting it in my pocket. I sat down at the table, took out my newly created diary, and started a new entry:

'Today I went home on time, and I finally have some free time for myself. Found the flyer I had thrown away, maybe I'll give it a try...'

I decided to take a stroll again, the sky lit orange by the sun. I had the competition flyer in my pocket, so I took it out and read it. 'This is a stupid idea,' I thought, 'It's impossible that I can somehow make a name for myself in a national writing competition!' but then I laughed and just put it back into my pocket. Just like the adventurers of the past, no one was certain about the result, but they still tried, and their adventures inspire future generations, so what excuse do I have not to do so?

A gentle breeze blew by. I smiled, mumbled "Thank you," and began going home. The chains were all gone, the pride for my achievements, the envy for others, the endless gluttony of searching for a purpose, all gone. At that moment, I felt freer than I ever did.

The Silk Road witnessed by a Merchant

Yuet Wah College, Macau, Lui, Jia Cheng – 16

In the bustling market streets of Ankara, numerous merchants sold a variety of goods, including sweets, flour, and freshly baked bread. I watched every day as children ran with jolts of energy, travelers marveling in awe, and buyers bargaining for lower prices. In the corner of one of the alleyways sat me, Murat, on my dusty mat and with my worn-out table. I sat there every day for 15 years, selling trinkets, making just enough to get me through to the next day. Occasionally, the Sultan makes a proclamation, usually about which country we are at war with, or which cabinet minister to be executed. And one fateful day, the king's messenger came to this very market to deliver a very peculiar piece of news: "The Sultan's youngest daughter is to be wed in 5 years, and the Sultan seeks a suitable groom; all are invited, nobles and peasants alike, to try their hand at winning the fair princess's heart. Come tomorrow at sunrise to Hisar." I went back to my hut and ate my usual dinner of flatbread, accompanied by a little milk mixed with water. After dinner, I could not fall asleep. I carefully considered the spokesperson's words. I thought to myself, "I am young but single, able-bodied but rotting away, ambitious but without hope. I will go to Hisar tomorrow, even just to see what happens."

The next day, a great multitude gathered at the gates of the Hisar, and when the first rays of the sun hit the sundial, the gates opened, leading to the great hall of the Sultan. Upon entering, the walls, carved from chiseled marble, were lined with fine European works of art, all complementing the throne, which was embedded with bedazzling jewels. When all had shuffled their way into this magnificent hall, the Sultan arrived, and all stood at attention, eagerly awaiting what he had to say. The silence was broken when the Sultan finally proclaimed, "Whoever wishes to marry my youngest daughter must travel to China, and bring back fine silk, so that a dress might be made for her. Whoever accomplishes this may marry her. The only condition is that you may only travel on land." As soon as everyone had heard the news, they rushed out, preparing various items to begin this sudden adventure. I went home, still deliberating whether I should go or not, but even if I stayed, there was nothing here for me. So, I packed a small bag with a little bread and water, as well as the last silver coin I'd saved for years, and embarked on a journey that I did not even know if I could survive.

I hid at the back of a carriage, taking me to the border of Kazakhstan. It was easy to pass through the countries between Turkey and Kazakhstan, as borders were unregulated, but in Kazakhstan, the border is always heavily guarded by the military, ready to send off anyone suspicious. When I arrived at the border, soldiers stopped the carriage. I blended in with the group. The soldiers went down the line, asking each individual what their business was in Kazakhstan. When it got to my turn:

The soldier asked impatiently, "What is your business in Kazakhstan?"

I replied shivering, "I am here to complete a quest, given by my Sultan. Please grant me safe passage through your country, that I may arrive in China and purchase silk. I have travelled a long and treacherous path to come here."

The soldier looked down at me scornfully, "Yes, we have heard of your Sultan's sudden task, but you don't seem like the person who can marry the princess. How do we know you are not lying?",

I desperately whined, "How can I prove that I am genuine?"

The soldier replied with a grin on his face, "Pay us with what you can, and we will grant you safe passage; if not, we will send you back to Turkey."

I had no choice; I reluctantly gave them my precious coin, and I had entered Kazakhstan. I arrived at a small village with no money. I could not afford a night's stay at an inn, so I had no choice but to sleep on the streets, where people spat and stepped on me. It was a cold, long night; the chilling wind howled at me, the hard tiles made it hard to lie down, and my thin clothing was unable to keep me warm. Rats were roaming nearby. When I awoke again, I realized my milk had spoiled, and rats had eaten my bread. I had nothing; I was in a foreign country, with no money or food, left to traverse this barren land. The next year, alongside travelling, I went begging from house to house, asking for food or shelter. I went everywhere I could, and I cried in Turkish, cursed be the day I was born! I knelt and wept until a man came to me, he was wearing a velvet kaftan, wooden clogs, and carried a bag made of Turkish cloth. His face showed mixed emotions, partially curious because there was a

man who knew how to speak Turkish, partially disgusted since my clothes were covered in dirt and grime, and a hint of pity. When you've been a merchant for so long, you gain the ability to observe what people think. Though I was not surprised at his expression, I saw it every day while I was in Ankara. He hesitantly extended his arm to me and introduced himself.

"I am Osman, I am the son of the noblemen [Ertuğrul Gazi](#), who was entrusted by the Sultan to handle the affairs of Istanbul. Why are you here in Kazakhstan, so far away from Turkey?"

I replied, "My name is Murat, I am passing here to go to China, I want to complete the Sultan's quest, and win my hand at the princess's hand."

Osman, looking surprised, commented, "Ah, I see, you are travelling to find Silk from China. I am on this same quest as well, but are you sure you can accomplish such a thing looking like that? Come, let me help you."

Osman took me to a local inn, paid for a room, and gave me enough money to last a month. I was so touched by his generosity that I was skeptical, but appreciative for the time being. I went to a restaurant and gorged on real food; surrounding customers looked at me as if I were a feral beast. After my meal, I walked back to the inn, and Osman had already left. He placed a new set of clothes on my bed along with a note written in Turkish.

"Murat, I leave you with this set of clothes, although we are working towards the same goal, I hope you can have a fair chance as well, all the best— Osman."

After my stay at the inn, I had to find my way to the Gobi Desert. I met a broker and paid him money to take me there. We travelled for two more months. When we reached the outskirts of the Gobi Desert, I was provided with a camel, a gourd with water, and a mat for sleeping. My broker left, and with what little I had, I began traversing through the sand and dust. Many times, I wanted to give up. I was bitten by snakes and scorpions, I had to learn to use medicinal herbs, harassed by bandits, whom I had to fight off, as well as the issues of food and water. I learnt to obtain water from cacti and eat the meat from catching wild hares. At night, I depended on the North Star to go in the direction of the Chinese border. And after 2 years, I reached the Chinese border. I crossed illegally and travelled southwards by horse to Yangzhou for the first time, stopping at various stops sparingly to avoid detection.

I was mesmerized by the city; it was completely different from what I had seen in Turkey. There were thousands of bridges, markets a hundred times larger than those in Ankara, and everything was far more efficient and modernized than anything I had ever seen before. In the moment of curiosity and awe, I was approached by Chinese men wearing uniforms. They approached me and spoke in Chinese. I could not understand what they said. I spoke in Turkish, and that was enough for them to take me into custody. I was thrown into a cell with many other Turks, and I was informed, because of the Sultan's quest, China had experienced a huge influx of people crossing the Chinese border illegally to obtain silk, the emperor has ordered that any Turk standing on Chinese soil would be arrested, subsequently all sales of silk or any other Chinese goods, had to be personally approved by the emperor himself. Upon hearing this news, I became very disheartened, all my work had seemingly gone to waste..... Day after day, I lay in my cell until something caught my eye: a prison guard was reading a very famous Turkish work, which had been translated into Chinese. I asked in Turkish if I could borrow it, and the guard, taking pity, decided to allow it. I flipped through the pages, but I could not make out a single character, the guard then handed me a Turkish-Chinese dictionary and, flipping through each page and pointing at each character, told me "If you explain to meanings and morals what this book from your country is trying to say, I will give you this dictionary, and teach you some basic Chinese." As he finished flipping through, I nodded in agreement. He took me to a private cell, and every evening after supper, we would sit down and analyze the book, while he taught me Chinese. After 6 months, I had grasped enough to converse, I also learnt some literature, and the prison guard also brought other works for us to analyze.

One very fateful day, the governor of Yangzhou came to the prison to inspect how it had managed the Turk prisoners. We were lined against the wall, and he whined, "Ahh, these Turks, so dirty and annoying, why must they come here? We should just finish them off, and we won't have to bother." I exclaimed out of anger, speaking in Chinese, without feelings of respect, what is there to distinguish between man and beast? --- Confucius. The governor looked surprised, then amused, "Turk, you speak our language? I am impressed, you

quote Confucius well, guards set him free from now on, he will work as my advisor in Yangzhou.” Everyone was shocked, and everyone thought the same thing: how could a Turkish prisoner work in the government of a prominent Chinese city? I was taken to the governor’s home and given a personal room and servants to help me. But the governor was very strict; he sent me to learn the Chinese language and literature, as well as the philosophies and culture of the Chinese people. I spent 5 years working under him, I learnt a lot, and advised him on matters of war, communications, and trade with the other cities.

At the fifth year, the governor suddenly passed, and it was tradition for him to name his successor in his will. It was proclaimed at his deathbed, “Murat will be the next governor of Yangzhou.” The Chinese people were in disbelief, a foreigner handling the politics of the city.” The other senior officials, although annoyed that they were not selected, informed me that it was customary for any new governor to have a personal audience with the emperor, and that the emperor would grant the incoming governor one wish.

After 7 days, I stood in the presence of the emperor and he began by saying, “Murat, I am very surprised, this is the first time a foreigner has been selected to be a governor, I have heard that you were well educated in our language and culture, and for that I respect the previous governor’s decision to have you as his replacement, so what wish would you like me to grant for you?”

I stood, all eyes on me, immense pressure fell on my shoulders, but I stood firm and said confidently, “Your Highness, thank you for such kind words, it is my honor to serve you as a humble servant, and continue the legacy of the former governor, in your kind generosity, my wish is that you would let China and Turkey trade, silk, spices, tea from China, and let the world see and exchange various goods, building the bridge between East and West, additionally, I would like to return to Turkey to be married to the princess, after that, I will return to Yangzhou, and begin work in my official capacity as governor.”

The emperor took a few moments to think and responded, “Very well, I will send you to Turkey, with 100 crates of our finest silk, along with an official offer to the Sultan of Turkey, to begin trade negotiations between our two great countries.

I, along with carriages upon carriages of silk, each being driven by men wearing imperial robes, rode to Turkey, and by virtue of being representatives of the emperor himself, all granted them safe passage. When he and the silk arrived in Ankara, the gate of the Hisar opened. The sultan sat on his throne, with his daughter behind him, watching as each crate of silk was moved into his courtroom.

I began “My Sultan, I am Murat. Formerly, I was a humble servant in this country. I worked as a merchant selling trinkets in the local market. From your decree many years ago, I come to you today, to fulfill your request. I gift these crates of silk to you and your daughter, alongside a letter from the emperor of China, requesting to initiate trade talks.

The Sultan replied, “For many years, no man, no noble, not even Osman son of [Ertuğrul Gazi](#) managed to complete my task, and for an even greater number of years, we have never managed to establish contact and trade with China, how is it that someone like you managed to accomplish this, according to my advisors you were but a poor merchant.

“My Sultan, after your request all those years ago, I recklessly went on a journey that I was not sure if I could come out alive from, but because of those reckless decisions, I have learnt so much about this world, and I am grateful for all the experiences I had, therefore I stand before you today, a changed Murat.”

After hearing this, the princess smiled sheepishly. The sultan saw this and said, “Very well, you may marry my daughter, and I will begin the trade negotiations with the emperor myself.”

After Murat and the princess married, they both moved to Yangzhou so that Murat could fulfill his official duties. Murat was hailed as a pioneer of building bridges, and the treacherous path he journeyed on became known as the Silk Road, linking the East and West.

Where the Silk Road Breathes Once More

Yuet Wah College, Macau, Sou, Ka Seng – 16

More than twenty centuries ago, a few daring souls set their eyes westward from the gates of Chang'an, which was the heart of ancient China. They carried rolls of silk that shimmered beneath the sun, unaware that their journey would change the course of history.

These Chinese traders crossed countless mountains, deserts, and valleys. Their goal was very simple: to find new customers who valued the silk they carried. But what began as a simple silk trade soon became something far greater.

Along that route, silk was exchanged for gold, jade for glass, and so much more. From China came silk, porcelain, paper, and one of China's greatest inventions, gunpowder. From the West came horses, grapes, and wool. Other luxury goods, like spices and precious metals, were traded in significant volumes, generating immense wealth for merchants and empires along the way.

Chang'an quickly grew into the largest city on Earth, with its markets overflowing with treasures from lands across the globe. The Chinese dynasties were able to enrich themselves and gain resources that significantly accelerated their development, thanks to the trade paths that were established.

Other than goods, the road also carried ideas. Monks crossed the Taklamakan Desert, and explorers traced the stars. New foods, inventions, and beliefs travelled alongside them. The compass and the art of papermaking reached Europe, while glasswork and metallurgy found their way to China.

Every step along the Silk Road brought worlds closer together. The East and West, once divided by vast distances, began to share not only their goods, but their thoughts, faiths, and dreams.

One evening, the desert wind carried music through a small oasis camp where travellers from many lands rested after a long day's journey.

A Chinese musician plucked the strings on his pipa as the gentle notes echoed through the dunes.

"Your music... It feels just like the running water back at my home," said a Persian poet as he sat beside the musician, his fingers still smudged with ink from his day's writing. He set down his small clay cup of wine.

"Thanks," the musician smiled, and continued playing his piece.

"That scale," said the poet as he leaned forward, "the third note makes it a minor. In our music, that note would be bent, like this." He hummed a wavering, mournful tone.

"Let me see it," the musician replied with interest. He shifted closer, holding out his pipa. "Show me."

The poet, unfamiliar with the instrument, plucked a string awkwardly. The musician adjusted his finger position on the fret. "Here. This could make it weep."

From his bundle, an Indian scholar took out a small flute. "That weeping note you seek," he said, "is the heart of the Raga Bhairavi." He played a short, haunting phrase that echoed in the air.

The musician's eyes lit up. He mimicked the phrase on his pipa, while blending it with his own tune. The poet turned to the musician as his eyes filled with admiration.

Before long, the original song was forgotten and replaced by something new. It was a hybrid melody born on the spot, its sheet music written in the sand by their feet and in the poet's quickly filling page.

For the next millennium, the Silk Road flourished. It glimmered like a golden thread of silk across the world. Empires rose and fell beside it, yet the exchanges of goods and ideas never stopped. Merchants, scholars, and pilgrims continued to walk across Asia and Europe.

But no road, however grand, can escape the weight of time.

By the fourteenth century, the harmony that had sustained the Silk Road began to fall apart. The Mongol Empire, once a mighty bridge connecting the East and the West, fractured after its rulers were driven away from China in 1368 after a massive revolution. Smaller kingdoms now contested every mile of the Silk Road, and the once glimmering deserts had now been haunted by bandits everywhere.

One moonless night, a caravan stopped near Dunhuang. The merchants huddled around a dying fire as the wind carried whispers across the dunes.

“Keep your voices low,” the caravan leader murmured. “Those bandits killed a caravan just three nights ago. They took everything from him.”

A young trader clutched his pack tighter. “This is terrible,” he whispered. “When will the road be safe again?”

The leader sighed. “Not until the fighting ends. The Mongol Empire is gone, everything is a mess now...”

Far away, in the valleys of northern China, the drums of rebellion echoed through the night.

“The Mongols are finished!” shouted one farmer. “We have taken back the land that belongs to us! No longer will we be oppressed!”

Beside him, an older man frowned. “A new dynasty won’t fix everything at once,” he said quietly. “We still have a lot to rebuild.”

For a brief moment, hope flickered anew under Timur the Lame, whose empire brought life and fortune to the great city of Samarkand. Trade flourished once more, and the town finally felt alive again.

“Welcome, friends!” a silk merchant called as foreign traders entered the marketplace. The air buzzed with languages like Persian, Arabic, Chinese, and Turkish.

A traveller from the west admired the crowded stalls. “I thought this road was abandoned,” he said in disbelief.

“Not while Timur rules,” the merchant answered, grinning proudly. “Here, gold meets silk again!”

And for a time, it was true. Caravans crossed the plains once more, and Samarkand glowed like a jewel at the heart of the world.

Yet, when Timur’s empire crumbled after his death in 1404, so did the last breath of the Silk Road.

Beyond the deserts, far to the west, tension brewed between the Christian kingdoms in Europe and the Muslim states in the Middle East.

The Crusades caused devastating damage to the trades. European pilgrims and merchants, once welcomed in eastern markets, now faced suspicion and peril. The great exchange of goods slowed, and it seems that the old glory days of the Silk Road will never return.

And then came the final blow.

In 1453, the armies of the Ottoman Turks captured Constantinople, which was one of the main bridges between Europe and Asia. The Byzantine Empire crumbled into dust.

With its fall, the geography of trade was violently redrawn.

The Ottoman Sultan now held the world's most vital choke-point in an iron grip. Not only did he block the old routes, but he also weaponized them.

Crippling taxes were levied on all goods passing through his new capital. European merchants were priced out, while rival Muslim traders faced strict quotas and permits.

The overland caravans, already weakened, now faced an impossible tariff wall at their very destination.

Constantinople had always been the familiar partner for Europe. Its fall sent a shock of fear and alienation through the Western world.

The East was no longer a land of potential partners, but the seat of an aggressive, expansionist empire. The will to navigate its hostile and complex territories vanished.

The Silk Road fell into the shadows.

The desert winds swept over forgotten towns and buried markets. The world turned its gaze toward the sea, and new routes of trade set sail across uncharted oceans.

And so, the great Silk Road fell silent. Its deserts were left to the wind, its cities were left to the dust.

It seems that the Silk Road has become another page in our history.

...

But this is not where the story ends.

My name is Umidjon, and I was born in a small mountain village in eastern Uzbekistan, near the Kamchiq Pass. For generations, my family lived as our ancestors did; we would plough the thin soil and wait for rain that seldom came.

My dad worked from dawn until dark in the fields, while my mom sold what little she could in the village market. Some days we had bread and rice, and some days we had... nothing.

The mountains that surrounded my family and my neighbours were beautiful, but they locked us in like barriers. The nearest city was far beyond the twisting roads, and only a handful of trucks barely made it through the narrow pass.

Factories and proper schools belonged to another world. I did not go to school then, since it was too far and dangerous, and my family could not afford the travel.

The Silk Road had once run near our valley, but it had been silent for centuries.

Then, one morning, the world around us began to wake up again. Word spread that a great project was coming, a project that would revive the Silk Road, a new path of trade and connection under something called the Belt and Road Initiative.

Most of us thought it was merely a rumour. But the rumours grew louder.

Officials came to survey the land. Trucks loaded with steel and machinery began crawling up the old road. Even the air felt different; it was full of purpose and promise.

One afternoon, the village gathered near the river when a convoy of bright red machines arrived. Children ran alongside them, shouting in awe.

Some engineers stepped down and waved at us.

I had never seen such machines before. They were huge, loud, and dug through stone as if it were soil.

They told us they were building a new railway, the Kamchiq Tunnel, which would cut straight through the mountains, linking our region directly to Tashkent and beyond.

The old men shook their heads.

“Impossible,” one said. “Even goats struggled to climb these mountains. How could it be possible for you to dig through them?”

“Watch us,” a young engineer with a dusty face smiled.

And so they began.

Dad found work on the construction site. Every morning before sunrise, he joined hundreds of others, Uzbek and Chinese workers side by side, marching toward the mountains with helmets and pride. Even young men from nearby towns, who had once left for faraway cities, returned to take part. This project gave us jobs, roads, electricity, and most importantly, hope.

Days turned into months, and months into years. I watched the mountain transform progressively. Machines roared and lights burned through the night. The Chinese engineers taught new techniques to our local builders. In return, we shared our music, food, and laughter with them.

We worked as a family bound by the same dream, that is, to open the road once more. Just like our ancestors did before, we shared stories under the same night sky.

After 900 days, the tunnel was finally complete! It is almost 19 kilometers long and is the largest railway tunnel in Central Asia.

It was a miracle.

When the first train passed through, we, Chinese and Uzbek alike, all shed tears of joy. My father stood beside me, his hands rough and trembling.

As the train’s whistle echoed through the mountains, people waved flags and cheered until their voices broke. Children climbed onto their father’s shoulders, many wept openly, and even the toughest workers wiped their eyes.

“It’s moving!” someone shouted.

“Look! Our mountain breathes again!”

My father gripped my shoulder tightly. “Do you see this, Umidjon?” he said with a shaking voice. “Your grandfather once dreamed of this road. Now, it’s alive again.”

Beside us, one of the Chinese engineers smiled through his own tears.

“Together, we made history.”

The air was filled with steam, laughter, and the scent of new steel. For once, our tears were not for loss, but for hope to be reborn.

And for the first time, I saw tears of joy in my father’s eyes.

Life began to change quickly after that. Goods from cities arrived faster, and farmers could send their harvests to market without losing half their income to transport costs.

Prices fell. New shops opened. Electricity reached our homes more steadily. Last but not least, I could finally attend school!

We were no longer trapped by the mountains.

Even though poverty did not vanish overnight, each passing year brought new signs of progress; our city received new jobs, new connections, and new dreams.

The Silk Road that had once carried silk and spices now carries opportunity, an opportunity that belongs to people like you and me.

As trains rushed through the Kamchiq Tunnel each day, I sometimes imagined they carried the voices of travellers, traders, and explorers who once journeyed along the old Silk Road.

Their road had been revived, and somehow, it had found its way to me.

One bright morning, Mom told us to dress neatly.

She said we were going to ride the train. The train that passes through the Kamchiq Tunnel takes just 900 seconds. My dad had saved a little money from his new job, and he wanted us all to see the train.

The station was alive with sound. I had never seen so many people in one place!

When the train finally arrived, my sister gripped my hand tightly as we boarded. Inside the train, soft seats were lined up, and cool air entered through the vents.

As the whistle blew and the train began to move, I pressed my forehead to the glass and watched the sunlight pour through the entrance of the tunnel.

I thought about how this journey was no longer just ours. The Belt and Road Initiative has become the world’s largest project, with 150 countries participating. Across the world, other roads and tracks were being laid.

I remember watching a news clip about the Jakarta–Bandung high–speed Railway in Indonesia, which was built through the cooperation between China and local engineers, just like how our Kamchiq Tunnel was built. The reporter said it turned a day–long trip into less than an hour. The children on the screen looked just like me; their eyes were full of the same wonder I once felt when our first train arrived.

Meanwhile, in Africa, ports built under new partnerships now carry goods that once could not reach the sea. In Central Asia, new highways and pipelines connect countries once isolated by geography. And across the southern hemisphere, nations share technologies, education, and hope through the South–South Cooperation. These are happening as digital highways are being built across Europe, with more and more European nations joining the Belt and Road Initiative.

When our train emerged from the tunnel, I looked out of the window and saw how the valley below spread wide and green. Villages that were once forgotten now seemed to be much more lively than before.

For the first time, I could see how our tiny corner of the world fit into something vast and alive.

The Silk Road had found its new meaning in a new era.

As the train rushed forward, carrying us toward the horizon, I knew the road that once connected the world had not ended after all.

And this time, it won't disappear anymore.

Fiction

Group 5



New Tales of China's Silk Road

Canadian International School, Yuen, Stephanie – 17

I walked down this road, past the old streets and old buildings, to this dinghy bus stop next to a pothole—one of many that decorated the broken street. I sauntered on like the tinny polka dots of rust on the plate of metal of my father's car. A fly buzzed from the nearby garbage bin, as if to see another being that lived and ate and excreted like it, before ducking back down into its filthy home.

Now, stopping at this bus stop, this red bus stop with peeling paint and eroding pillars, I waited. The car that was supposed to be mine for the next few months did not come, forcing me to wait at the bottom of the hill beyond the city skyline like my father once did in the summer holidays, where he brought me on a road trip to lands so far that I could scarcely believe that they were only a finger-width apart on a map.

It took the renter a few more minutes, but they finally came through, and a Japanese Toyota, along with its keys, was finally in my hands. I didn't have the money for anything more expensive, so it was battered with mud and sand, with some scrapes on the glass. But for an off-white car, packed with a trunk and just enough space in the back to stuff a few more supplies and a sleeping bag, it was enough for what I wanted.

"This is it." The man muttered, glancing at the plaid shirt and raggy jeans I wore, "Not bringing anything?"

"No," I answered, "road trips don't need much." That was what my father announced, all those years ago, with a toothpick hanging from the corner of his grin as he smacked the driver's wheel like a mule.

The way he looked at me gave me all I needed to know.

Once my bills flew into the other's hands, the renter left.

I moved forward, opened the doors, swivelled around to the back of the trunk, and traced the hood. My fingers came apart, and it was just damp from the early morning, with a rough grit that spoke of years down the road. There were bug stains from long trips down a highway. It was serviceable, in my company's terms.

For me, it was just alright.

I closed my eyes and shifted towards the driver's seat. It was time to go.

I plucked the ratty cable stuffed in my pocket into the port, and my phone and I were ready. Everything else was on the road to...somewhere. Maybe at the end of the road, maybe in the middle. Just not here.

Step on the gas pedal, hands on the steering wheel, eyes on the rearview mirror, and off I went onto the road, just like my father taught me.

The car sped up upon that highway and brought me away, from the plains and upstream, where the mountains of Xinjiang would come and go, then further and further, passing Nepal until I got to India, then even further, perhaps to the plateaus of Greece, if I was lucky.

But I had left my apartment without anything after paying the rent for a full year. My father would have smacked my shoulder and called me a 'good child', even if I didn't quite feel like one when a job and accomplishments were needed to thrive.

I would need to return after a year. Beyond that, I had nothing left but time. Like a cicada, or even a moth, my chance to live was this. I would not squander it for something incredibly petty like taking revenge on the supervisor who fired me for nothing.

This was freeing. Away from all that annoyance of catering to others—this was my time. Truly mine.

The car bumped against a pothole, and I laughed. All mine.

I could speed down this road, ignore all the tickets and judgment and rush from border to border. Oh, how freeing it was! My foot itched to step on this gas pedal to rocket me to this far-off destination, and for once, I could understand why Father laughed when he drove, even if it was so dull in my unknowing eyes. Was this how a butterfly felt when it emerged from its chrysalis? So utterly free and wild when the sunlight passed through their colourful wings?

Snack.

I snapped out of my reverie as the wet slap against the windshield startled my twitchy limbs. Pulling to the side, possessed by this uncertainty, I moved into the rest stop that loomed only a measly few hundred kilometres away from where I started.

I exited the car, closing the door behind me as my hand brushed by a mosquito unfortunate enough to fly near a car rocketing forward at speeds it could not understand. There was something on the windshield.

My hand brushed by the glass, careful not to smudge the window to the endless world of highways...and—leathery wings. Leathery, fragile wings and a slightly fuzzy body that was pinned down to the disturbed glass by the metal rods of the windshield wipers.

I looked down, giving the little bug the honour of seeing the perpetrator of its current fate.

Oh.

Feathery, beige antennae that twirled limply against the buffeting wind, a pair of sucking black compound eyes that seemed to take and devour all of the colour of the pure white fuzz and wings that made up the *silkmoth* that was now pinned against my window.

A silkmoth. Out this far, in the middle of virtually nowhere worth mentioning. Furthermore, this little, pathetic bug actually lived to adulthood. Adulthood! Where all of my dreams and desires died a desolate death to the damning dirge of capitalism. And a silkmoth that was harvested for nothing but the silk it made when it wove itself a cocoon lived to make it to adulthood to mate until oblivion came over to take it to the quiet, long sleep made it to this windshield where it would be smushed against the immovable wall and the impenetrable force of wind that would rip its limbs off.

And it was stuck here. On my not-quite—mine windshield and pinned to the glass like it was being displayed.

Hah. How ironic. It would be poetically funny if I left it there, twitching like it was sprayed by insecticide. Sure. Why not? Not that anything would change about my trip if I left it there. It wasn't even visible from the driver's seat...well, barely.

The breeze drew me to the minutes that ticked by as I gazed at the shivering specimen. It was time to go on. Away. From everything. From this stupidly long moment.

I opened the door again and shoved myself into the suddenly humid seat. My skin squelched against the leather, disgusting in a way that reminded me of the gross carcass of a squished ant before I shuffled off, slamming the door to step onto the gas pedal at the moment I flicked on the ignition.

A feather-like brown swayed in the wind outside, sticking to the windshield.

I drove back onto the highway.

At this point, my father would probably start up the music. Some strange, canto music that was old even by his standards, that was passed down from father to son, and then repeated just to reach me. He'd sing, sometimes, humming to that emotional or jaunty tune, depending on the day and the stars and whatever redundant charts and calculations that our ancestors created and used to determine fortunes.

He said that doing certain things was more auspicious than other things on certain days. I never quite understood or believed. I trusted more in the everlasting death of the mosquitoes in summer.

Perhaps I should have brought something with me.

No.

That would go against what I had planned all along. It wouldn't be right. This was supposed to be freeing. Somewhat freeing.

I had to get away. Not to go back to the past for a metaphoric escape. It had to be physical.

This was what I needed.

I floored the gas. The car rocketed forward. A few more bugs splattered onto the windshield. This was my *moment*, my *freedom*, and no *stupid* silkmoth smacking onto my windshield would stop me.

Onwards. Onwards and *onwards*, to this beyond that would separate me, like a silk veil between reality and freedom, thin, translucent, but *there*.

The car jumped across the road, blitzing down the highway as the road widened and broadened as the plains came and the mountains loomed ahead. Flat roads turned hilly, then tighter as they slithered through deserts and rifts and valleys, taking me far enough from all the hustling rampage of city lights.

And all through that time, that silk moth swayed, clipped between the wipers and so, so *alive*.

Staring at it, I wondered if I could pluck it from the wipers and send it flying to the mountain range I was travelling upon, where the barriers thinned to nothing and rock slides were common.

Would it be crushed? Would it be able to fly?

An answer that no one could give me at this moment.

As I carefully spun around the curve at this cliffside, I was met with a sign.

'Work in Progress'

I peered over the frayed wings smacked onto my windshield to see an utterly demolished road. Repairs were going on at the very moment to fix it. The gas meter blinked red at this moment, and my mind blanked to the rest stop a few hours ago when they recommended my purchase of a gas carton.

Checking the meter again, it turned out I had enough gas for the drive back to the relatively safe highlands earlier. I could call for help then.

I turned around and gazed at the horizon where the starry night faded. There, at the edge of everything on this leaf of a cliffside, was the city I had spent days running from. And it was looming, like a praying mantis, just standing there and waiting for my inevitable return when I ran out of the cash I spent years saving for this moment.

I couldn't get away.

No matter how long I travelled down this Silk Road, on the paths that my ancestors took, that my father travelled half of, I couldn't get away. Was this how it was? City after city that never changed no matter how far I drove away.

But this was the Silk Road. A road of commerce. I couldn't escape the cities if this was the road I was on.

All of the gas ran out and I'm still here. Trapped, a fly in a web. Unable to get out of this sticky urbanism to return to the youth of freedom.

Is this it? Has all of this been for nothing? This escape, only to return to where I started, just in another colour. I'm a bug then, in an endless maze of the world's making, never to run free.

Plap.

I spun around to the windshield. The silkmoth was struggling, hitting the windshield and the wipers in an effort to be free, but alas. It couldn't get free, just like me. Hah. We were both bugs struggling on a windshield, unaware of the reason behind our imprisonment there in the first place.

All this work, all this rat racing for retirement, for money, for safety in that nebulous future—what was all of it for? Was this what my life would amount to? A long road of carrying all that silk for the money that I could get if I reached that destination?

...

I slammed the gas pedal and turned the car around, driving all the way back to the highlands. There was nothing for me here. Not there either.

I had nowhere to go.

All roads led back to those cities. Even if I turned towards the villages, I could never escape the need for money from those around me. We were all trapped on this road if we wanted to live. Yet, we only had so much to give.

The thin membrane of that silkmoth glimmered underneath the starlight as I drove back up the cliff. Well, the bug couldn't live long anyway, not after being reconstructed in their silk cocoons, which was their life's work yet barely having enough food in their stomachs to find another to produce offspring with.

...We were the same, weren't we?

I just had an infinitely more complicated path to walk on, compared to this little bug. Unlike it, I couldn't be free. I couldn't free myself. But I had to do it if I wanted to not return to that life in that tiny cubicle and type infinitely until I deemed myself 'ready'.

I wasn't ready. I was far from it. This journey, this nostalgia trip along the Silk Road my father went on for retirement was a small vacation. I had more than fifty years left to go. That silk moth had barely five days left to live.

What was I supposed to do? I couldn't ever be free. I couldn't get myself out of that web between money and want. Much like that silk moth that had to be plucked between my fingers to leave my windshield.

Yet...that silk moth. It could be free. I could just take it out and hold it between my fingertips like a coin, or a long-awaited drop of nectar from an aphid's belly. I could savor that moment when a life was in my hands, and—

There was no 'and'. I was at the highlands already.

I left the car and slammed the door behind me. Flaps broke apart the night as the vehicle swayed like a reed, jostling the silk moth that was trapped there for a day. I looked up, and the stars were beautiful tonight, unencumbered by the city lights that I slowly began to hate. The road was still scuffed with age. Millions of lives once passed these lands, and I was here, anchored to what they spent ages suffering for.

Turning towards the frantic patter against the windshield, I steadied myself next to the rearview mirror of the dirtied car.

This one deserved freedom.

I slid my nails underneath the wiper, and carefully clamped the silk moth's abdomen with a light pinch. Wedging the wipers apart, I took the moth to the skies as it writhed within my grasp. With a clack, the wipers flicked back to where they belonged.

The little thing struggled, white, fluffy wings that beat out its rhythm of terror as black, beady eyes stared up at the sky. Soon, it stopped, and I could see the milky way reflected in that pitch black moment.

"The stars." I whispered.

The answer was a series of struggles.

Carefully handling the moth, I placed my pinched hand above the other's palm, so that I could see eye-to-eye with the little thing.

"We are both trapped." I stated, looking past the silhouette of my pinch.

This endless, shared silk road of ours—

And yet.

Yet, I free you, little thing.

With a careless flick, the moth learnt of freedom in the next one-hundred-and-twenty-hours. The shadows of unburdened wings cast a void among the starlight, and I hated it so. The moth was free.

And still, there I was, trapped, unfree, and bound.

I opened the car door again, and unplugged the phone. I punched in the emergency hotline, ignoring the automatic notification in my mailbox.

"Hello?" I said, after three rings, "I need a tow car at—"

Far off, in a distance no man could reach, the moth drifted downwards.

Pair of Translated Letters

ESF Island School, Cheung, Ching Lok – 16

To my good, dear sister, Anne Wright.

Dearest sister, my best wishes to you. I am writing to let you know that I shall be off to Constantinople once more as I have received word that, I will soon shall have to search for a new supplier of silk and other goods from the East, as, to my greatest misfortune and sadness, my respected long-time business partner and supplier, Arden, has passed; may his soul be at peace. It is of my greatest sorrow that I will not arrive in time to attend his funeral rites. Dear sister, inform our mother of my voyage on my behalf and ensure she does not go out of the house and await my return when she is in dire need of rest.

I recall that Arden had once told me that, if you ever so inquired about him, he would be more than glad for me to tell you about him. As he is no longer with us, I assume that this will be the most appropriate time to write to you regarding his character and history, as you have asked me some while ago when I was busy and saddled with pressing matters to tend to. To return to the matter at hand; Arden was, I believe, one of the most renowned and trustworthy traders in Constantinople, especially within the trade between West and East. From what I first heard of him, he was skilled in the languages and could bargain with Eastern merchants without issue. Once, I overheard him negotiate; though I could distinguish between his words and those of the Eastern merchants through his unmistakable accent, his fluency of the language could be compared to that of a native speaker, showing irrefutable mastery over foreign words. Of course, his efforts were almost never without gain. Every category of goods purchased were of the utmost quality; I could vividly recall the rich array of silks and fabrics laid out in front of my two wide eyes, and I do not believe that I would ever know a fabric that could be even smoother and lighter than the silk bought on that day. It still bewilders me that Arden was seven years my junior; he was so young, but he was already so more experienced and remarkable than I am.

Arden was fair in appearance and was of a phlegmatic disposition. In most times I saw him clad in distinct, plain black, garnished with minimal traces of white; at times, he would stare blankly at a distance, as though pondering in deep thought or lamenting things long bygone. It was only then I would see hints of heartache flit across his gentle features. I never did ask him the reason behind his clothing, nor did I ever pry into his personal affairs; but, once, as we were overseeing the appraisal of a batch of newly bought fireworks, Arden decided to satiate my curiosity. He had a keen eye and most certainly could have captured every slight contortion of my face, as every skilled and eloquent bargainer must, but I am also now inclined to believe that he was also reminded of a distant memory upon seeing the many-hued explosions of fireworks. He began, recounting that many years ago, he accompanied his father, who was also a merchant, to Constantinople. He mentioned that his father was desperate for Arden to learn anything about the art of the trade, even just so much as a smidgen of knowledge. Arden described his younger self as an indolent child who was

unwilling to inquire into his father's work; someone that I could not, nor will I ever picture Arden as.

He narrated, once, he evaded one of the bargaining sessions that his father attended, even though he was instructed by his father to remain. In the vicinity of the area, he encountered a man from Cathay instructing his father's servants on how to operate the fireworks for the purpose of evaluation as they were being transported from the docks. Arden described the man, who went by the surname of Yuwen, in great and excruciating detail, although I do not recall much of that lengthy account other than a few notes of his characteristics; he was apparently a skilled navigator, and was a most courteous, though charming and witty man. Arden then continued, saying on that day, he was smitten with the fireworks upon witnessing Yuwen's splendid presentation and demonstration during the final testing. The two quickly grew close. To his sorrow, as Arden was not yet fluent in languages from the East, he had to rely on a translator to communicate with his newest and closest friend during that period of time. The image of Arden's regretful expression as he lamented on this unfortunate barricading of their direct communication will, perhaps, never escape my memory.

Arden mentioned the past activities that he and Yuwen once partook in during those distant years. Yuwen would bring kites, distinguishably from Cathay, and during the times when Arden's father did not call for him or reprimand him, they would fly kites throughout the day, and Yuwen would light-heartedly ask Arden about the animals depicted on the kites; cranes, kestrels, birds from the East. Arden would often get words in foreign languages mixed up back then, and Yuwen would obnoxiously yet endearingly let out barks of laughter when he mispronounced any sort of words. As time marched on, Arden got bolder. Sometime later, months after their first meeting, Yuwen started creeping through the windows and into Arden's quarters like a thief. Thieving from these chambers was not the intention; rather, they had stolen wine intended for trade and put on a sort of cultural exchange through drinking. Arden recounted that, on one of their "wine-stealing trysts", he saw a person other than his own father utterly and completely inebriated; Arden lugged Yuwen back to his own designated quarters with great difficulty. Perhaps Yuwen was embarrassed, according to Arden's own memory, which was mostly unfaltering and reliable, but for weeks after that incident, Yuwen did not bring wine to their nighttime meetings. Arden enjoyed these sessions moreso than when he had to rely on a translator, as language was not necessary to understand if Yuwen enjoyed the wine or not; he would either grin in deep satisfaction or spit it back out.

It was then Arden began to comment on Yuwen's fascination for the poetry of his homeland. On occasions, the two would exchange crudely written poems, read aloud by the translator who, to the best of his ability, attempted to stifle his irritation and utter bewilderment at the lines of absurdity he was instructed to translate. Arden continued, saying that if only he were more studious, or, if he was raised in Cathay, there would be no need for a translator in order for them to converse, let alone recite amateurish poetry to one another purely with the intent of amusement. He made a most puzzling comparison as he continued; having a translator present during their meetings was as if a soldier had marched into his quarters and insisted on

watching him as he slumbered. I had thoughts of disagreement as he said that; myself, I would be grateful to have a servant so fluent in a complex, foreign language, and who could accompany and decipher the words of my outlander friends. However, Arden also commented that, as the translator was under servitude to his father, there was a chance that the translator might inform his father about any foolish or inappropriate activities he and Yuwen would have participated in, or exchanges of dialogue concerning severe, forbidden topics. I am more inclined to believe that Arden's father had just wished for him to grow as a proper, young man who had not involved himself in any questionable affairs, as I do not believe that Arden would ever think of committing wrongdoings in his youth. Moreover, I do believe that his good judgement for silks and porcelain would also translate well into his judgement of a person's character; surely, Yuwen would also not be the dishonourable sort of person.

Eventually, all good things come to an end, and no meeting between men will last forever. The day before Yuwen had to embark on the voyage back to Cathay, he and Arden met for one final time. I can vividly recall how he described the setting to their last meeting; the sun, he described, was a glowing yellow pearl embedded in the dark redness of the sky, which was like silk. The ocean's waters were at peace and the roar of the waves gave way to a final farewell between close friends. I must correct myself, however; from that day on, they were no longer friends, but sworn brothers who forever pledged loyalty to each other and their bond. They recited a vow to the heavens in Yuwen's language and indulged in wine; then, Yuwen gave Arden half a jade pendant, which he had presented to me as it was mentioned. I must comment that although the jade is crude in quality compared to other samples in Arden's possession that I have examined, I must praise the maker of this pendant for the fine details sculpted into the rock. It is truly a shame that the quality of jade was this unsatisfactory, as a great deal of skill and care were imbued into the creation of this pendant. Arden then mentioned that Yuwen had the other half of the pendant in his possession; the pendant will only become whole again if they meet. The day Yuwen left Constantinople was the day Arden had changed for the better, or so he said.

In hopes that Yuwen would return someday, a hope that Arden now described as entirely wishful and astoundingly credulous, he persuaded his father to let him stay and assist the family business far from his homeland. Arden threw himself into his personal studies fueled by the desire to remain in Constantinople, learning from hagglers in markets on how to bargain, studying various goods from East and West to discern quality, and consulting tomes and foreigners on different languages. Arden very humbly said that all this took a laborious effort; I myself believe that this would not be accomplishable if he did not have the giftedness to begin with. The years slowly passed, and Yuwen did not return; yet, Arden did not leave Constantinople either. He said that he found himself purpose there; he was to connect East with West, being one of the many bridges that break through barriers between the peoples hailing from far, different lands.

Now, to our greatest misfortune, that brilliant bridge has collapsed; perhaps Arden was riddled by extreme exhaustion as he fell from the docks and into the sea on the day of his death. As I write this letter to you, my sister, my chest is heavy and weighted from sorrow; it pains me

that I cannot converse and work with Arden anymore. There is still much that I do not know about him, but I am grateful that he has decided to share his journey with me, another passing, possibly insignificant merchant in his life of business and trade. If I had the premonition that this misfortune would be laid upon us, I would have seized the opportunity to know more about him, and perhaps I could have alleviated his sorrows, encouraged him to rest and tend to himself. I do hope that, through some method, he knows that those he has worked with, especially I, will remember him dearly for as long as we live. However, I must not be discouraged by his passing. Arden is of the greatest inspiration to me, and I shall carry on the spirit and nature of his work. Perhaps in the world beyond our time, there will be no more barriers between nations and no more need for translators, and all of humankind could converse and develop relationships without being divided. I will conclude this letter here; may God have you in his keeping.

Written at Bristol.

From Alexander Wright.

To my dearest brother, Alexander Wright.

My blessings to you, dear brother. I wish for success in your endeavours and for your safest voyage and return. Do not worry; although Mother has been repeating her complaints about your sudden departure, she has listened to your instructions and did not go to the harbour awaiting your return. I am truly sorry to hear that your business partner has passed away; if you are to see his family or close acquaintances, please extend my deepest consolations towards them.

It is a shame that I did not have the chance to meet Arden; although I know nothing of him apart from what you have written to me about in your previous letter, I do firmly believe that he is a good and remarkable man. His bond with his foreign companion is a deep and lasting one, as rare and precious as a jewel. I do think that if he could know of us now through some mysterious method, he would be grateful that you have decided to speak so nicely of him and that you have decided to carry on his spirit and continue what he has set out to do. With the combined efforts of man, perhaps one day, all nations will be bridged, and all people will be brought together.

Before I end this letter, there is one anecdote that I do think would intrigue you, and I certainly find to be most interesting as well. I have overheard the gossips of the servants of the house; they most likely have learnt this from the seamen. They have said things about a ghastly jade pendant appearing on the docks of Constantinople. It appears at night elusively, taking the shape of two crescent halves, both threaded with red string, combined to be a whole; upon daybreak, the pendant vanishes without a trace and cannot be found even with the greatest of efforts. I would say that, perhaps, you would have some luck should you seek it, but that is not for certain. After all, some things are not meant to be grasped by living hands. May you have God's blessings and mine.

Written at Bristol.

From Anne Wright.

Road to Emptiness

ESF Island School, Leung, Cheuk Him Karto – 16

Wong wore a confident smile on his face; his eyes glistened with joy, his chin lifted up. His treasure has found an appreciative customer, and he was even wearing his patron's gifted fresh garments, rather than the torn rags he had entered the mansion in.

With the amount of gold this deal promised, he could see a future again. He couldn't help a slight grin as he savoured the joy of the present against his bitter memories.

Back home it was impossible to survive as an orphan. He slept on the side of roads and stole from passerbys to make a living. Once upon a time, his entire existence was shameful. His mother abandoned him, an illegitimate son, out of shame; he always walked with his head down, eyes cast to people's shoes.

That was until he met Sun. She was beautiful, a light of radiance in his life. She took care of him when she found him ill, sleeping outside her door, and let him in her house during the bitter winter, which was a great cultural taboo, a man and a woman sleeping in one room. He loved her kindness; she loved his devotion, which set him apart from the sons of other rich families. And he was incredibly handsome, once his face was washed properly and dressed in better robes.

Once he regained his strength, he vowed to marry her. But both of them knew that was impossible, since she came from a prominent family that despised people like him, not only poor but also uneducated. But he convinced the lady to help him steal some silk and gold from her family — then he swore he would return with fortune worthy of a kingdom, and give it all to her.

He wondered suddenly, with a heavy pang of guilt, what sort of punishment she must've faced from her family. She said that her mother loved and protected her dearly; Wong can only hope that no fate too harsh has taken her. Yet this success was a sign, wasn't it? It was the will of Heaven. She was his destiny. He's sure of it.

Khulgad, his nomadic bodyguard on this journey, was waiting for him. He opened a box, and stepped aside. Khulgad took his share, ten gold bars, and smiled. No more than what he deserved.

Ten gold bars was a large sum, probably equivalent to nine months of difficult work by a peasant. But of the hundreds that he had received, this seemed but a small portion. Khulgad was loyal and honest, travelling thousands of miles by his side, although he did not speak a single word of Chinese. He could've robbed everything from him, but chose to honour their agreement. That alone made him a man to be admired.

The Chinese interpreter, Qin, stood quite far back. With his one good eye he looked at Wong like a starved dog. Wong wanted to help him, but knew that was impossible.

'I still require your services on the way back,' Wong assured him, upon which he made a wide smile. This made the ugly scar on his face distort, and made him seem almost grimacing, the hollow pit in his left eye warping and shrinking. Wong forcibly pulled his attention away from this hideous face.

'I shall remain in the mansion of my patron for but a few more days,' Wong told him, 'during which time Khulgad's clan may follow me around.'

Qin relayed this to his master, who grunted his response. Wong sometimes feared sabotage from this man — but surely he wouldn't wish to lose one more eye. Besides, there are other slaves like him that are dragged along by the warband.

'The master invites me to dinner. You may go with me.' Wong nodded at the man, perhaps out of some sympathy to his own brethren. He knew it was impossible to let Qin go, however, without some form of supervision. And he did feel gratitude to Khulgad. 'Let your master know as well.'

The dinner was, as everything else in the city, rather exotic. There was rice and dumplings, which were cooked in an extraordinarily different manner than in his homeland, and which smelled rather divine to a man who had been on horseback for the past four months. It was an earned meal, which filled Wong's spirit with gladness.

His patron, Kushi, waved him over to sit on the table. The feasters included his family, of course, and a few other guests that looked equally as exotic. There were two men with copper-coloured skin, something which was never seen before; their painted eyes look remarkable under the candlelight. There was also a monk, who tore into the freshly served chicken without much concern for this sacreligion. All of them ate with their hands, so Wong followed. Had he still been fresh out of China, he would not have done so, but after so many months of semi-nomadic life he was used to it.

Khulgad may have some benevolence in him, since he claimed to be not used to the food, and declined the feast. Instead, on the outskirts of the city him and his nomads camped, and presumably feasted on whatever animals they managed to scour from the barren plains outside.

Qin ate slowly, but one could tell his desperation as he kept clawing at the rice, causing much of it to fall through his fingers. Kushi, who ate in a gentlemanly manner, didn't seem to mind, but Wong felt much embarrassed by his companion. He patted the man gently on the back, and told him off with a glance. Qin avoided his gaze and, in fact, left him wholly ignored.

This stoked an unknown fire within Wong. Who was this mere captive, who was able to eat on this table only thanks to his own goodwill, who dared to ignore him? But Wong could not act on this anger on the table. Nor can he do so outside — Qin was the property of Khulgad and his warband. Even to give him a slap is to risk losing a finger or a hand. Instead, Wong chose the policy of resignation, turning away from Qin and keeping a low profile.

There was a sudden banging at the door, amidst the loud music playing and happy cheers, it sounded so abrupt and out of place. It was really strong, as if a whole herd of buffalo had been ramming into that heavy door.

Displeased, Kushi turned to a servant, who peeped out of the door, then whispered something in the host's ear. Kushi stood up and walked to the door, waving to the musicians to stop their noise. Now everyone's attention focused on the door.

It opened, and behind the door was a group of men in armour, carrying swords. A few had bows and shields, all swept by the desert sand. Their leader stepped up and shouted, in a deep, raspy voice that carried across the entire hall, 'Is there one here who speaks Chinese?'

Kushi turned and pointed at Wong. Frustrated at being singled out, Wong stepped forward. The monk also left his seat, and the two stood by the side of Kushi.

The monk had strange green eyes, and wore garments that seemed as alien as this city to Wong, so Wong had mistaken him for yet another foreigner. Yet it was he who spoke up to the intruders first, in an impeccable accent: 'What is it that you seek from here?'

'One night's stay, and nothing more.' The soldier — Wong noticed that he was wearing imperial armour — looked Wong dead in the eye. His hard, grey gaze, resembling a desert jackal, softened for no identifiable reason. 'Your name?'

Wong told him his full name.

'Your father was a friend of my own. I've met you once, when you were ten — of course you wouldn't recognise me. Your peculiar ear shape gives you away. It is I, Cao Dufeng, has your father spoken of me?' The soldier did not smile when he said this, nor was there any emotion or change of the icy tone in his words. Just matter-of-fact, which sent chills down Wong's spine, despite the supposed familiarity.

'Why have you come here, servicemen, instead of defending the motherland?' Wong demanded. He could feel sweat slithering down his neck, like a cold-blooded rattlesnake.

'Motherland?' Cao smirked. 'The motherland is gone. Chang'an, the city where you and I grew up in, is ravaged, in flames. Me and my men do not know if the emperor lives. We crossed great distances to arrive here.'

'If you are refugees, put on an appropriate attitude for it,' The monk responded.

Wong's mind could not process this at first, but once he did, a cold terror seized his heart. The empire had fallen when he was away — to who? The barbarians of the north? A civil war? Raiders from Japan and Korea? But the fate of the empire was of no concern to the peasant. What of Sun, and her family? A wealthy family is likely to be plundered, and the fate of beautiful girls in war is unimaginable. His heart raced, he could not think of anything else, and he grabbed Cao forcefully. 'What is this that you tell me, this dreadful prospect?'

Cao kept a flat tone, though his face turned neutral, more stern. 'I know nothing of the city's state currently, since it's been months since we abandoned it. Don't bother asking me anything. I would advise against returning, even if you have family there. The rebels are savage, and I heard tales of massacres from those who fled the same route as I.'

So it was a civil war, and the enemies crushed the capital already. Wong felt a burning heat in his head that could not be contained. He let his hands free, and punched Cao hard, in the face.

'You should've defended the city to the death. You traitors, deserters, disgrace to your families! Heaven shall curse you, your followers, and your descendants, till our names are buried under the sands of time!'

Two of the soldiers behind Cao began moving, and simultaneously, two of Kushi's bodyguards seized Wong. Wong struggled, but was pressed to the ground. Only then did he notice his fist bleeding, while Cao was unscathed.

'That was ridiculous,' He said simply, then turned to Kushi. 'So, honourable mister, is my request granted?'

'I apologise, first of all, for the behaviour of my guest,' Kushi said, through the monk as a translator. 'But as you can see, we are a large family, and I fear that I am incapable of accommodating all of your men.'

Cao took a step up the stairs, so he stood on equal height with Kushi, despite still having a three-step difference. His right hand clutched the sword, which shone in the candlelight. 'We simply ask for the servants' rooms.'

'You ask me to force my servants on the streets,' Kushi said. 'That is against my values and my religion. I should give help to all those who need it, yes, but your army is better at surviving the open desert and fending off robbers than my poor servants, whose only true property are a cloak, sandals, and trousers.'

Cao laughed. 'And you put on the guise of a good man before me. Where is your benevolence to your servants, if you will not even allow them the leftovers of your dining table, and give them food not even a stray dog would want?'

Kushi's face turned red. 'I do not —'

Cao moved up quickly, ramming the hilt of his sword in the forehead of Kushi. Kushi's eyes rolled backwards, and he fell to the ground, making a thunderous crash. The two bodyguards let go of Wong and rushed Cao.

He growled, like a wild animal to be unleashed, and swung his weapon. It was clearly not very polished, because it lodged itself in the neck of the first man, and refused to move further. Frustrated, Cao had to wrestle with the other man. Grunting, he managed to push the bodyguard against a pillar, and gave him a powerful headbutt. Blood spurted from the forehead like a fountain.

The body slumped to the ground, so that the only thing standing between Cao and the mansion's interior was the monk.

Wong scrambled to the feast hall. It was already deserted, as all others, including Qin, had fled. Wong also rushed for the back door, which was wide open, and ran blindly through the desert. His eyes were down, so he did not see where he was going.

He felt a powerful impact, hard and sharp, against his body. He reeled backwards, gasping for air as he was knocked over. His face was lit up by the cold moonlight. Paralysed, he waited for his doom.

But a shaking hand reached out and, with some difficulty, managed to pull him up. It was Qin, and the person who kicked him was one of the nomads, who, unable to see his face, must've mistook him for some vagabond. With difficulty, he gathered himself and looked to the main doorway. Some torch-carrying soldiers can be seen, which were slowly moving inwards.

A sudden thought came to Wong, even amidst all this chaos. His gold.

It was not that he truly cared about the gold anymore. He needed to return, to find his lover, or bury her corpse if he must. That was his mission. But without the gold, he wouldn't be able to pay Khulgad's nomads, and without protection he would surely die on the long journey home, not to mention, he doesn't even have a horse.

Qin was speaking to him, but, numb with shock, he did not hear a single word. He felt someone walk up to him from behind, and gave him a light push. He turned around. It was Khulgad, who had a horse by its ropes, and handed it to Wong.

'He cannot convince his men to waste their time following you for no reward,' Qin explained, 'but he could do you this favour. During the chaos, they entered the wealthy man's stables and got this fine steed. He says it's the best in the whole batch. You know how to ride — actually even if you didn't, there's no other way to help you.'

No other thought passed through Wong's mind. He bowed, got on the saddle, and rode off.

The nomads did follow him for a certain distance, as it turned out, since they were basically going in the same direction. They parted ways at the Qinghai Plateau, the nomads and Qin moving north and him further east. Even without carrying any burden, it took him two months to finally return.

The city gates were utterly ruined. No soldiers stood outside where there would usually be checkpoints, so he simply rode in. As soon as he was within the city gates, the horse collapsed underneath him. Its eyes rolled, and the tongue stuck out. Day and night riding has taken a toll on this animal, which was probably only used on hunts at the city outskirts, rather than long-distance travelling in this manner.

There were some people milling about, indicating that war, at least in this part of the country, was over. They were reconstructing a street, which had burnt wood, scattered beams, pits in the road everywhere. Most houses were ruined, but no corpses — fighting was over, probably for a long time. This gave Wong some sense of relief, but also the guilt of abandoning Sun to face this all by herself...assuming she still lives and he would be able to see her again.

He walked up to an old man. Normally, in these rags and with such an expression of death on his face, the villagers would avoid him like the plague, but currently everyone looked more or less broken. 'Do you know the family of Sun, the one that lived in a nice house just down the west side of the town?'

The old man nodded. 'Their house was burned down by the rebels, and I think they had to leave most of their possessions behind. Truly terrible! You know, they refused to allow any of the servants to follow them. They locked the poor men, women and children inside, and let the rebels take their lives, while they themselves left with their precious calligraphy and antiques, as if those wouldn't drag them down.'

Wong had no time to listen to this old man's rant. 'Where did they go? Do you know?' He was glad, excited even, that Sun was still alive, but that meant nothing if he would never see her again, never hear her voice again. That thought was unbearable.

The old man waved over someone, a boy not yet even ten years old. 'Did your former masters tell you where they planned to go?'

The boy had a badly burnt left arm, which twisted like a gnarled tree's branch, a heartbreaking sight to see. 'They talked about Guangdong, some relatives living there. Where exactly, I have no idea.'

'They left five months ago, just a day before the rebels got here' The old man added. 'You may not find them, or they may be intercepted on the way, since they were carrying lots of money.'

Wong turned his back to them without a word. He walked down, all alone, towards the south. He no longer had a horse, no money, not even food...but he had purpose.

He will find her. He has done so much already, he simply can't give up now. He would go over mountains, river, any obstacles to get to her

A new journey must begin. And he will survive this, even though he is left with nothing again.

The Silk Anchor

ESF King George V School, Khan, Rakin – 16

Chapter I: The Glass Horizon

The cranes at the Kwai Tsing container terminal rise and fall with practiced grace, like a calligrapher's brush strokes across a bruised Hong Kong sky. From my vantage point behind the glass of the observation deck, the world resembles a vast game of Tetris played with the wealth of nations.

My scanner, a sleek piece of black plastic that feels like an extension of my hand, chirps. Beep. Container 4492 – J. Destination: Piraeus, Greece. Contents: High-density fiber optic cables. Beep. The New Silk Road isn't made of dirt and camel breath anymore, Mei, Mr. Lau said, leaning over my shoulder. He smelled of expensive espresso and the ozone of air-conditioned rooms. It's made of light. Data moving at the speed of thought. We are the gatekeepers of that light.

I nodded, keeping the polite, vacant smile of an intern. Mr. Lau liked metaphors, especially those that made logistics sound like poetry. To him, the "Belt and Road" was a seamless map of progress. To me, it was a mountain of digital paperwork. Behind his desk, a world map glowed with bright blue lines connecting Xi'an to Rotterdam—an efficient web designed to unite the globe. I often wondered what got caught in the webbing.

Chapter II: The Dust of 1912

Shao-Heng wiped the grit from his eyes as the caravan halted at the edge of the Hexi Corridor. Behind him, three hundred mules groaned under the weight of raw silk and pressed tea. Ahead, the horizon shimmered like a lake of fire.

He was the interpreter—the bridge between British trade envoys, Han merchants, and nomadic guides. He carried three languages in his throat, but today, they all tasted of copper and thirst. The local headman, a man with skin like cracked leather, pulled Shao-Heng aside, speaking in a low, urgent dialect of the mountains. "The wind has changed," the headman whispered. "In the village of Wuwei, the black cough has taken the children. If you lead the caravan through the main gates, you bring the shroud with you. You must turn north, toward the dunes."

Shao-Heng looked at the British envoy, Captain Sterling, who was tapping his pocket watch. Sterling didn't see people; he saw a schedule. To turn north meant a three-week delay. It meant the silk would miss the autumn ships.

Chapter III: Grave Shift

The air in the modern archive was thick, tasting of dust and the slow decay of organic ink. I had been assigned to the "Grave Shift"—digitizing the company's 1920s-era ledgers.

I pulled a cart of ledgers, most of them mundane records of tonnage and tariffs. Near the bottom, I found a folder bound in silk thread that had turned brittle and black. Inside was a manifest from the Northern Route, 1912.

There, in faded vermilion ink, was my family name: Lin Shao-Heng.

Next to his name was a frantic scrawl in the margin, a note in English written with a shaking hand: Discrepancy in translation. DO NOT RECORD. DO NOT TRANSLATE.

I touched the paper. It was cold.

Chapter IV: The Neon and the Silk

That night, the neon lights of Mong Kok blurred against the rain-slicked window of our apartment. I sat across from Po Po, my grandmother. She was the keeper of our family's "small history."

"Language is cargo, Mei," she said, her voice competing with the hiss of the teakettle. She reached into a lacquered box and retrieved a small silk scrap covered in hand-painted maps. "Your great-grandfather knew that. The traders wanted the route kept open. They told Shao-Heng to tell the guards that the path was clear."

And what did he do? I asked.

"He lied," Po Po smiled thinly. "He told the merchants the guides had seen bandits to the north, forcing the caravan onto a longer, safer path. He intentionally mistranslated the maps. He saved the village from the traders, and the traders from the plague, but he was fired for 'incompetence' when they arrived late. He carried that 'failure' like a badge of honor."

Chapter V: The Optimal Truth

The next morning, the "light" of the New Silk Road was blinding. Mr. Lau called me into his office, where a draft community impact survey regarding a new high-speed rail link in Central Asia sat glowing on his massive screen.

"Mei, look at this translation," he said, pointing to a paragraph regarding the displacement of a nomadic settlement. "The local response uses a word that translates to 'stolen' or 'severed.' It's too emotive. We need to 'optimize' the language for the board. Change it to 'reallocated for regional synergy.' It sounds more..."

cooperative."

I looked at the screen. The villagers' words were raw. They spoke not of "synergy," but of the graves of their ancestors and the wells that had run dry because of the construction.

"But, sir," I said, my voice shaking. "The word they used, *khit*, it means a spiritual severing. 'Optimized' doesn't just change the tone; it erases their reality."

Lau sighed. "We are building the future, Mei. We don't have time for the poetry of the past. Just make the change."

Chapter VI: The Unbroken Thread

I sat at my desk, the cursor blinking like a heartbeat.. Another container was logged. I thought about Shao-Heng in the dust of 1912, choosing to be a "bad interpreter" to be a good man.

I began to type. But I didn't use the word "optimized."

I wrote a report that included a three-page appendix on the linguistic nuances of the local complaints. I documented the history of the land and the exact weight of what was being lost. I used the word *severed*. I used the word *stolen*. I hit "Send" to the regional board, bypassing Mr. Lau's approval folder.

Chapter VII: The Weight of the Word

The fallout was not a storm, but a sudden, freezing silence. Two days after I hit "send," my login credentials failed. When I arrived at the office, my desk had already been cleared, my personal effects sitting in a nondescript cardboard box like a handled organ.

Mr. Lau didn't shout. He looked out at the harbor, his silhouette framed by the very cranes that now felt like giants marking my exit. "You were meant to be a bridge, Mei," he said, his voice thin. "Instead, you've become a barricade. The board is furious. You've introduced 'unnecessary complexity' into a billion-dollar acquisition." "I didn't introduce it, sir," I replied, the weight of the box pressing against my ribs. "I just stopped hiding it. My great-grandfather taught me that a bridge that only carries one side's weight eventually collapses." He waved a hand, dismissing me. "Go home. You're too concerned with the 'why' when the world only cares about the 'when.' You've traded a career for a footnote that no one will read."

Chapter VIII: The Ghost in the Machine

I walked out past the rows of blinking servers. For the first time, the "Grave Shift" felt alive. I had lost a career I never truly wanted, but the silence of the elevator ride down felt different than the silence of the archives. It wasn't the silence of decay; it was the silence of a held breath.

In my apartment, the ghost of the terminal still hummed in my ears. I thought of the "Red Zones"—villages like Karamay, marked for "Total Asset Integration." In plain English: demolition. I realized then that I hadn't just sent a report; I had committed a digital heresy. I had tied the modern fiber-optic cable to the dusty silk of 1912, and the tension was pulling the whole map apart.

Chapter IX: The Hexi Corridor, 1912

Back in the dust of the corridor, Shao-Heng stood his ground. Captain Sterling's hand rested on his pistol—a symbol of impatient power.

He says the eastern pass is blocked by a massive rockfall, Shao-Heng lied, his heart hammering against his ribs like a trapped bird. He says a seasonal flood has washed out the main bridge. We must take the northern dunes to ensure the safety of the cargo.

Sterling scowled, his eyes scanning the parched horizon. A flood? In this heat? Are you certain of your translation, boy?

Quite certain, sir, Shao-Heng replied. He was no longer just a translator; he was a navigator of fates. He was smuggling safety in the guise of a lie, knowing that every mile north was a lash against his own future. He was trading his reputation for the breath of children he would never meet.

Chapter X: The Cost of Clarity

The "solution" did not come as a grand victory. It came as a slow, painful audit.

Because I had bypassed the internal filters, my report didn't just sit in Lau's inbox; it had triggered an automatic flag in the consortium's Ethics and Compliance division—a department usually meant for show, now forced to look at the "linguistic nuances" I had laid bare.

I spent the next week in a liminal space. The "weight" of my words was heavy because I didn't know if they would matter. I watched the news, waiting for a mention of Karamay. I felt the isolation my great-grandfather must have felt—the "incompetent" man who knew the truth.

Chapter XI: The Resonance

The storm hit Hong Kong at 4:00 AM. When the city woke, the news was not just about the typhoon, but

about a "Strategic Pause" in the Central Asian rail link.

The report had leaked. Not through me, but through an anonymous clerk in the compliance wing who had been moved by the "appendix of ghosts" I had attached. The public outcry over the word *khiti*—that "spiritual severing"—had become a viral flashpoint. Investors didn't mind "synergy," but they were terrified of "stolen souls."

My "footnote" had become the headline. The translation was no longer a secret; it was a mandate.

Chapter XII: The Return to the Dunes

September, 1912. The caravan finally crested the ridge overlooking Lanzhou. They were twenty-two days late.

The mules were skeletal, and Shao-Heng's pay had been docked to nothing.

As they rode toward the gates, they met travelers heading east. They were ragged, but their eyes were clear.

Don't go toward Wuwei, one warned. The city is a tomb. We only escaped because a rumor reached us—a story about bandits to the north. It forced us to take the long way around.

Shao-Heng fell to the rear of the queue. He thought of his empty pockets and his ruined name. But then he saw a young girl among the travelers divide a piece of fruit with her brother, their laughter rising above the grit of the road. The "failure" in his heart blossomed into a great, quiet peace. He had lost the world's respect, but he had saved the world itself.

Chapter XIII: The Unbroken Thread

I walked out to the harbor one last time. The rain had slowed to a thin drizzle, and the cranes—those giant steel calligraphers—were moving again. I no longer saw them as unreadable gods.

Back in Mong Kok, Po Po was at the table. She didn't ask about the job or the "Audit." She just pushed a cup of tea toward me.

"The Silk Road is long, Mei," she whispered. "It doesn't end just because you step off the path. It just means you are the one walking ahead of it."

I looked out at the city. Hong Kong was a web of light—thousands of cables pulsing with the "cargo" of a billion voices. I finally belonged to it. I wasn't a unit of labor; I was a link in a chain reaching back to the Hexi

Corridor. I had found the "weight" of my own name.

I picked up my pen. I wasn't writing for a board anymore. I was writing for the shadows that finally had a name, making sure that in the new world of light, no one would be left in the dark.

Of letters past, sent or unreceived

ESF Renaissance College, Cheng, Bernice – 16

Dear Rokhshan,

They say our homeland lies at the centre of all roads, but tonight it feels like the farthest place in the world. This place is a wasteland of sand—smothered nothingness. You don't have to say it back, but of course, I miss you. I do, truly. How's Maman doing?

We camped in a dry riverbed that sat between a gorge, three days east of Samarkand by a good caravan's pace. The camels kneel in a ring around the fire, their shadows long as tired giants. Master called this the first step towards China, yet the air already smells so different. I think it's the strange odour of dust and the cold stone, and the scent of dead animals that did the trick.

Anyways, I am writing by the light of a brazier, my hand clumsy with the Sogdian script. Master says a merchant's pen must be as quick as his tongue. Kamal lent me some scraggly paper that he bought from the market in Bukhara to write on. There's a boy my age here as well—indentured like me. He's called Anwar. I think we are friends.

The camel-master here swears in three languages when the animals baulk, and there's this man from Khwarezm who would sing drinking songs in a tongue I do not know, but the rhythm. It reminds me of the songs Baba would sing in the taverns at home. Back when you were still well, and Baba could still walk fine. They say on these roads everyone borrows everyone else's words. It's truly bizarre, but Master says I should be learning some Chinese. I guess we'll see about that. You know what Baba says about me. Not the brightest of the bunch.

In many ways, I see this letter as an apology. If I had it my way, I would've never done all that. That night, when I saw Baba step towards you, it was not you that I saw flinch, but my scrawnier, fearful self. The same young boy who would beg naively for their father to show a sparkle of love, only to be met with the meanest silence and then a loud, reverberating sting on the cheek. If I have learnt anything over the years, it is that if I am bad enough, if I am loud enough, Father's fury stays on me. It is a small thing, but it is all I have to give you. I may not be clever, but I am stubborn. I'm sorry for leaving you, willingly or not.

The people with me, their bodies are marked with wrinkles and scars, tongues wrapped with stories of adventure, and yet they speak of me only as the one who must walk where Baba's bones cannot. Don't blame yourself, though. I can imagine you reading this, thinking that, but don't.

What I'm trying to say is that this won't be the only letter. Master says we might not see Sogdiana again for many upcoming seasons. The plan is to push farther east, onwards to where the gods shift their names and camels are kings. Find a town, settle down and handle the goods from one town to the next. That would mean being away for a very long time. Anwar says time makes memories golden, but I'd argue that time heals nothing; it merely makes your memories fade away. Words to think about...

Don't be an idiot,
Your brother

Dear Rokhshan, D-381

I hope you have received my previous letter. If so, I'm afraid your reply has been lost, if you've sent one at all. Anwar tells me not to worry, says I'm a pessimist. I hope he's right.

Anyways, all is well. For the most part. It has been almost a year and a bit, but we're still on the road. Master has his eyes set on Khotan. The city, he says, is rich with merchants from faraway lands and buyers from wealthy empires beyond our penurious reach. Crossing the high passes of the Pamirs is, in theory, the shorter and quicker route. However, the journey itself is the hardest part — the weather has been the biggest nightmare. As if regular winters aren't bad enough, the air up here is thin and fragile, and the mountains seem to scrape the sky. The view is just an endless vacuum. The mountains stretch on and on, the only thing you can see is the horizon and the bones of dead men pointing the way. We usually travel at night, but tonight we are setting up camp under this huge escarpment. Kamal has predicted a huge blizzard. He is quite good at this sort of stuff. Says he studied it at maritime navigation school down south or something.

On the hard nights, it's like even nature isn't on our side. The camels would plod on, their hooves crunching on the snow carpeted gravel, and I could feel the weight of every step in my bones. Hunger is a constant companion. We've lost a few men and almost one-third of our livestock in the higher parts of the Pamirs; we don't ever talk about it, though. Master says it's bad karma – the mountain gods apparently had rapacious minds of their own. So we keep our heads low and continue onwards. We follow the caravan master, who uses the stars to guide us at night and plants a stick in the ground before we sleep so we know which way to go in the morning. It's a trick, he says, inherited from the ones who've travelled before us. It is times like these, when I'm huddling with Anwar for warmth, when the silence gets too deafening, that I think of home most often.

On the good nights, however, the moon would hang quite like a polished Sogdian pearl in the velvet sky. It's a calming notion knowing that the moon will always be there, looking after me, looking after you.

Anwar and I have grown closer. He's the only reason I've been able to make it this far. He's quick – quicker in the head and heart than any merchant's son has a right to be. Now I can definitely say he's a friend – a brother, even. He reminds me so much of you it hurts. He tells me about Ferghana with this light in his eyes. He tells me about his family: his deceased parents, his sick grandma and his sweet little sister. In return, I tell him about you and Maman, the annoying clicks our chickens made when we chased around the plains, even Corin with her honeyed smile. Then Baba – it always ends up being about Baba. Anwar understands. He's great like that. Together, we try to guess how far we've come – across a couple of small towns, each with its own caravanserai and stories engraved on its walls. Each is a node in the sprawling net of strangers who pass as family for a night or a month. Crazy to think I'm part of that net now.

He asked me yesterday why I bother writing to you, knowing I may never get a reply. I don't have an answer. Not a good one anyway. Nice, cheap paper is hard to scrape for. Yet I am still writing this from the lacklustre campfire, my hands growing numb from the cold. I might hand this letter off on the next messenger post down the mountains. But for now, I'll just continue writing. To keep you close. Just so I don't lose you in my head as well.

Next time I write, I will be in Khotan.

Forever stepping further from home,
Your brother

Dear Rokhshan, D-1125

Happy birthday, brother. Seventeen years of being alive – finally, a man you are! I wish I could be there to celebrate in person. But it's been two years since I last wrote, three years since I left. Too much has changed; it's almost unfair.

We've finally settled in Khotan. This town is filled with riots of colour, men with nimble hands and most importantly, the buzziest market. Anwar and I are bunking upstairs above a smithy. It's not very luxurious: splintered floor, straw mattress, desert mice and air heavy with charcoal and sweat. At this point, though, I'm grateful for any roof.

Anyway, the market here is insane – carts stacked with carpets, loads of grapes, copper mirrors, and leather pouches. They traded in everything here and the people! I've met men from Turk, from China, from Persia; Indians, fellow Sogdians and even a wild-eyed man who claimed to come from the salt cities near the sea. You were right, Rokhshan. The trade really is a river.

Master has me learning fast – more than I ever did from Baba. I take the bids now. Last year, my voice would shake, but now it is sharper and more confident when a deal feels right. I must say, I'm getting rather good. I sold a handful of old bronze weights yesterday for a good price on my own. And Rokhshan, I could have taken on the whole world

because I had the silver pieces in my pocket from my own share of the bid. I will never get over it – having money that was truly mine.

After that, I was walking around the market alone, looking at dried this, canned that, silver from the Mediterranean... and then I saw some peaches. I don't believe in heavenly beings, not anymore, but I could have sworn I was blessed by the saints above when I saw those peaches. They were ripe to the core, their skin juicy and plump – looking, so I haggled for fifteen minutes straight for a single peach at a price low enough for me. It was the best feeling ever. The peach so tart on my tongue, and the way the juice rolled down my arm and got sticky all over my fingers... I had not tasted such flavourful goodness in a while, and the one bite of the world's most ordinary pink fruit was like a whole summer feast laid out in my eyes. Maybe one day, I'll bring

you a peach like that, so bright you'll have to squint to look at it.

You must think I'm off my rocker right now, and maybe I am. But at that moment, I couldn't help thinking how you would have loved it here. I guess that's why I'm finally writing, after two years. You've always fancied sweets. Remember when we stole those dried apricots from our sweet old neighbour during that miserable winter? Maman got so mad at us that she locked us in our room for hours. That didn't do anything to stop us, though. I remember us sharing a bed and snickering until we could no longer feel the cold. That was until Baba came home, and all the giggling was snatched from our throats like a bandit does with gold.

In many ways, I fear I will never be free from the grip of old, controlling men. Master's grip on me has tightened. And if I'm honest, it has been consuming me. He's harsher now; Anwar reckons greed has devoured him. Right now, we're loaded with turquoise, silk and paper— the thin, delicate kind, worth more than gold in Samarkand, so I guess it makes sense. Don't worry, though, he doesn't hit and yell like Baba. But I could feel his discontent with me growing by the day, the minute, the second. I hate being bound by some stupid indenture.

Some days, I imagine my 10 years being up. Me travelling wherever I please and making just enough so you and Maman won't ever have to worry for grain again. On other days, I am raw with a longing for home. I try to look for scraps of home everywhere: in the colour of apricots, in the stories Sogdians abroad tell, in the twinkle in Anwar's eyes when he laughs, and especially in the hooting of boys running wild in the city alleys.

With all the sweets in the world,
Your brother

Dear Rokhshan, D-2490 I don't know if you're out there. I'm still writing, though, as

I've always done.

We lost him. Anwar. He's gone. Forever.

You might not have known him, but you would have loved him. Anwar was funny, kind, selfless, and a damn great trader. In a twisted way, I saw him as a replacement for you. He had a way of making even the harshest days seem lighter, a handful of dust into a story. I don't know how to say it less bluntly, but I miss him more than life. Anwar

got sick last spring. He had a fever, contracted it from some Mongol travellers, then dark nodes appeared on his skin— swollen, ugly, like ink beneath his flesh. I thought it was just another fever, but then I saw the fear in his eyes through the faint glow of the oil lamp one night, and I knew it was real. It wasn't fair. I tried to help him, but it was like leaving you all over again. I couldn't save you from Baba's wrath when I was sent away, and I couldn't save Anwar from this curse. I wish the sickness had taken me instead.

I don't believe in a god. I haven't in a long time, even with the many monks and missionaries that come and go on the road. But one thing I do believe in is ghosts, Rokhshan. The road is full of them. They walk with us, and I see

them everywhere. Even inside me, they exist. Sometimes they take the form of strangers, sometimes of Baba, sometimes of you and even the traders we left behind in the mountains. I feel their presence. Now, I'd like to think Anwar is one of them, watching and guiding me forward.

How is Maman? Or even Baba? I never thought I'd be asking, but time is strange here— it stretches and shrinks, much like the desert. So does love, I think. I remember the first letter I wrote to you. I said I didn't think time would make memories golden. I was wrong. I remember the day I left as if it were yesterday. He didn't even say goodbye. You know how Baba is. He checked the tally of bales twice and just turned away, coughing into his sleeve. It's pathetic, really. I've realised that now— miles away. Time didn't heal the pain of leaving, but it did nurture the flower of acceptance.

Four more years till I'm free, and the trading here is still relentless. That's what it's like here— a constant ebb and flow of goods and people. I don't think I can do this anymore. I feel lonely in this room so bare and foreign.

Should Maman or anyone ask for a song on cold nights, sing them one of mine, if only for me.

Hope you are well,

Your brother

My dearest Rokhshan, D-3175 I've met a girl. Her name is Liyan, and she's an artist.

We talk about everything. I tell her of Master and his endless ledgers, of Anwar and how he used to laugh so carelessly, of the trades I make. But mostly, of you and home. Sometimes when she laughs, she reminds me of Anwar: warm, glowing, unreachable. Sometimes when she cries, she reminds me of you: misty-eyed, soft, strong. But when she whispers sweet nothings into my ears, she reminds me of the person I used to be, and I will feel ever at peace with her body pressed tight against mine.

We speak often of escaping together. Two more years, I tell her, then I'm free from my indenture. I will work hard to please Master. Endure his heated, disapproving gaze and grovel at whatever silver pence I can find. Then perhaps, we would follow the trade winds eastward to the ports where Chinese sails bloom like a lotus flower. Or perhaps, she would counter with a smile, we would go westward, where horses had wings, sweated blood, and were born out of the water. (I told her it's not true, but she doesn't believe me.)

In this plan, however, there will always be Liyan, painting what she sees. Whether it be the terracotta roofs of Chang'an, the red stones of Dunhuang or the gilded faces of strangers we would never see again. I would sell her art to all those who crave beauty they can never hold, and we would live on what knowledge, exploration and colour can earn. And in this plan, know that you will always be my measure of home, my final stop, after I've succeeded the Sogdian mission to build connections that outlive us.

Liyan says that art is memory. 'Every brushstroke is a story' is what she says as I watch her grind her pigments – cinnabar, jade dust, azurite. I like to think of my letters as my brushstrokes, my way of keeping home close. Even as the world stretches between us like silk drawn too thin.

I'm not sure, Rokhshan, but I think this will be my final letter. If these letters find you, keep them close. Read them when the desert winds rise, or when things get hard. But if they never reach you, let those reading this—twenty years from now, five thousand years from now—know that they were written with all my devotion.

So I end this, my last of my letters sent and unreceived, with my love. Because of all the trade lessons I have learnt throughout my three thousand one hundred and seventy-five days on the road, one that has stayed closest to my heart is that sincerity is carved into every word we say, and confident silence is what we should embrace as we wait for a reply.

Love,

Your brother

Why do we kill

ESF Renaissance College, Ghidaoui, Maya – 16

Prologue:

My fingertips grazed the stars that watched the Silk Road gently. Their bright smiles turned to black ash, dropping out like flies after I cursed them with my touch. Their fiery essence boils up – huge welts waiting to explode, showering the floor with their cursed light. They scorn as I hold up a gold bar, attempting to hypnotise people with the promises of great riches after they cross the Silk Road, only to be met with my frowning face as I kiss their lips slowly and breathe death into them. I watch them stare up at me, glassy-eyed, attempting to also paint my face with black streaks with their burning fingertips. But I am already black, I am the black plague.

I don't enjoy pain, but there is beauty in human suffering. The tears that fall, glistening brighter than any diamond, but are much too temporary to ever sell, the thoughts, dreams, and hopes that live on, diffuse into others' bodies once the final blood hits the earth. Hopes and memories that never die, it's all tragically beautiful. I'm sure you'd understand; you even have a word for it – *schadenfreude*. I keep all these paintings of hurt in a museum, locked tight so that you will never find them. It keeps me going, finding beauty in suffering; otherwise, I'd just be a monster.

Part 1

I have seen many people depart from this world. The first, second, third, and fourth deaths I carried out were all pretty boring. The fifth death, though? She was beautiful, but she died disgustingly. I messed it up. One of the stars I grazed landed in Shaan'xi on a traveller's wife, and she was enchanting. If I could love, I would have loved her, but I can only ever paint misery. So I decided to immortalise her in my art.

Limbs intertwined with strands of grass: I floated towards her and cupped her face. Her skin was so pale, as if she were a fragment of the moon that drifted down. She lifted her head slowly, looking at me through closed eyes, as if praying for a merciful death. Her black eyes opened, such a vast space: stars all dead, the moon burnt out. One blink and the universe closed away. Head hung; black hair pooled around her on the ground—a curtain to her solemn world. I kissed her. She felt me and shuddered. That night, as they entered an inn, I staggered towards a nearby lake to collect lotuses to wrap up her dead body.

I love painting with black. True black absorbs all light and reflects none, keeping all its thoughts and stories to itself. But if you sit in the dark for a while, and let it consume you, it starts speaking. It'll show you your every nightmare and all your greatest dreams, so even when you allow the light to enter yourself again, you too will never reflect light again. Black, the darkness, it's all-consuming, but not without giving back to those who give in. Why didn't humanity give in to me? I would have given everything. Silk, porcelain, spices – those don't matter to me anyway. I only consume light. Give me your light.

The sun rose, lazily leaking into their room through cracks in the wall. Cold air slept on every bed except for theirs, warmth emanating from their bodies, and yet the air around them froze. She woke up with a start, vomit started to pour from her mouth, carrying all grotesque forms of digested food. Tears welled up in her eyes before falling, burning her face as it landed. Her organs were trying to exit the thin fabric of flesh that held her all together. "Feiyan!?" She turned weakly towards her husband's voice before collapsing. I screamed. She continued vomiting; her airways could close any moment now. She'd come to me early, but this death would be so disgusting, so bland. He screamed—a cacophony of fear. I wouldn't get to see her skin stained with my sketches, I wouldn't get to see her begging for a life she never did and never could find meaning in. The sun continued to rise, dousing the room in a golden light, and yet the smell of premature death sliced through the rays. I heard a sharp intake, then silence.

I watched him cry over her dead body late into the day. His eyes were dry but red by the time the moon sat itself among the evening clouds. I'm sure he was infected by now, too. I'd come back to collect his body in due time, but I had no reason to stay around him. I heaved her soul into my arms. Heavy but beautiful. Feiyan, only you

were more beautiful alive than dead. I released her and watched her soul drift towards the moon, before exploding, showering the evening sky in light that it soon drank up. I could have painted something so much more beautiful with her, my muse. I rolled up the painting and walked away.

Part 2

I felt empty after that. Wandering through China, India, Turkey, Egypt, and Greece. I didn't know if I would ever be able to paint a beautiful death after that. None of my muses carried the same essence she did. The sheer willingness to not exist, and yet vehemently wanting with every fibre of their being to live and find a reason to exist anyway. All the black inks and paints I used were grey, polluted. My brushes started to fray.

It was the 190th millionth death. The last one I ever inflicted upon a human during my times of strength. I was walking through the streets of Lyon. The light reflecting off the seas of silk pierced the corners of my eyes. The sound of chatter and the occasional shatter of porcelain filled the air. In the midst of it all, a weaver apprentice: Strong spine crumpled, sweating, shining. He was so full of life and hope that it overflowed and spilt out of him. I remember his jet-black hair, light brown eyes, and brown skin, standing out in the pale sea. I needed to consume all the light buzzing in him. I had to. I remember rough dirt under my feet, my flesh peeling off my bones, and exhaustion from the summer heat as I breathed death into a muse, one last time.

I followed him into his master's home. One that was restless, anxiously picking at itself, flicking fragments of rocks and the occasional splinter of wood at us. Large windows, I suppose, helped those standing outside peer in and glance at the marvel of a man heaving the weight of France's silk industry, carefully feeding strands of thread into the wood, pulling, pulling, pulling until it spat out rivers of silk. He'd do this on and on until the moon fell out of the sky, in which he'd receive watery-carrot-soup. Bland, but it kept him alive, and somehow smiling until he fell asleep, and his day would start again.

Work for me was lazy, and so I'd spend most of the next day with him. Starting in the early morning, I sat next to the base of the loom, eyes closed, drinking up the small amounts of light that trickled out of him, leaving dull holes behind that would soon be bruised up, waiting to burst and trickle inside of him with a new fire, blood. Bleeding but never escaping. Until his skin turned black and he was reduced to a shrivelled-up, dehydrated man. But I'm getting too ahead of myself. At the time, he was still bronze, still shining, still bright.

He worked with another man, pulling and interweaving threads late into the afternoon before they were granted an hour break to eat lunch. The Maître and Madame had gone out. For what? No one asked, just grateful to be alone among other peasants. He sat with two others: one whom he called Marie and the other with whom he worked with: Yvon. They had Carrot soup again. His laughter filled the empty places Yvon and Marie left between their words; it seeped into their hearts and made them uncrumple and smoothen their faces just a bit. In the bit of cold left behind during the gaps between his laugh and their speeches, Marie's voice froze the air: "You'll leave us behind one day." Laughter dissipated, and I shivered. "Why do you say that?" "Don't be daft, I'm a mere maid, Yvon a drawboy. And one day you'll become a master weaver" Her voice cracked.

Yvon looked up. I still remember the bittersweetness that dripped out from his mouth.

"Why not join me then? Leave the Maître?"

"And your future wife, Loys? Would she be happy with me being there?" He looked her up and down before turning away and saying nothing, cheeks red, and yet frowning. "You could be...Never mind." He stood up and walked away. I followed. For the first time since we met, his shoulders fell to the embrace of the earth without any physical pressure. "Marie...did you really have to bring this up again?" She remained silent for a few seconds, staring at Loys' creased form. "My biggest regret in life was meeting him, and yet I still wake for him every day."

Loys. I toyed around with the name, throwing and flipping it around my tongue until I was satisfied. Sure. It suited him. It was acceptable. I drifted after him. He was once again next to the loom; he couldn't operate it alone, though. So he sat silently, reflectively. I smiled. He would be the one left behind, not them, so he needn't have worried. I took a sharpened nail and pierced the veil that obscured his vision, letting him see beyond and into the lonely world in which I reside. If I had time to paint the reactions of my muses seeing me for the first

time, I would. Beautiful paintings, they would be. So raw and human. How could one confront seeing into the eyes of their death after all?

“Am I finally going insane?” I chuckled at his voice.

Have you ever looked straight at the sun? It doesn't sting your eyes as much as people say it would. Or maybe it's because it's so bright and beautiful that the pain fades away, and the imprints of it in the back of your mind will feel shallow compared to its beauty, and yet you never want it to fade away, always wanting to keep the sun in the back of your mind, even if it's just a mirage. Soak up its light. Soak it up. Become the evening sky. Black. Consume the life and light of the sun. He was the sun.

Sweating in the alleyways. His black skin formed a safety net around him; even the most notorious of thieves in Lyon at the time steered away from him. He wasn't talking to me currently. I sighed, “Do you miss Marie?” He looked up, then away. “I can give you anything you want, just give in to me.” His eyes were set on the ground. I watched an ant walk by, and I squashed it under my fingers. Too small to bleed. “Why won't you give in?” “You took everything from me, why would I?”

“I can take her too; you can both join me together, would that make you feel more at ease?” “Why would you do that? Are you crazy? Take me if you have to, but leave her alone. Leave everyone else alone. Let this be the last thing I give to the world, your death.” I smiled.

The next day, I held him in my arms, his skin turning purple. The sky filled with blood, and as the sun set slowly, the final strands of light left his body. The air around me burned. I traced the writing I left on his skin, punctured holes that left blood oozing out. He stared glassy-eyed up at me, and the frown that painted his face was slowly softening. I felt footsteps approaching behind me. Marie and Yvon's shadows painted the floor in front of me. I heard a thud, and the air started to shake. Shrieks tore through the atmosphere. I rolled my canvas and extracted his soul. Marie held him; he seemed to come back to life as he shook in her arms. Any other day, I would have taken Marie and Yvon along with me, but I had a contract with Loys to fulfil.

I stood at the edge of the lake, and the water below me danced and sang. I took a step in. The chill sliced me apart, and so I took a deep breath before diving in. It was excruciating. Tears stung before floating around me. My throat burned. The water filled my eyes, and my vision blurred; my lungs constricted. I screamed one last time.

Prologue:

Am I so different from you? Your weak hand reaching for those you claim to love when you're contagious. Doesn't that show you think death is beautiful, too? Why else would you be so desperate to drag your loved ones down with you? Why else would you and so many others accept the death awaiting you? I guess I accepted my death, too.

Am I so different from you? Why do you kill with your tongue, lace it with poison, and slice the hearts of those around you? Why do you commit suicide, in trusting others when they will inevitably betray you over and over? Why do you still sharpen your blade and cut the threads of trust others have given you? And why do you yearn for love when you're contagious?

I know why I kill. Why do you kill?

The Red Princess of the Silk Road, or, the Death of All Evil

ESF Sha Tin College, Chiu, Jennifer – 16

You're not entirely sure if the bitter taste is the cinnabar, or if it could be the blood welling from her tongue. Blood doesn't taste bitter, anyway. You've had it in your mouth before, boiling with the sensation of silk—soft anger. Rather, everything feels cold now.

Cold—yes, that's the word to describe how she moves her hands away from your face, how the ornaments in her hair come to rest on your neck as she kneels on the cushion placed in front of her. Cold: the colour of tears that cascade vermilion red. Cold: the frost icing over your lungs as the strength leaves the fingers that were lightly touching your robe.

You suppose the other cold thing in the room is the skin of the corpse. Or what will be the skin of the corpse, once she stops breathing. Not everyone is lucky enough to keep heaven's favour forever. Full-body quakes brought on by the entrance of divine wrath, minds cracked and shattered like useless clay pots; these are all blunders humans make.

Except... now, you have to remember that she was once human too.

For that, she is sorry.

You know the best stories start with a contradiction. Here's one for the ears of the caravan merchants travelling under embroidered-star skies and anyone else who will listen.

Listen; a mortal goddess once cried herself to sleep to the sounds of a desert oasis.

She did this because she knew life would never be the same.

This usually begins with the advent of your birth. An unrelated question: How can the light of a single candle seems consequential in the face of billions of falling stars?

A disaster, cried the grassland-tinged winds and voices that intertwined with the scent of incense. *The calamitous birth of a demon-babe*, your mother once explained to a passing traveller, hook-nosed and with strange blue eyes, *often is preceded by broom-tails in the sky. And this one has given me far too much trouble. She's quite a naughty one!* You can remember her sunspot hands deftly tying packages of fragrant pears for the foreigner as she sighed at you. The foreigner smiled, one too wide for his face. *In my country, we make wishes on shooting stars. It's good luck...* What kind of laugh did she bark out here? The sound of everything was muffled, because you had already dashed away through the whirling skirts of bazaar tables.

The broom-tail. A demon's star. Warning from the heavens. The natural world order is doomed!

It isn't until you kneel at the feet of the prophetess years later that you realize maybe those marketplace whisperings were true.

After all, without even opening her mouth to address you, that star of misfortune has already ruined your life.

I don't enjoy talking to my supplicants, she tells you to the beat of a slow sunset. *There's always something so greedy, so hungry about the look in their eyes. Like if I weren't here to divine the outcome they wished for, they would chase me to the ends of the kingdom to beat the "correct" answer out of me.*

The seer is covered in local finery befitting a queen. You suppose she is, in a way, for even kings have walked a thousand miles to fall at her side for answers. There's a thick scent of burning bone and incense. You have the urge to sneeze.

Sometimes, I want to see if I could lie. But a leader does not lie. The gifted do not lie. I don't know if I even can, anymore.

"Wickedness is contagious, o' exalted one," you reply. "In fact, I'm lying right now."

The prophetess's head of night sky black swivels towards you, jet eyes widening with that eternal fear and surprise all of her lineage have known before.

A grin spreads across your face as you climb the steps to the raised dais and suddenly collapse onto the lap of the flinching prophetess, reclining on the platform. "Imagine how people will be shocked when they hear you'll be executed alongside me! The fruit-merchant's daughter, influencing the holy saintess's mind with terrible thoughts of having a good time! Tsk tsk, that weak-willed seer will be convicted of not understanding a good play on words, and then she'll be slain on other charges!"

The giggle that has been brewing for the past few minutes boils over when the fearful face of your friend hovering above you quickly shifts into indignant rage. Even her earrings, heavy and turquoise-beaded, tremble with remarkable character.

I'll execute you with my own two hands! Let's see... the punishment for a trusted confidante... for spreading libel about the Benevolent Shamaness, the All-Seeing Saintess of the Western Plains, and making a horrifically lame pun in her divine presence... a punishment of death by a thousand... pokes!

"You'll have to catch a wanted fugitive first!"

You've always been the faster runner out of the two of you. You both know this, so why do you slow as she chases you around the supplicant's room? Why do you allow her to tackle you in a facsimile of your days as children? Why, as the sun hits her face with its unnaturally endearing crimson grin, do you allow yourself to stay pinned there and screech through the torture that is her hands upon your skin?

Listen to yourself. You already know you would follow her into the mouth of hell.

Are you still here? Open your eyes. Not the ones you use for the trivial things on this mortal plane.

Somewhere, stretching across the leaf-studded mountains only goats and sheep dare cross, is the lingering brush of something untold. There have been infinite possibilities on this route, but you need only to pay attention to this one.

After all, any story requires true sacrifice.

You don't realize just how much trouble you're in until the visions start.

They're not yours, of course. For all the anguish and all the vivid description, they may as well be yours, fireworks set off far too early with blue-hot sparks dancing in your face.

You drowned in this one, you hear from your back as willowy arms warp around you, like you could flit away on butterfly wings. Let me hold you so you don't run back to that lake.

It's a dull knife of pleasure, knowing that you love her best when she fears losing you so badly.

I saw three old ghosts on camels, walking towards us with the writings of a holy man from a city built on water. Sometimes, the things she sees do not frighten, but what can you do except reply with a laugh? "Doesn't sound too stable. Well, at least that's three less people they need to worry about when the place floods."

I saw a great invasion, of spilt blood and trees burning from bones and sulphur that spread like oil. When I turned and saw the face of the man behind it all, he remarked that you above wheel-height and ordered my head cut down to size. I screamed and screamed, but they only laughed at me and— and then I woke up. After this vision she starts sleeping on her throne, surrounded by bowls of water. You tell her you'll fight off any barbarians as long as she's close to you.

She doesn't leave your bed for a week.

I saw the faces of our citizens grime-streaked and bruised, led one by one with ropes on their wrists to a place farther than any of us know, to serve and be whipped by cruel masters 'til the end of their days. With this, she flinches at the flesh-and-blood sight of the innocent, smiling faces who gather under her balcony.

The victor, dressed in the black robes of justice, is a tyrant and conqueror. He will swallow the tears of other states, before ripping asunder the last of his own flesh. Now her eyes grow wide, pinpoint black in a shallow sea of deep honey. Now the gates shut upon the outside world. Now, the sconces emit only smoke and not cleansing flame; the fire long gone like the sea of voices that once echoed in anticipation in these halls.

Apples and pears fall from the trees; persimmons and grapes turn into mush in the valleys.

The cries of the people turn from concerned to wrathful; those faraway enemies and rivals draw ever closer.

Still—the palace compound remains still, touched only by the whipping sandstorms.

"Your holiness, the citizens and dignitaries have waited for you for months. They need their fears assuaged, their minds put to re—"

From her darkened throne (stone now, not wood; the old one had rotted away in a sudden winter chill), the shamaness observes you through the shadows of her clinging hair.

It's only now you realize that her power comes not from mere lines of succession, nor the records and practices of all her ancestors. There's something ancient, something altogether divine and cursed in the words she speaks.

Rest? I've not had a rest for a thousand years. I saw all the way back to the first humans, to Nüwa's scaly fingers shaping us out of mud, to the splitting of heaven and earth, to the great nothingness that came before and will come after.

The seer rises from her dais, clinking silver and turquoise a cacophonous offering to sound in the empty chamber.

I have seen the anger of countless souls, the injustice of those who can barely be called living souls. I saw the edge of all human knowledge— from great bombs of destruction, to missiles, to men who reached the moon, how best to subjugate a people, how to destroy somebody's hopes and dreams— and the great nothingness beyond.

How long her fingernails have gotten. You can barely notice the marks of pink spreading on your skin. Cat-scratches. Really, a reflex borne of desperation.

*And I will not find rest, not even when my hun and po free themselves from the fury of the sound in my body.
Not till every star in the Universe wakes and wails in pain, the way I have.*

She's still human, yes. But not in the way you are. Not in the way anyone except the two of you can be.

This is the last thing you realize before ascending the grand staircase to the open window, as you watch her retreat into herself. And now, you're sure that whilst you gaze upon the sparse lamps and torches that light the faces of the crows, she's nursing a cup of mysterious liquor tinged with the taste of something astringent.

A breath. You've not seen the sunlight in weeks. You tell yourself that she'll get better. And when she gets better, she'll adore you with her whole heart, just as the praying masses adore her prophecies.

"Unfortunately, her grace is still absent with illness. She's done what she can and has worked hard to decipher the *longgu*, and entrusted me with relaying the truth to her beloved country."

The courtyard below is lit with weak orange. The scent of mountain lotus fills the air on this cold night; an auspicious sign for the blasphemer. The holy fox-faced, the sword of the divine— that's what you are, what you've become. A tremulous breath hangs in the atmosphere like frost waiting to melt.

It feels wrong, standing where she should stand, smiling in the place where she used to smile. Your righteous goal will absolve you, soon enough. These are false prophecies, but their devotion has never been untrue, nor has it wavered since that first lie.

"A recent cold front has come from the North; her holiness suspects this may be the harbinger of good fortunes once the chill subsides. It is a favourable year for us. She forecasts bountiful harvests... spring brings miracles, the barren becoming fertile..."

Even the blind know better not to forsake the gods who have cursed them.

A foolish child may fall and scrape his knees once, but he will learn not to trip over the sprawling roots of a tree like this again.

You know this. Why are your knees still so raw?

The Court of Heaven has a sense of dramatism, you'll give them that.

So that black-robed conqueror did come in the end. So he denounced your shamaness as a *yao* given manlike form. So he ordered the scorching of your sandstone palace in the desert.

Even the horses seem darkened. Perhaps they have been burnt by true fire. Their teeth gnash like grindstones as their riders circle you, spears and red plumes the colour of blood.

You suppose this must be a godly approximation of punishment— an empty excuse built on the hollow prayers of heretics. Of course it goes without saying that the people abandoned you long ago; their fates are muddled, cloudy to the two of you now.

It's a long line down to Diyu, one that spans the breadth of the plains beyond. The unfaithful, the unwilling, the uncaring... all should be grateful you've saved them the twenty-odd years waiting for the release of death! For who could consider a life well lived without your saintess, she who grins like the ruby sun nestling into golden dunes? She, who makes the light filter through clouds and reflect upon her chalice of lambs-blood? She, whose voice rings clear and true like the call of a bleating sheep through the mountains?

You've never been the pleading sort, and these are the last people you want to plead with. A tongue is a tongue, however, and could be cut out at any moment. knife is a knife, and could be placed between the hollow of your heart at any second

A child like you saw the curvature of the Earth and determined that the road extended far further than anything we have known. This is not because the world is designed to be beautiful, nor because it is ugly beyond relief. The world is not enough. The horizon is too vast for a tragedy like this.

Could it ever be a tragedy, to hear that ghost of a laugh, bitter with the taste of forgotten love? To see her raise that treacherous cup and gaze longingly through you, peeling you back like the skin of a fruit?

They say the thing about tragedies is that they play themselves out, over and over on the same tired stage.

So this must be one, because you can never stop yourself from running towards her.

And you know too that she'll never be able to silence that last, "I love you."

Once upon a time, in all good stories, ones whispered under nights of embroidered stars with camels and caravans surrounding a merry bonfire, the goddess would be born a mortal.

That distant land, now distant to the mortals of this new age at least... soon it shall rise again, twining through the lips of modern scholars. However long it takes, your wandering spirit will one day see the face of your beloved again. Perhaps by a different name. Perhaps by a different soul. After all, the gods make sure nothing is certain.

She is more certain to you than any god. Both these things are true.

Perhaps it will be millenia before anyone finds her again. But you'll be damned if they don't find you two together, bodies intertwined in the same burial pit like sleeping children.

You hope the rest is easy.

Tales on the Silk Roads

International Christian School, Ho, Charlie Lui – 16

Tearing through the barren frontier is an army of a hundred men journeying westward. It is a marvellous yet ironic sight because it is the presence of an achingly human pulse in a basin far too desolate to inhabit signs of life. The plain is soft and wet, and the lime-yellow grass stretches into an endless expanse. The soldiers are weary from weeks of treacherous marching, yet they persist without fail. It is something to disregard the extent of one's mental and physical fortitude, but to betray the emperor's orders is unthinkable. An imperial soldier's life hinges on that of the celestial emperor's—to be cherished, praised, or deemed worthy by the emperor is the ultimate goal. Thus, it is without a doubt that the chosen one who locates the 'heavenly horses' supposedly bred in the valleys of Ferghana would achieve something far greater than any trivial luxury—namely, the emperor's acknowledgement. Lullabies are fictitious for a reason, but perhaps tonight, the soldiers can rest together soundly on this dream, just to let it bear weight a little longer.

Across the frontier, a whistling soldier catches sight of a shell-pink flower, waving idly and lonesome behind the dew-dappled weed only a few feet away. It is a pentamerous flower, flushed with vein-crimson—a virgin beauty amidst the barren landscape. The soldier hesitates and lifts his hand almost imperceptibly. Perhaps he can save it as a present for his daughter back home. Perhaps she would hold the flower up to her ear and smile with innocuous delight, a simple joy that a father can only wish for his young. But the soldier looks back at his outstretched palm, coarse hands etched in grime, and shakes the thought away as if it were a futile, fleeting memory, shifting his gaze to the army ahead. There is no telling by the stars whether the voyage will succeed or if the men will make it out alive. Within the safe haven of the Chinese empire, survival is cradled and nurtured like fruit from the trees. But beyond the empire's walls, survival is uncertain; it oscillates on the brink of fate and the gods, teeter-tottering mercilessly until the fruit rots like a cavity boring into itself. This landscape is an endless vineyard of cruelty, especially for imperial soldiery. And beauty in the eye of the beholder, particularly in the vast territory of the Northern barbarians, is never to be sustained, let alone ferment; rather, it is surely to be hunted, sunken into, and torn apart without mercy.

One can only cradle hope for a certain period of time. Similar to a fire, hope burns brightest at its peak, yet falters moments later, flickering weakly and inevitably extinguished by the cyclical nature of time. All it can do for now is exist behind the scenes of ordinary life, scavenging in traces of charred soot that are hastily covered up by members of the peasantry. But perhaps, just perhaps, there is a flame that still lingers, one that persists for more than a decade, and it is no secret that all it takes is for one ignition to spark a wildfire. It is not long before the latest word in the imperial capital would be spread in hushed tones among the women rinsing garments by the river or among the gentry chatting idly outside the wards. Zhang Qian, the presumed-deceased imperial envoy, diplomat, and leader of the decade-long expedition to Ferghana, had miraculously survived the once-deemed 'hopeless' voyage, confirmed the existence of the heavenly horses, and returned to the imperial capital with only one remaining companion by his side. The tales Zhang Qian spoke of in the court were wondrous and were woven in a folk-like quality; the emperor listened keenly as he laced together fabulous, faraway empires such as 'Persia' and 'India', places that the court diligently noted but didn't fully comprehend. But beyond the surface of the leader's tales, the emperor, who had been listening with great intent, had finally discovered a root, a root that trailed and sparked into a beautiful flame, a scorching flame that burned hot-white and burned brighter than anything else: the potential of trade with the West. The emperor would then reach out and pull the root with all his might, because the heat is meaningless when the flame is prosperous. And amidst the acrid smoke that billows out would lie the foundations for a new route, a journey birthed from the spirit of determination and the beautiful pursuit of glory, known otherwise as the Silk Roads.

★ ★ ★

There is a certain rhythm that seeps into a world when it is set ablaze with foreign language. It is a rhythm that unconsciously penetrates a person's mother tongue and reveals itself in vowels and consonants unbeknownst to the merchant when he bargains deftly at the bazaars. It is a rhythm that cannot help but flourish in a market

bustling with the rampant yells of street vendors and the clatter of camel hooves, a cacophony of entwined cultures because it is the rhythm of harmony—not through similarity but through the beauty of difference. The flame that ignited centuries ago now burns with ease. The land is much different now, and so are the people—with every passing day, merchants on caravans from the West enter the imperial capital of Chang'an, carrying wondrous luxuries like ivory and fur that gleam within the eyes of the Chinese elites. China's most desired commodity, silk, spun from silkworm cocoons, was exchanged in return for such Western items.

Farther along the road and away from the bazaar lies a Buddhist monk, ethnically Sogdian and in his late twenties, standing idly at a temple entrance. There is an almost surreal tranquility that the temple brings—it is quite different in comparison to the lively and bustling markets ahead. The monk observes his surroundings with innocuous interest, noticing the way the sunlight bathes the temple in tangerine-yellow light, signaling the sun's descent, and the way the soft murmurs of foreign language reverberate in the successive courtyards. The monk looks down at the ground and clutches his palms together in hope. He can only hope that Xuánzàng, his mentor, who was on a pilgrimage to India to obtain authentic Buddhist scriptures, can return home safely. There is great promise that lies in Western trade, and he can only hope that his faith promises the same.

★ ★ ★

Far along the route is a trembling man, ethnically Chinese and no more than fifty-three years of age, lying on the ground of his quarters. It is a windless night, and the air is crisp and dry. The lamps outside crackle with heat, but there is no warmth or laughter in the city of Turfan; rather, there is a pervasive feeling of doom that seems to sink its teeth into the land itself tonight. The man's eyes are bloodshot with restlessness, and his tongue is heavy from coughing and incessant prayers. He pries his eyelids shut as he fiddles anxiously with a merchant's coin in the palm of his hand, rolling it around until his palm is numb because he can no longer bear the feeling of his wife heaving with sickness beside him.

Wēn yì, or 'the great disease' as they called it, was a plague that had descended upon the Western lands centuries after the peak of trade and had wormed itself eastward into the caravan routes, rupturing the arteries of the land as if it were a parasite, a despicable, predatory entity. A few weeks prior, the man had urged his children to flee Turfan with cloths on their mouths, because their beautiful home was dying and their lives were a fragile, fleeting thing. The man had stayed behind to take care of his wife, who was among the first in the area to fall ill. People around him criticized his actions, but he paid no attention. As a merchant, life on the road was a prosperous but challenging commitment that meant years of absence from home, separation from his wife and children, and familial relationships that thinned across distance, narrowly surviving on crumpled letters sent back home that were often months-old, hastily written, and stained with traces of foreign wine and tomfoolery as they were cradled by innocent hands that simply missed their father's touch. Thus, the man's presence and loyalty tonight are the most he can do to make up for his children's longing, his wife's sorrow, and everything that he owes to his family that caused irreplaceable hurt.

The man leans over and casts a weary glance at his wife beside him. Her fingertips and toes are plump and blackened, and her chest heaves rapidly with blood trickling down the sides of her mouth and nose. His wife can no longer speak, but the silence is all that there needs to be, because there is an encroaching, quiet ache that permeates the air when a soul leaves too soon, especially when the soul is loved. So the man reaches out and takes her hand, intertwining it with his own tightly, because it is a sight too final to ever truly forget.

★ ★ ★

Further down south and many centuries later, there is a man, ethnically Lao and in his late thirties, hunched underneath the glaring sun as sweat beads down his neck. A torque wrench is wrapped tightly in his fist as he whistles under his breath, methodically adjusting the line of bolts. The air is filled with the sound of buzzing generator hums and the *pings* of hammering on the distant train tracks. After the man finishes his duty, he stands up slowly and lets out a satisfied groan, shaking his head in relief as he admires his work on the tracks.

The railway he is working on does not trace a new path, but rather follows an ancient one. The ‘New Silk Road’, the people call it. *Gone with the old, in with the new.* The man’s calluses have seen the destruction of old and the construction of new. But perhaps, this is something different. There is something different about walking on a path that his very ancestors trekked on. One that he grew up hearing about in family gatherings and read about in textbooks. And when the man closes his eyes, he can almost feel the buzz, the magnificent energy that characterized the Silk Roads, the chatter and excitement over cross-cultural exchange that would last for many lifetimes, that would have an impact on him today. The man looks down on the tracks, tracing the lines that once connected caravans from Central Asia, Africa, and Europe all the way to the Chinese empire. The man smiles. *The old becomes new.*

The man shifts his gaze from the tracks, and almost instantly, he spots a flower growing a few feet away. The flower is cross-shaped with a vermillion hue and wavers idly amongst the bushes, minding its own business as it seems to drink in the intense, tantalizing heat of the afternoon sun. It is a beautiful thing. Perhaps he can give it to his daughter, because her favorite color is red. Perhaps it would look pretty behind her ear. It is her birthday tomorrow, and the man and his wife had saved up their earnings to purchase a beautiful crimson dress spun with authentic silk from the local mall as her birthday gift. He hesitates for a moment, feeling rather foolish, but eventually decides to pluck the flower.

The man reaches out and lightly tears the flower from the crumbly soil, holding the plant with improbable tenderness in his calloused, leathery palms, textured and hardened from years of hard labor. It is almost a comical sight—a man with thick hands holding such a little plant. Shaking away the thought with a bashful smile, he takes the flower by its stem and gently places it into his pocket, ensuring that the petals won’t crease. He smiles because his daughter has something to look forward to tonight, and he smiles because he has decided to bring it back home.

The Kingdom of None

International Christian School, Leung, Lap Yan Leanne – 16

A horde of travelers rode their camels across the barren terrain, with goods that could turn a beggar into an aristocrat strapped to their weary backs. They came back and forth, some wearing different garments than others, speaking in different tongues, but they always came back. Through the vast desert to the mountains, they trekked; it was this path they used to bring honor and wealth to their country. It was *my* path they treasured and sought out. The familiar sound of hooves trotting along sandy roads that stretched endlessly was like music to my ears; an old Sogdian merchant and his trusty steed made their trek, this time with Ferghana horses instead of silk from the east. The way he trekked from one foot to another, to the rhythm of his breath, to the way he wrinkled his nose at a sudden gust of wind, and the tune he hummed to his camel, it was all committed in my memory, as was all other veteran travelers that took this road. The merchant made his trail he would continue to make until his last breath, while a phantom coin made its way into my coffer of power and glory.

The amount of silk and porcelain transported from one end to another were countless like the grains of sand along the path they traveled, the very grains that helped them improve their status in society. With all this help I offer, surely one should erect a statue in my honor? After all, I am the reason connectivity exists between the West and the East; I am the reason why cultures diffuse and why merchants become revered in their cities.

My attention jerked towards a new set of footsteps thudding against the Gobi. My lips curled when I realized it was a new traveler. A young merchant from Chang'an, hand gripped around the leash of his steed. The goods were wrapped around the poor camel's back by several layers of rope; someone was terrified of losing their only chance of making this trek worth it. How adorable. With a flick of a hand, a gust of wind surged from his back, propelling him with more comfort in the scorching sandy terrain. He could be another regular. Another trophy to add to my ever-expanding collection.

Chatter amongst scholars of different origins floated towards my ears from those caravanserais: Persian and Chinese scholars discussed and debated about the stars or numbers, or spoke with great passion about the deity they centered their society around. Some even handed each other gifts like it was a time of celebration. And all of it was possible through *me*. As I passed through a bustling caravanserai, a snippet of a conversation floated to my ear.

"What is this you are carrying?" A scholar pointed at the rolled-up papers in a Tang scholar's hand as they sat across from each other in a caravanserai.

"Oh, these are translated works from the Ancient Greeks about the stars."

"The stars?"

"Yes," the scholar unfurled the works, fingers pointing at charts and texts as he rambled on about the findings from the people before them. All the while, the scholar across from him listened, asking questions or adding insight from his own region. Soon, many others joined, and the conversation echoed through the inn until the night. The next day, all scholars from different walks of life and regions left the caravanserai, enlightened with new knowledge, eager to share with their people. And all of that was possible through *me*.

I sneered at my brother, the one who championed sea trade in the Indian Ocean. He monitored the ships carrying *common* and fruitless commodities one could find in their backyard, while *I* oversaw the transport of luxury commodities that the richest vied to display and the poor vied to sell to survive. Any arguments from my brother fell on deaf ears; why should one care if goods were far more efficient, affordable, and safer by sea, when *profit* came knocking on the merchant's houses who traveled on *my* road?

The sounds of annoyance and frustration from these mortals brought a smile to my face as I sent a sandstorm to play in their ports. All their goods were probably ruined, and ships delayed or, even better, destroyed. "Let's see you try and protect that." I chortled.

In fact, people have sought to keep me alive and well. Genghis Khan and his descendants protected my path and enhanced its ability to provide, and *profit* flourished. I lived in luxury as much as the merchants who sold their country's goods. People adored me. People *needed* me. I was the only thing keeping Eurasia connected via land that provided massive rewards with... minimal harm. Another coin falls into my pitless coffer when a traveler and their steed traverses the road, further investing into my power and might as the Road of All Roads. For decades, this rhythm that the travelers and I danced to was unbreakable. Until that fateful day.

Travelers visited like any ordinary day. Strange. Vermin and fleas swarmed them, unbeknownst to these feeble-minded travelers. No matter, all it shows is that pests adore and desire to experience the luxury and grandeur of my road.

Those travelers never returned. They must be staying in the city for a while. Perhaps migrated there. Surely any day will come when they will make their journey on my road again.

Another regular hoard of Persian merchants came. They were much more slender in build, a weary yet determined look plastered on their face. There were usually four that traveled together, but only two went on this journey. My path, crafted from thousands of merchants, grew cold. Abandoned by the people who discovered my magnificence. No. Perhaps they have retired.

The caravanserais went silent. One of the owners was slumped over, their corpse being the only resident in that now abandoned inn. Another owner had set up a sign in front of the inn. Closed? *Closed?* That owner had the same sickly look that plagued other travelers' faces. They all looked like Death was knocking at their door. A few days later, that owner also became the only resident in that caravanserai.

Another band of travelers. I watched the sick-ridden man plead with his horse, begging the animal to move faster and pull the cart of soon-to-be corpses attached to them. The driver, with the same weary expression, gripped the leash as firmly as his strength allowed him to.

I whispered the same words of pleading, but formed a different prayer instead. "Please... make it to the next stop. Make it to the next city." I did not wish for them to make it to the next city to make money and fuel my pride. I prayed they would make it to prove my road was still worth taking.

I reached out to the horse, straining to pull the cart that clashed with the sand. "Go on. Keep moving." A flick of my wrist and a gust of wind carried the cart as far as the horse could move.

A hoof in front of another. A prayer from the driver's lips.

I stared at the horse that took its eternal sleep, and the driver joined his steed, along with his family that had left the plane long since the journey began. I stared as sand covered the corpse, as if it never existed. I stared at the desert that once brought me fortune, and now only brings me corpses. I could only smell death when I used to be able to smell the tang of copper.

A decade passed before another band of travelers came with their horses. Instead of luxury goods being transported, only *common* goods were strapped to the back. I squinted my eyes and took a closer look at these travelers. They weren't merchants. Desperate citizens trying to escape a fate I dare not face.

"Just a little further," One of the travelers coughed, hunching over to relieve the itch in his throat. I widened my eyes, a chill passing through my spine. With a flick of my wrist, a gust of wind blew that traveler over, separating him and the poison he spat out away from the other travelers whose fate has not been written yet.

"Are you alright?" One of his companions rushed over to him, only to be blown away by another gust of wind. No. They were not getting sick. Death would not write their stories. Death would not determine the fate of my legacy. No, I was going to be the road that brought fortune and luxury to cities that used me, *not* the road that would be the Grim Reaper collecting its toll.

Those travelers never made it past the Taklaman. I could hear Death laughing in my head.

Since those travelers, none have come. The only sound that remained was of tumbleweeds being led by the wind across the barren lands. No more sounds of hooves pulling themselves up a mountain came to my ears.

For once, it was quiet.

I gritted my teeth, glaring at both the hubs residing in the west and the east as I hollered. "You fools! You dare leave?! I am the road that made you grow, I am the road that you *need* to grow! You cannot be done with me, you shall *not* be done with me! Send your men, send your horses! You can travel this road, you *will* travel this road!"

My cries echoed through the barren terrain, my only audience being the untrampled grains of sand. Somewhere, the roof of a caravanserai crumbled. A sand dune swallowed a worn-out path made by thousands of merchants. I stood there like a frozen statue, realization cementing the future I refused to play out.

They abandoned me.

The ones who once *used* my road to grow.

The ones who once *relied* on my road to grow.

They abandoned me.

"You cannot abandon me," I whisper into the void. "You need me... You must! How else will you transport your goods? How else will you thrive? You cannot! You cannot... can... can you?"

No response. Not even my brother in the south responded. Simply watching. Pitying.

"Pax Mongolica, you swore to protect me! Where are you now?!"

The corpses infected with buboes did not answer.

They abandoned me.

And I was all alone.

I stood like a knight at a post, refusing to abandon my duty. This vast hollow terrain was once *my* territory. My kingdom that *invaders* used for their own benefit. "I am the one who made you who you are!" I sneered, laughing maniacally into the audience of none. "Bow down before me!"

This mirage echoed through the deserts and the mountains, of a prideful sneer emboldened even as the body was crippled, no longer useful. Inadequate.

The dust and sand settled, while the waves and winds roared. People still talked about the stars and numbers. Not because of me anymore. I was of no service.

The tune... what was that tune? I was desperate to recall the sound of the Sogdian merchant's tune. How did it go? I listened to it regularly. I knew it. I *knew* it. The tune he used to calm and entertain his camel. I know that tune. I can remember it. I *can* remember it.

I fell to my knees, hands digging into the grains of sand that mocked me. I forgot that tune. And the joyful conversations of enlightenment and diffusion that occurred in those houses. All gone. All leaving me. Just like those merchants.

There I lay in my kingdom of none, the kingdom that *served* all yet was never served. My mirage echoed for no one to hear, for no one to remember the glory and the *use* I brought to Eurasia. All that remained was boundless and bare lands, and the road that was no longer taken.

An invasive, jarring drill violated the once peaceful grounds of the road, drawing me out of my slumber. The sound did not cease, but rather amplified. What was happening? I cringed at the distinct, overwhelming scent of metal instead of the traditional desert breeze. The same drilling sound erupted again, vibrating each grain of sand and hammering in my head. That wasn't the sound of a merchant's bell. No... it was much shriller. Irritating. What was happening? The warm and dull light of a campfire that brought a sense of warmth and camaraderie was replaced by a sterile, blinding spark of light that lit up the whole road. On top of all of that, chatter and footsteps echoed. People were here. Their faces were not grey nor sullen, and their builds neither slim nor crooked. *Healthy* people were here. On my road...hammering plates that glistened in the sunlight onto pillar after pillar, forming a highway made of inorganic metals. I snorted at that thought. The road existed, paved by travelers...travelers centuries ago.

Men with foreign tools were able to drill a hole through a mountain, where I witnessed travelers risk their lives to travel around; in fact, their corpses were not too far off from another metal pillar and a road with lines built on top. These men carried on with their task with an air of confidence and pragmatism, unlike merchants who were always checking behind their backs and carrying daggers with them on their camels. These men also traveled on a moving metal box, with circular plates spinning along with those lines from earlier. These metal boxes allowed the men to travel from one place to another in an hour, when it would have taken a merchant a day to do so.

Time had slipped through the cracks of what remained of me. Time had caused the crumbling of my empire. But it was not entirely cruel. Time was merciful. Time had brought the future generation to me. People swarmed the roads that were once considered dangerous and arduous to travel. Enhanced it with the technology of their time. Foreigners traveled all around the world just to admire the newfound technology that was based on me, as organizations cultivated archives that told my story and of my glory when I used to rule the world.

They remembered me.

Another metal box zipped across the tracks on these newly built pillars. They did not carry the luxury goods I was familiar with, but they still carried commodities that were considered important. Information. Commerce. Connection. Where my empire used to rule, another had been built in my honor.

They remembered me.

I took a deep breath, watching like a silent sentinel over this new system, ensuring its success. This new legacy would carry on and act as my second chance in this new time. A halfhearted smile stretched across my face as I watched another batch be shipped from the east all the way to the west. For they had remembered my

purpose and reinvigorated my duty as an overseer of exchange and prosperity, yet they had removed memories that flooded back after centuries. There would be no more stories around the campfire. There would be no more sharing of discoveries in caravanserais. There would be no more hooves trotting on sandy expanses or rocky terrain. Nothing but the sound of metal boxes flying from the west to the east and vice versa, carrying goods that made each party stronger.

Regardless, they still remembered me.

They still remembered the glory I could bring.

They had remembered my purpose but left my soul.

Yet, they have remembered me.

Second Life

International Christian School, Wu, Yi Ting Clover – 17

The Silk Roads—13th Century

The Silk Roads were a series of vast trade routes connecting countries across Asia and Europe. These roads not only carried precious silks and spices but also religions, cultures, and languages. On the road stretching between Kashgar and Merv, Li Wei, a young silk merchant, braved the stifling dunes and treacherous roads in pursuit of faraway lands. With each wavering step in the unknown textures of nature—complete with the heat of the day and the cold of the night—he only had one thing in mind: his destination. Even through all of the trials and tribulations he had to endure over the journey, it was all worth it in order to trade and set foot on new lands. The grueling journey taught him to persevere. Through ever-changing circumstances and weather conditions, he battled his way to reach Merv.

When Li Wei finally arrived in Merv after enduring perilous mountains and endless deserts, he was greeted with sights he had never set eyes on before. The city was filled with a buzz he had yet to experience; towering mosques pierced the sky, and pungent spices wafted through the air. Vibrant scenes filled his vision—carefully crafted buildings with the most intricate stone carvings were spread out over the horizon, and rich textiles in every color of the rainbow were draped over market stalls, fluttering in the breeze. Lugging his camel to the caravanseraï for the night, he felt a weight lift from his shoulders as everything he had worked for was about to be accomplished. A symphony of languages reached his ears the moment he stepped into the inn, and he was sucked into a blend of various cultures. People in the inn were resting and chatting, sharing each other's cultures and stories about their travels.

Embracing the gathering with eyes alight and heart ablaze, he was ready to meet the merchant with whom he would trade his fine silks. To his great surprise, there was someone else standing next to the merchant. A girl with hair as bright as the sun and glittering eyes was standing next to him, piquing Li Wei's interest—every single aspect of her seemed to catch the light—it was as if the sun was a sunflower and she became the sun. When he set his eyes on her, everything else seemed to fade—even the goal he had long sought after. He quickly exchanged his silk with the merchant, acquiring luxury textiles and meticulously made crafts in return. Then, Li Wei began hammering him with questions. After finding out that she was his daughter, Yasmin, and that she was there because she wanted to learn more about the world, so much so that she learned the language of Kashgar, he was even more certain that he was intrigued and mesmerized by her. In the rest of his days at Merv, he found a way to take Yasmin out every day, conversing and exploring the city. They travelled through the bustling city filled with life, exchanging stories about the places they had been to. As she also wanted to explore the world, dreaming of distant lands beyond Merv, Li Wei was granted permission to bring Yasmin back to Kashgar with him because they had fallen in love. Her father blessed their union, urging Li Wei to take care of Yasmin.

On the journey back, they exchanged stories with the loudest laughs and cherished each other's company. He shared tales of the vivid scenery in Kashgar, its presence inhabited by mountains and lush plains. She shared about her life back in Merv—how supportive her family was and how stuck she felt living in one place her whole life. Li Wei noticed every detail about her. Looking at her with a gaze of melted honey, he noticed how she would tuck her hair behind her right ear whenever she laughed and how she would scrunch her nose whenever she was nervous. He was willing to do whatever it took to protect her. Since the first time they met, he already knew that she was the one he wanted to spend the rest of his life with.

When they stopped under the pitch-black sky full of stars, Li Wei was beginning to worry because there was no caravanseraï nearby. The silence of their surroundings amplified all sound. Suddenly, the sound of a rustling leaf filled the air; chills went down his spine. Without hesitation, he quickly took Yasmin into his arms and placed her behind him, making sure that she was shrouded. It wasn't until he heard another sound that he realized that something was really wrong. Just then, his worst fear came to life: a group of malignant bandits emerged from the shadows, ready to take lives for the sake of gold. Li Wei knew he was about to spend the last seconds of his life with the person he loved; it was the only thing he could take comfort in. One swift move from a slash of steel reflected in the moonlight led to pools of warm red dripping down Li Wei's body. They hit

Yasmin too, the two of them hitting the floor in a thud, their blood intertwined on the muddy terrain. A single tear from Yasmin landed on Li Wei's chest as he kissed her left cheek with the remaining strength he had, holding her close even in his final moments.

"No matter what it takes, I will meet you in my next life."

"I'm looking forward to meeting you again."

Shanghai—21st Century

Under the sky that never seems to reach black, illuminated by the perpetual glow of neon lights and noisy billboards, Li Wen Jun walked along the reflections of dazzling skyscrapers in the Shanghai Bund. Due to the revival of the "Silk Roads," his recent project at work involved communication with Turkmenistan, researching the ancient city of Merv. He was puzzled about a colleague at work. Something about the new translator, Jasmine, was unsettling, familiar, even. It was as if he had seen her before and knew her from a long time ago. She had glittering eyes and hair as bright as the sun, with a mole on her left cheek. The second he laid eyes on her, he felt a connection, wanting to know more about her. A wave of *déjà vu* washed over him; it was as if they had met before, as if there was an invisible string tied between them. The next day, he decided to meet up with her to discuss the project, but he had an ulterior motive: finding out exactly who she was and why she elicited nostalgia within him.

After work, they walked to a dessert shop near the office, named *jǐǔbié chóngrěng*—to meet again after a long period of separation. Opening the door for her, he scanned the QR code on the table and ordered a *tangyuan*, and she ordered a bowl of *niangao*. After discussing details about work, they went through a rollercoaster of topics. They found common interests in travelling and touched on topics ranging from food to philosophy. It was as if he could talk about any topic in the world with her—even one he had zero interest in—and he would still be content and happy. Even though he had just met her, he knew deep down inside that he could be with her forever. Throughout the night, waves of familiarity knocked them down. He noticed how she would tuck her hair behind her right ear whenever she laughed and how she would scrunch her nose whenever there were difficulties at work. He couldn't take his eyes off of her all night; he wasn't only mesmerized by her outward appearance, but the sense of belonging he felt in her presence and her comforting personality kept his eyes locked on her.

After the meal, a scene abruptly flashed through his mind of a girl on a carriage of sorts, maybe a caravanserai, laughing, then tucking her hair—but the face was blurry. Another scene appeared where there was a girl on the floor, and he kissed her left cheek. Meanwhile, Jasmine felt a sense of security around Li Wen Jun that she had never felt before; it was as if she had returned home, not to a physical place, but to a place of the heart. She knew something was different about him; something about her reaction and feelings when they were together was something new. No other person had made her feel this way before. Months of getting to know each other led to more relived memories; he wanted to spend each waking moment with her. They spent at least one day a week outside of work in each other's companionship, going on walks, trying new restaurants, and watching movies. With every smile, each unnoticed look, each slight touch, they became more curious, eager, and willing to spend time with each other. The messages sent were a cry for attention, a desire for the other person to sacrifice their time and give it to them, knowing that they would gladly do so. Wen Jun associated everything he did in his everyday life with her; whether he was listening to music or eating food, her face would dominate his mind.

One day after work, Wen Jun was walking Jasmine back home. As he listened to the sound of blaring horns in the distance, complete with rustling leaves in the Shanghai autumn, he reminisced about the memories they had together over the past couple of months. Over time, he realized that her presence in his life was unchangeable. As more memories of the past flooded his mind, he slowly understood that they were truly meant to be together. Not just in this life, but at every point in time when a piece of him was missing, she would be the one to fill it—past, present, and future. Fate was a strange thing—it liked to push people apart, then pull them

back together—no matter the timeline. Though he was grateful that it always brought him back to the person he loved the most. He remembered those days on the Silk Roads like yesterday and never wanted them to slip away. They were a testament to the time they lived together and struck him deeply. He watched videos on reincarnation, and one thing that stuck with him was that people would have moles where their past lover kissed them—Jasmine had a mole on her left cheek, exactly where he kissed the blurry figure.

He stopped to a halt, then turned his head around, staring at Jasmine intently, asking, “Do you believe in a second life?”

Her face froze into shock. Slowly, warmth spread through her body, and tears welled in her eyes.

“No, not until I met you.”

Tears gushed down their faces, and Li Wen Jun ran like never before and twirled Jasmine around.

“I told you I would meet you again.”

“I loved meeting you again.”

Where the Judge meets the Lion

Singapore International School, Kwong, Cheuk Yin – 17

This story is set in the Greco-Bactrian Kingdom, or Bactria, a kingdom founded by the descendants of Alexander in the Central Asian steppe. In a hypothetical world where the Han Dynasty comes into further contact with this kingdom which lies along the Silk Road, cultural collision becomes inevitable. This story imagines that collision escalating into cooperation through a common enemy, forging an alliance that combines Greek phalanx tactics, Chinese crossbows, and Parthian cavalry into something greater than any single civilization could achieve alone.

Millet, millet, millet, and more millet. I try to imagine my ancestors watching from engraved stone tablets atop the faraway crest of mountains, or my son's laughter rippling through the evening smoke, where we once again cook our subsistence crop in as many ways the coarse grain would allow itself to be heated and molded. Millet soup, raw millet, millet bread, the possibilities were endless. Waking up at dawn and watching steam rise from a pot of millet stew, I saw the characteristic undulating figures of horses and their riders in the distance.

Being a week or two's horse ride from the Mongolian plateau, horse riders were an occasional sight in the distance.

My father would tell me to pick up my pitchfork and sickle as though that would merit any use apart from letting these valuable pieces of farming equipment be knocked from my hands and buried in the dirt as the horseman drives an axe-blade through my head. In the midst of my daydreaming, I realise these were not raiders but imperial

conscriptors, their red banners flapping in the wind and snapping like hungry mouths. They needed guards for the

Silk Road expedition, they said. Guards to protect merchants carrying precious silk, porcelain, and tea to distant western kingdoms where such treasures were worth their weight in jade. Now, though I had heard about these precious goods in passing while trading in the farmer's market, I had never thought of even seeing them in person

while I was trading my millet for some other grain. I am Li Zekuan. I was Li Zekuan, the farmer. The millet farmer.

Now I am Li Zekuan, the reluctant traveler, marching toward horizons my ancestors never imagined existed, with a fistful of millet stuffed into my pockets. The Silk Road, for that's what the merchants called this ancient network of trade routes, or rather a network of horse-riding merchants carrying their goods spread before our column like a promise written in sand and stone. This was the path our ancestors had pioneered centuries before, when Emperor Wu of Han sent Zhang Qian westward to forge alliances and trade. Now we followed in those footsteps, carrying bolts of silk that shimmered like liquid moonlight, porcelain vessels thin as lotus petals, and knowledge that would transform whatever laid in the West.

More steppe? I thought of my son often, his small hands that would never learn my hands' calluses, and wondered what tales I might bring home if I returned at all. I reached into my pockets to find my lackluster handful of grain, spilled and left behind somewhere in the desert. Beside me trudged Lian, though I knew her then only as Li An, a slight youth whose archery put veteran bowmen to shame, who hunted rabbits to sell in the market. She spoke to the conscripts eagerly about archery. We shared their kinship. The merchants spoke excitedly of the treasures we'd encounter: western horses tall as buildings, glass so clear it seemed like captured air. When she smiled, which was rare, Lian's expression carried both fear and fascination for what lay ahead. The Silk Road promised transformation for all who traveled it.

I dreamt on the thirty-seventh night. Golden spears, a forest of them, impossibly long, gleaming as armored figures

bearing them charged forward with a war cry in a language I could only liken to what I could not imagine. I woke up gasping with the dream, dried millet in my mouth turning back into sand the vision more real than the

fading stars. An omen, surely, but of what? I burned paper prayers to my ancestors, but the smoke vanished, unanswered.

We reached Bactrian territories in summer's furnace-mouth, that legendary crossroads where east met west. As politely explained to me by a gruff imperial conscript with the heavy accent of a Northerner but the historical knowledge of a librarian, this was where Greek descendants of Alexander's armies had mingled with local peoples, many of whom I knew only as "barbarians". Our merchants grew nervous, speaking of raiders who struck caravans, stealing silk and living with equal indifference. Our commander, a career officer whose competence matched his arrogance dismissed their fears.

"Barbarians," he declared, using the term for all peoples beyond the Han. "They scatter before the emperor's might like leaves before wind."

The ambush came at dawn.

They emerged from canyons carved into the mountains surrounding us. Our formation shattered. In the chaos, Lian and I fled, stumbling through rocky passes for two days. We survived by following the trail of a wounded ambusher back to his camp.

We saw a fortress of sun-baked brick, strange banners flapping with symbols that seemed to describe meaning but not in the usual Chinese characters but alien symbols. This was a Greek Bactrian outpost. We were captured before we cleared the outer walls and blindfolded.

My first sight was Demetrius of Bactria. He removed his helmet, which covered his face, revealing an appearance Lian and I had never seen the likes of. Before we could react, we noticed his stern expression drilling into eyes which we were familiar with regardless of the face. It beckoned me to look around. Behind him stood his soldiers, whom we had just been attacked by. I would learn that the spears they hold were called sarissas, that rose like forest sentinels, longer than any weapon I'd conceived, held by men armored in bronze scales that moved in unison. These were the descendants of Alexander the Great, the legendary Macedonian king whose name even we Chinese knew, who had conquered from Greece to India's borders centuries ago.

"Prisoners. They could be useful. Don't treat them like we do the...Parthians," Demetrius said in mangled Han dialect. His voice pierced the air and silenced the room.

I couldn't answer. My tongue had forgotten its purpose, shocked by the impossible length of those spears, the relief of not having to die, and hearing Chinese after being surrounded by a babble of a foreign language by the soldiers around us. One soldier brought us food. Yellow curdled milk. I retched. Lian laughed, but she struggled too.

I nearly died of mortification the first time a soldier invited me to the baths, chattering about philosophy while scrubbing intimate places with casual Greek shamelessness. I wondered what this "So-cra-tes" he spoke of would think of the concept of propriety?

Their debates were, constant, passionate and seemingly endless. Touching on the topics of gods, governance, the nature of virtue, things I held in my heart as unquestionable facts. They questioned everything. When I mentioned the emperor's divine mandate, Demetrius laughed with confusion.

"A man," he said, "cannot be heaven. Heaven is a concept, not flesh."

We argued for hours, me defending filial piety and cosmic order, him countering with logic and rhetoric that I fought through like catching wind with my hands.

"Your thinking," I told him once, exhausted, "is crazy. You tear down what should stand."

"Your thinking," he replied, grinning, "is prison." Which I was in.

At night, I pointed to the skies and according to the spots that decorated the darkness of the night sky (which remarkably, stayed the same in the thousands of li we must have covered from the farm my father pointed out the same stars to). Where I described the Judge and the Dragon, he pointed out a lion, or Leo, and a crab, or Cancer. Where I described a large "dipper" he described a wagon, which I could liken to the wheeled hunk of wood I transported loads of millet in.

One evening, Lian produced a remarkable creation: rice cooked in olive oil, seasoned with Greek herbs, topped with crumbled feta. We ate together, Greeks and Chinese, sharing stories through broken language and hand gestures. Demetrius spoke of his fallen brothers, the history of the empire they fought for. I spoke of my son, of rice paddies that knew my family's sweat for generations, of the Silk Road's promise that I might return with wealth enough to secure his future.

But Ardashir the Parthian didn't let us have peace. The Parthians, Demetrius explained, were nomadic raiders led by a warlord named Ardashir. They'd been harassing Greek settlements for years, angry about trade routes cutting through their ancestral grazing lands. Ardashir himself was a ghost. Attacked at dawn, gone by noon. Left burned depots and dead sentries. The Greeks called him the Shadow because you never saw him coming. Demetrius had lost half his men to one of Ardashir's ambushes two years back. Just thinking about it made his jaw clench.

"He fights like the wind," Demetrius said. "No honor, no formation. Just death and smoke."

His raiders, swift and brutal, were gone before we could respond. They left two Greek sentries dead, and left messages written in blood on the walls: Leave, or join the ravens. Demetrius lost it, swearing to gods I didn't know.

He pointed to the stars instead, and there I understood.

"We hunt them," Demetrius said, "before they hunt us to extinction."

"We?"

"You fight. You've trained." His eyes were challenging me and inviting me at the same time. Useless decoration.

"Or you're just guests."

Lian answered by pulling out her crossbow. Han repeating model, all mechanical precision and military function.

"Show us your sarissas," she said. "We'll show you what machines can do."

Training started. The sarissa was ridiculous in my hands. Eighteen feet of a foreign wood with an iron tip, needed both hands and coordination I absolutely did not have. I dropped it constantly, tripped over it, and almost killed the man next to me. The Greeks laughed but not meanly, more like when your drunk uncle falls into a ditch and

everyone knows he's fine. Demetrius grabbed my hands himself and moved them around like my father did when teaching me the plow.

"Feel how it balances," he said. "It's a tree of the forest. You're one tree in the forest, got it? Alone you're kindling we burn to cook food. Together, nothing gets through."

I got it. Everyone shoots together, nobody's the hero, teamwork wins. Just their version had more stabbing and less moving parts.

Lian disappeared for hours one afternoon, returning with sarissa tips coated in a local paste.

"Sleep, not death," she said. "A gentle poison."

Demetrius looked at her work like she'd invented fire.

"You think like Archimedes," he said.

"I think like Lian," she said back.

Ardashir attacked that night. His horsemen tested our lines for three days, and we held, but food ran low. I fought in some kind of fever dream, jabbing the sarissa at shapes in the dust, feeling things hit the other end, trying hard not to think about what those things were. People died. Greeks, Chinese, raiders, everyone bled the same way. On the third night I ended up on watch next to Demetrius, both too tired to do anything but stare into the dark.

"Why do you even fight?" He thought for a while.

"Alexander died and our people scattered. We're dying slowly out here, not quite Greek, not quite Chinese, and nobody back home remembers we exist. If we don't fight we just disappear."

He looked over. "Why do you?"

"My son," I said.

"I want to go home and tell him I wasn't a coward. Keep growing some millet. Maybe some olives, though I doubt with the soil's quality—"

"Same reason then, Li." Demetrius interrupted me.

We sat there, stars spinning overhead, neither Chinese nor Greek patterns, just stars doing their thing regardless of what we thought.

Ardashir's final push came with the sunrise, perfectly timed for maximum dramatic effect and tactical advantage. His whole army, hundreds of horsemen, Parthians and whoever else he'd convinced to join, all desperate men the same as us filled the canyon below like someone had dumped out a box of toy soldiers along with menacing horses and military equipment.

But something was off. He rode out alone, empty hands raised, his face not twisted in rage but etched with a grim, calculating exhaustion I recognized. It was the look of a man who has run out of bad options.

Demetrius walked out to meet him. I followed, and Lian came after me.

Up close, Ardashir was older than I expected, his eyes the color of steppe dust. He did not shout. His voice, worn thin by wind and command, carried just to us.

"We bleed each other for scraps from a table we do not own. A fool's game."

"You started this game," Demetrius said, his hand tight on his sarissa. He lifted it up and planted it firmly on the ground. The sound of metal reverberated through the air.

"And I am ending it," Ardashir replied, his gaze sweeping over our patched-together walls, the mingled blood on the stones.

"You fight with a new spirit. You adapt. I have lost two brothers and a son to your walls. For a few lengths of silk to burn?" He spat.

"A warlord who does not seek trade or tribute, but slaughter lies in the North. Three day's ride. He will raid the whole length of the Silk Road, hunting for merchants. The Road will die." He looked directly at me, at my Han features, then back at Demetrius.

"My pride says to wipe you from this canyon. My mind says the only grave being dug here is for all our peoples. Let us have one battle. Together. Against the true barbarian. Lest we be the bones the crows pick upon."

The silence was immense. Demetrius studied Ardashir's face, searching for the trick.

"Three days' ride?" he finally asked. Ardashir nodded.

"He moves fast. We move faster, or we die."

"Then we move," Demetrius said.

We left at dawn.

Trudging towards the battle, we argued nonstop. The Greeks wanted to plant themselves and let the enemy crash into their sarissas. The Chinese wanted mobility, and harass with arrows from a distance. Parthians thought both ideas were stupid and wanted mounted archery who shot arrows atop charging horses.

"This is insane," I told Lian on night two.

"Insanity is just a rough draft of cooperation," she said.

The warlord's forces had taken a canyon with good position, high ground and about the same numbers as us. When we showed up, he sent out a champion for single combat, because apparently tradition requires a good duel before the mass slaughter starts.

Demetrius went out. Five minutes maybe, where Greek wrestling met Asian cavalry sword work, sarissa versus curved blade, ended with Demetrius winning but with this really concerning cut across his ribs leaking blood.

"Now," he gasped, "we try it. Cooperation."
The battle started.

Picture sarissas in the center, a wall of iron-tipped wood with Chinese crossbowmen behind them, shooting over their heads in volleys that blocked the sun. Parthian horsemen on the sides, mobile, fast, drove enemy forces into kill zones where a hail of various sharp weapons could do the killing.

It shouldn't even have worked. Different fighting styles, different languages, different ideas about what honor even means in combat.

I fought in the phalanx's third row, sarissa poking out past the first two lines, jabbing at shapes that showed up in the dust and screaming. Next to me was some Greek I'd never learned the name of; ahead was another Chinese conscript; behind me was a Parthian who'd volunteered despite never training with a sarissa. We were proof that different angles can still make coherent shapes.

The warlord's men fought desperately, knowing defeat meant their families died too. But slowly, through crossbow bolts finding gaps the sarissas stabbed out, through Parthian riders pushing enemy forces into the disciplined tips of Greek spears, we pulled off what shouldn't have been possible.

Ardashir found me afterward, face unreadable, impressed.

"Your idea worked," he said. I couldn't tell if he was accusing me or not.

"Not my idea," I said. "Ours."

That night's feast was chaos. Greek wine mixed with Chinese baijiu. Olives next to preserved plums. Roasted lamb competing with rice balls. Demetrius, bandaged and pale but alive, raised his cup. Parthian. All of us.

"To the eternal phalanx. Not Greek, not Chinese, not Parthian."

Lian cornered me later, drunk and philosophical.

"We did something important. Not just winning. We proved that differences don't require division. We've also proven that in mathematics," she said, chuckling.

"Will anyone remember?" I asked.

"You'll tell your son. Demetrius will tell his people. Ardashir will tell his tribes. Stories spread."

The journey back took weeks. On the way back, I thought of the potential of what I had learnt. Knowledge exchange between Greek philosophy and Chinese engineering. Our gunpowder would meet their metallurgy. Our silk techniques with their glassmaking. Our paper and printing visualizing their mathematics and astronomy. Parthian horsemen could raise their bows again and become caravan guards.

Years later, back in my village, my son helps with the harvest. I still see Leo where I once saw the Dragon, but I let the confusion stay. Standing in the field of millet, I remark to my son: "The Silk Road is humanity's best invention. Not because of the goods but because of the understanding it creates. The road itself became the teacher, showing us the world is huge and that difference simply connects different lines between the same stars."

"That's pretty philosophical, dad," he says, smiling.

New Tales of China's Silk Road

St. Paul's Convent School, Tsz Yan Leona, Ng – 17

Across the shifting planes of sand, the harsh glare of sunlight burns everything in sight, heating the air until the scenery seems to sway drunkenly, a mirage turned reality.

A fierce, parching heat permeates the area, drying one's throat with terrifying speeds. The sands burn as hot as coal underneath one's feet, a warning to passing travellers not to linger too long—lest the soles of your feet get burned.

No flora nor fauna as far as the eye could see—not even a weed to shrivel in the shade. There isn't a passing cool breeze or miraculous oasis to offer relief, just sand and sun for miles and miles against a brilliantly blue sky, the horizon splitting land and sky cleanly into two.

Here, in the desert surrounding Palmyra. And to the west, Dammaşq.

The unforgiving desert reigns supreme. However, that is not to say it is entirely without life—

Nestled in the dim shade of a towering sand dune, a caravan of merchants and camels carrying hefty cargo curls into itself, akin to a caterpillar curling up. They wear cloths over their noses and mouths, but the varying expressions of anxiety and nervousness are clear to see. Gesturing to the horizon with maps in hand, they seem to be deep in discussion.

Only some of their number seem undisturbed by their apparent predicament—the camels, leisurely blinking at nothing in particular, and a young adult wearing a winged hat suppressing his copper curls, pointing the way out with a peculiar wooden staff carved with two snakes intertwined.

The discussion lasts a while—it takes the young man much convincing and gesturing to earn the merchant's reluctant trust, and even longer to get them to follow his instructions. In the end, it is with no small amount of relief that the young man sends the caravan off, waving goodbye as the merchants head towards Dammaşq.

“Hmm...” The young man turns his head in the direction the caravan was coming from and rubs his chin in thought. “If I keep going this way, I'll reach Serica eventually...right?”

The sun, hanging high in the cloudless sky, offered no answers.

The young man glares at the sun and huffs, uncaring of the sunlight searing his eyes. “You don't have to look at me like that, brother. Can't I take a small vacation every now and then?”

Serica. The object of much curiosity and novelty, said to be located in the far, far east. He'd seen the porcelain and the softer-than-clouds silk in the marketplaces—he'd be a liar if he said their place of origin didn't intrigue him, especially with the stories those merchants loved to spin. What better way to get to the truth than by going to Serica himself?

Although, he's never been to Serica—or that far east—before. Still. How hard could it be?

With a single, graceful leap, the young man with copper hair jumps to the top of the sand dune, a pair of small wings blooming from his sandals before coming to rest against his heel. The seemingly boundless desert greets him, wind-worn rock formations peeking through the sand.

Hand above his eyes and squinting against the sunlight, the young man looks eastward. He's about to take another leap across the air—the wind picking up out of nowhere, blowing up red sand—when he sees something quite atypical, even for him.

With the corner of her mouth turned upward, a young woman draped in a semi-translucent white shawl stands alone among the sands, peacefully gazing towards the horizon, a distance away from the sand dune. A set of footsteps trail far behind her—her feet are bare, but she stands comfortably as if she were standing on cotton instead.

She does not seem bothered by neither the harsh sunlight, nor the dry heat, nor the burning sands. Even more curiously, the woman turns and looks up—making direct eye contact with the young man—and smiles gently. A polite greeting, if anything. Her white robes flutter in an unseen breeze, a soft contrast with the sharp-edged sunlight behind her.

They appraise each other, noticing foreign clothing and even more foreign features.

“Salve, stranger!” The young man descends from the sand dune in the blink of an eye, winged sandals disturbing not the slightest bit of sand. A grin comes to his lips, easy and quick. “Bold move, walking in the desert without any footwear. Aren’t the desert sands hot?”

The woman responds in a language he’s never heard before but could somehow understand perfectly. “I assure you I am plenty comfortable.”

“Fair enough! Forgive my curiosity, but what brings you here to this neck of the desert?”

“The same reason you are here, I suppose,” Her gentle smile never leaves her face, and her serene eyes crinkle at the corners, as if amused at some secret joke. “I am a traveller, today.”

“As am I.” Turning around, the man points to the horizon. “Are you heading to Dammaśq? It’s westward, beyond the sand dunes. You should hurry before night falls—find shelter from the freezing cold, and all.”

“I see, thank you for the directions—but my destination is beyond Dammaśq. I am headed to Daqin, you see—I have heard many a fanciful tale about that place, and my curiosity was piqued.”

“Daqin?” A crease appears in the young man’s brow. “I’m afraid I’ve never heard of such a place.”

“Hm.” She seems undeterred by his reply. “What about you, kind stranger? Where are you headed?”

“Serica. I don’t suppose you’ve heard of such a place?”

The serene smile on her face falls slightly. “My apologies, but I have not. Where is it located—eastwards?”

Frowning, the young man recalls the merchants from the caravan, and the ethereal silk that ripples like water under his touch from the marketplace. “I believe so. At least, that’s what I’ve heard. All I know is that Serica is at the very end of the journey many are taking across the lands—allegedly, it is where the merchants claim their silk comes from.”

“How curious,” she comments simply. “My destination—Daqin—is also said to be in the far west, where the climate is warm and mild. The merchants in my homeland sell perfumes and glassware with intense, vibrant colours that are said to come from Daqin.”

“What a fascinating place.”

“Indeed. Do you believe in fate, stranger?”

The sudden question barely fazes the young man. “Hm...I believe it exists, but I’d prefer to carve my own path in this world. Why?”

A warm gust of wind blows by, kicking up sand in its way. The woman’s smile reappears on her face. “This fortuitous meeting must be the result of good karma. Come, good sir, let us drop our pretences and speak freely. We may be travellers, but if I were to take a guess...it is not just curiosity that motivates us, now, is it?”

Though her eyes remain tranquil, there is an unanticipated gleam of astuteness that shines through the calm—however there is not a modicum of deception in her voice. “Surely,” the man begins. “I do not know what you mean.”

“Your snakes appear otherwise. Regular mortals do not have wings behind their ears, either.”

“Ah—?” Sure enough, the intertwined wooden snakes on the man’s staff had miraculously come to life, and the wings on his hat twitched by themselves. The mirage had dissipated—or rather, it had never worked in the first place. “Aha, so I’ve been caught. I’m sure mortals don’t typically have haloes, either.”

The sunlight behind the woman’s head solidifies into a golden disk before his eyes. In her right hand, a willow branch shifts into existence, its green leaves sparkling vitality.

“The truth has been revealed.” The woman says, as her eyes darken from normal brown—black to the inkiness of a starlit night. “What an auspicious meeting. May I ask for your name?”

“I am called Mercurius.” Mercurius sweeps into a half-bow, copper hair appearing almost flame-like in the desert sun.

“My name is Guanshiyin,” Guanshiyin answers in return, inclining her head politely. “Though, many of my people call me Guanyin for short.”

Before Mercurius could formulate a reply, the hot desert wind picks up once more—but this time, it doesn’t abate, spiraling faster and faster until the azure sky is rapidly being swallowed by a monstrous tsunami of red dust, crashing over the bounds of the horizon to devour everything in its path. An ominous whistle intensifies into a powerful roar, drowning out everything else.

Guanyin, unlike anyone else in that situation, remains calm. If anything, she sounds interested, as if admiring a particularly sophisticated mural instead of staring down a deadly natural disaster. “I’ve heard about the might of sandstorms, but to witness nature’s fury in person...nature truly is fascinating.”

Mercurius eyes the disappearing sunlight and the subsequent encroaching darkness. “Yes, sandstorms are a marvel to behold—if you aren’t caught in one, that is. Shall we find shelter? We can continue our conversation there.”

“Let us make haste, then.”

The sandstorm rages and pounds its fists against the rock walls, but it can't penetrate the safety of the cavern. To someone inside looking out, they might assume it was twilight instead it being the middle of the day—any sunlight streaming in has been muffled by the wall of red sand and the incessant, furious roaring.

Deep inside the cavern, holed up in safety with a single campfire and each other for company, Mercurius and Guanyin sit on two small rocks as stools, sitting across from each other with their hands in their laps. The campfire crackles merrily, and the sound of their synchronized breathing resounds in the companionable silence.

Guanyin picks up a stick from a nearby pile scavenged from the depths of the cavern and tosses it in the fire. Watching the flames gobble up the stick greedily, the warm orange light dances in her eyes.

“Seeing how the sandstorm has yet to abate, Mercurius, how about we continue our conversation earlier?”

“Alright,” Mercurius agrees. “I don't believe the sandstorm will die down anytime soon, anyhow. What should we talk about?”

Guanyin hums, making a soft ‘ah’ when a topic comes to mind. “How about the true purpose of our travels? There must be more to your journeying halfway across the world other than satisfying one's curiosity.”

“I'd say that satisfying one's curiosity is the only reason true travellers go anywhere,” the copper-haired youth muses, lazily tracing the swirls and loops the smoke makes as it travels towards the rock ceiling with his eyes. “Mmm, but you're right. My interest is beyond simple curiosity.”

“Oh? How so?”

He exhales, memories returning to the forefront of his mind. “For the sake of context, I shall start at the very beginning. Mortals have flocked to pray at my temples for as long as I can remember—whether they are merchants praying for fortune, or travellers praying for safe passage. Even divided by generations, they pray for the same old things—very predictable, as you can imagine,

Gradually, while I was overseeing the flow of commerce listening to prayers and the like, I began to hear names of locations increasingly further away along with unfamiliar descriptions of foreign goods. Of Persia, for example. Trade was starting to flourish eastbound, and it became clear to me that—potentially—a new era of trade was about to commence.

And it was obvious! Even among my siblings, talk was starting to spread of these newfangled goods that had originated from faraway lands and somehow managed to land in our markets. They, along with stories and the cultures they hailed from, were becoming all the rage.”

With a vague wave of Mercurius' hand, the campfire smoke condensed into gray images, wavy at the edges. “One such good that had garnered an immense amount of popularity was a type of fabric—silk. Ah, you should've seen it, Guanyin—bolts of silk, smooth as water to the touch, shimmering in the sunlight. People were fascinated with it—but I was more fascinated with the stories the merchants told.”

With another wave of his hand, the smoke disperses.

“They say Serica is a land abundant of silk—a grand empire underneath another sky. In Rome, silk is considered a luxury—but it is said that the Seres have so much of it they wear it every day and even build their temples out of it. The ruler of their land is rich enough to burn it for warmth during summertime, poets draft their poems on it, and astronomers draw the sky on them.

It is a land with language, music and art so wholly different from our own. They say the Seres are peaceful traders who weave silk grown from magical trees, own gemstones that are akin to solidified moonlight, speak mystical tongues that grant them longevity, and tame great beasts long enough to wrap around mountains and wield enough power to flood entire valleys...”

Mercurius pauses. “Oh, my. Am I rambling? I’m sorry if I bored you...”

“No, no, not at all.” Guanyin reassures, her pure white robes shifting as she shifts on her rock–stool. “I found your stories quite interesting. Please, continue.”

“Well, there’s not much to say after that,” Mercurius resumes, coming back to the present. “The more I heard those stories, the more something in my heart yearned to pack and leave my homeland, to tread that road many of the daring traders and rovers have apparently trod. I am the god of travellers, after all. Is it not fitting I journey along with them?”

The campfire sputters, spitting white–hot embers. “The god of travellers...how coincidental. Mortals often come to my temples to pray for safe passage, and I have had more than one merchant or sojourner light incense to me.” The midnight–haired woman folds her hands back into her lap as she talks. “I admire how you follow your heart—you are someone who is true to yourself.”

“I’m also the god of thieves and trickery,” the copper–haired youth laughs wryly. “But I digress. Do go on.”

“Many elements of my story align with yours. Daqin, an empire testing the bounds of the known world, a land resplendent striking with its stately architecture and unique culture. It is said Daqin is powerful with many vassals, filled to the brim with rich treasures and wonders, and the people there are knowledgeable in literature and in magic. They wear gold in their hair, and their kings carry themselves with virtue.

Precious metals, exotic perfumes that linger in the air, embroidered rugs bearing intricate and vibrant patters, exquisite, translucent glassware...all are goods so highly sought after word of them and gossip about the land of their origin easily reached my ears. I have seen them for myself, and the remarkable craftsmanship of those glass vessels awed me—they are reminiscent of winter ice over a still lake, and when brought to the sun the light falls through as if the glass isn’t even there.”

Guanyin’s eyes twinkle, and the orange glow of the fire casts twirling memories on the cavern’s rock walls. Even now, the tales told by enthusiastic mortals echo in her ear.

‘Stories and myths of Daqin carried to me by whispers on the wind—I hear all, and as more mortals prayed to me for guidance before they embarked on mysterious roads that led across foreign empires and ended in an enigmatic

land obscured by sky and space, I eventually wished to see this land for myself—to embark on a pilgrimage and gain new perspectives.

I meditated on this matter, thought it over for many moons, and even sought out my peers for advice. It is obvious, I think, what my choice was. As each step brings me closer to my destination, a strange excitement fills my soul—I see clearly that the world is truly a magnificent place.”

“Are you also a god of travellers, Guanyin?”

“I merely offer guidance and protection to those in the throes of suffering. It is just that merchants and travellers often pray to me for such.”

“I see,” Mercurius answers, as the firelight shrinks back down until it returns to being a normal campfire. “So it is as you say—fate smiles down on us today, for us to meet here and now when we could’ve so easily missed each other in our respective journeys.”

The midnight-haired woman nods. “We are indeed lucky. There are many routes across this continent, spanning across mountain and weaving across valleys, cutting across villages and empires alike. How fortunate are we, that we meet on this particular route, on this particular day?”

“Perhaps that is what it means to live life as a mortal. Perhaps for those traversing these treacherous roads to unknown lands, each meeting could be a first and a last. Finite, compared to our infinity.”

“As permanent as the blink of an eye,” Guanyin agrees. “Nothing can last an eternity. But perhaps the things they create and their trailblazing will be etched in the annals of history, and as the seasons bloom and wither, so will their legacies be remembered.”

It’s at this moment that both of them realize the roaring has stopped—one look outside, and the dazzling sunlight greets them with fervour. In their storytelling, the sandstorm has passed.

Mercurius notes this with uncharacteristic solemnity in his eyes. “All is finite. Here, we will part.”

“There is a possibility that we may meet again, friend,” Guanyin stands, brushing non-existent dust off her pristine robes. “Now that we know where the other is, even as we are a world away. Now, let us leave and continue our journeys—do as the mortals do, and bid farewell.”

“Then, farewell, friend. May we meet again under a sweeter sky.”

They go their separate ways, with only the remains of a campfire to tell of their encounter.

Silk Road Through the Eyes

St. Paul's Secondary School, Jaspreet, Kaur – 17

“Let’s go before I change my mind.” Minghao annoyingly shouted at his newlywed brother, bidding him goodbye.

“We are just leaving to pass on the goods, stop crying like we are going to war and not coming back.” He grumbled under his breath, seeing his mother and sister-in-law hiding their tears.

“Our adventure begins in Xi'an, when our porters are paid, and our camels and horses are loaded. Ten royal guards accompany us. We'll head south following the Wei River valley. The trip passes through the Tang Empire's rich territory. There are plenty of inns and nice roads. We will exchange our silk for Sichuan cloth in Chengdu, the "Brocade City.” The leader of the group that Minghao and his brother were joining took a deep breath and continued.

When will it end? Minghao whined as he yawned for the hundredth time.

“We enter the Hexi Corridor by turning northwest from Chengdu. We exchange our Bactrian camels for Tibetan horses and sturdy yaks at a boundary post. Our Chinese tea bricks have become worth more than silver. Bandits roam the deep gorges, so we have to be on guard. Our biggest strength is our royal guards, who are familiar with every cliff and pass. Lijiang, a bustling town ruled by the Naxi, is a popular destination. We take a week off to allow our bodies to recover and exchange tea for herbal therapy.”

Great, now we also have to deal with the bandits. Minghao thought bitterly.

“The most dangerous part is going to begin. We travel into the Hengduan Mountains, a place of thunderous rivers and enormous stone structures. Sometimes it's only a narrow ledge carved into the face of the mountain, and other times it's a shaky rope bridge across an abyss.”

“It feels like a prayer answered when we eventually witness the Potala Palace rising over Lhasa. The warmth of butter lamps and the dense smoke of juniper greet our tired bones. In exchange for the rich cosiness of wool blankets and the vivid blue of raw turquoise, our steel swords find eager hands here.”

When will it end? I wanna sleep already!!!! Minghao whined, lightly banging his head against the boxes of goods.

The road bends northwest from Lhasa, climbing the perilous Karakoram Pass where the mountain gods test all who cross. Thin air drains our strength; demon winds howl, and the deep freeze claims both men and beasts. Faces pressed to the ice, we move in a single, frantic queue. The altitude will start to drop after the pass. Beyond the pass lies the land descending towards the Pamirs, “the Roof of the World”.

Next, you’re gonna tell me that Sky God will test with thunder.

“At last, we arrive at the magnificent melting pot—Bactria. Persians with gleaming glass, Sogdians trading swift horses, the air heavy with Indian scents. We exchange our final silks for what we came for: saffron that turns the wind gold, lapis lazuli that holds the night in its depths, and spices that smell like monsoon woods.”

I am coming back the second we get the “western” goods. Minghao thought in determination.

“Everyone! Get your spirits up as we are about to have an adventure of a lifetime!” The Leader cheered loudly, getting on the horse.

The locals cheered for the first group of traders for a fruitful and safe journey. Horns blew throughout the streets, marking the start of an indelible journey. Some blooming with pride, others in envy.

“Gege, how long will it take? We have been riding since the morning!” Minghao whined to his elder brother, who was walking along with his horse, letting the young ride on it.

“Minghao, calm down. If you start whining on the first day, then the rest of the days will feel like a walk in the desert.” His elder brother replied softly, hoping the younger would understand.

“Why don’t you enjoy looking at the view? Perhaps try making friends along the way. Look, he looks like your age. You know when I was your age...”

The rest of the conversation faded away as Minghao looked at the boy, his elder brother pointed at who looked like he was in the same condition as Minghao.

As the sun started setting, the crew started getting their tents up for their first night out of the many coming up.

“Everyone! As we rest upon the night, let us remember the importance of teamwork, friendship and curiosity. Throughout our way, I have seen many still hesitating to trust one another. Take the time you want to take but remember this journey cannot be completed without trust among us. So now I would like to take this opportunity to officially start the first bonding activity of this journey.”

Groans were heard from all over the temporary shelter for the night.

While most of them had already retired for bed, the handful who stayed awake participated in the bonding game, including Minghao and his elder brother.

“Tonight, we will start simple. Every pair will take turns to talk to another pair of different families for 1 kè. Afterwards, we will rotate the pairs until every pair has talked with each other.”

For the next hour, the camp was filled with the chattering noise of the people who would soon have their lives changed either for good or bad.

The stars and moon shall soon be witnesses to a tale filled with friendship, sacrifices and maybe betrayals.

~~~ The Next morning ~~~

“Do you think the Wen’s are good? They seem to be trustworthy. I think they live two streets away from us?” Minghao asked his elder brother, who was packing up their makeshift tent.

“Hmmm. Maybe. But we cannot really trust anyone this easily. Who knows what they might do to us in the future? Plus, we should focus less on making friends and more on keeping our goods safe.” His elder brother warned him, still sceptical about making any peers this soon.

Although Minghao still wanted to learn more about Wen's younger son, who was about his age, he understood his brother’s concerns. Maybe in his naive mind, he thought that everyone was trustworthy. But in this harsh world, not everyone can be trustworthy. Some are sacrificed while some sacrifice.

“WHO STOLE OUR GOODS?” The head of the Yin family's voice was heard coming from the leader’s tent.

“ No one has stolen your goods. Please check your luggage carefully.” The leader said calmly, a headache already starting to form.



“Gege, I can literally see the Yin’s family’s goods peeking from their camel’s storage bag,” Minghao said deadpan.

“Well, Hao, you should know that there are people who will be greedy for money. If I remember correctly, the agreement states that if the goods of a family are lost, they will be fully compensated. Hao, remember, even if we get poor, do not cheat people off because bad karma will always come back one way or another.” His elder brother reminded him. Already starting to form a dislike for the Yin family.

“Psst, psst”

Minghao heard a soft psst sound coming from his left. The owner of the sound was the younger son of the Wen family, smiling, showing his shiny teeth.

Minghao raised his eyebrows in question.

“I am Wenjun. You look like you want to run away from the boring trip like me. My father says this trip will bring lots of benefits to us and our future generations, as it will unlock a path to earning income for us. Did you know that I have.....”

After listening to the second sentence, Minghao knew that this new boy or Wenjun, would not stop talking. So he did what any sane human would do in front of a chatter head – ignored him.

Soon, days and nights passed, and the next moment Minghao opened his eyes, he realised that they were already halfway through the journey. They were going to rest in Lijiang for one week to recharge themselves for the rest of their journey.

The journey to Lijian was not as easy as turning over one's hand; not everyone in Chengdu was willing to trade with them. Only a handful of people who saw the golden chance of this trading were willing to trade with them.

One thing that surprised Minghao and his elder the most was how quickly Minghao formed a bond with Wenjun, aka the chatterbox. Even Minghao doesn't remember how his friendship with Wenjun bloomed. All he remembers is that one day, he started appreciating those mindless conversations that Wenjun made with him along the journey, making the expedition less miserable. Those meaningless conversations about nothing and everything at the same time formed a bond which tested their friendship and trust.

The moon, stars and sun witnessing their beautiful bond couldn't help but feel jealous and awe at the same time. Two boys not knowing a single about the other despite living in the same city ended up being friends for life, sticking with each other, though the rough terrain of the mountains, lending each other a hand when crossing over the rough river bed or when simply walking along the hot, deserted pathway, leaving their footprints in the soil for future generations to find and follow. Their bond was a testimony to embracing changes and facing the world with bravery, even in uncertainties.

Walking along the Wei River was not as easy as it sounds. The frequent drizzles and showers made the possibility of flooding high, but that did not stop the 20 families out of the original 30 families from venturing along the river. The other 10 families slowly started leaving one by one when they received letters from their homes of various kinds of emergencies.

Another obstacle they encountered was the walking Hexi Corridor. The Hexi Corridor was a narrow passageway connecting two cities. The Hexi corridor, with its arid desert climate, extreme temperatures and the threat of bandits, sounded like a challenge to the 20 families, but the passion of passing through the corridor made it exciting. Though at the end of the corridor, only 15 families remained.

Before entering the corridor, they had been warned about the little to no water source in the passageway, so they had prepared enough water to last them for 10 days. But the challenges they were underestimating were the

extreme temperatures during the day and night, and the threat of bandits, especially at midnight, when awareness had decreased significantly due to the lack of sleep.

By the third night, five families had already made the decision to leave the first thing in the morning.

As days passed in the corridor, the friendship of Minghao and Wenjun deepened. During the first attack of the bandits, Minghao and Wenjun both hid behind the goods, fascinated by seeing the royal guards fight off the bandits like they were flies.

A seed of trust was planted in both Minghao and Wenjun the moment they both saved each other from the attack of the bandits without hesitation.

“Next time, don’t save me first. Always save yourself, promise me?” Minghao had asked Wenjun after the bandit’s attack.

“I can’t promise something which I will break.” Wenjun had replied without a second of hesitation. Minghao, looking at the determination in the eyes of the boys, dropped the subject.

That day onwards, they protected each other with all their might. They had been each other’s emotional support when their elder siblings got injured during the attack. They were with each other, even if Wenjun annoyed Minghao with his chattering to the extent that Minghao started to meditate the first thing after waking up.

“MINGHAO!!!” Wenjun shouted, jolting Minghao from his daydreaming.

“Why are you shouting in my ears the first thing in the morning?” Minghao asked, still rubbing his ears, feeling the echo of Wenjun’s shout.

“I have been calling out your name for the past kè, and all you have been doing is staring nowhere like you're talking to someone,” Wenjun exclaimed, feeling annoyed.

“Anyways, I came to call you out because we are going to explore the streets of Lijiang and eat everything we can. Do not worry about the silver, the leader has given each a small allowance which should last us a week if we use it wisely. I heard that Lijiang’s rose cakes are really delicious and their ..... ” As Wenjun was rambling, Minghao had already gotten ready and started to drag out Wenjun, with him still talking about food.

“Little kid, give me all your silver right now.” A bandit had managed to corner Minghao in a dark alley with a knife.

Thud

“Yes, guard, I saw someone here with a knife entering.” A young voice said to a supposed guard.

“Okay, then, let me check with a big sword in my hand.” The guard sounded like he had a cold; his deep voice sounded almost forced.

But that voice was enough for the bandit to run away, leaving Minghao alone. The "guard" was Wenjun mimicking a deep voice.

“Really! Out of anything, this was the only way you could have saved me? What if the bandit had found out it was not a guard but a boy like me?” Minghao said deadpan.

Despite his carefree attitude, Wenjun could see the relief in Minghao’s eyes. He knew that Minghao was not good at talking, but his eyes conveyed his emotions.

The week passed in the blink of an eye. And soon, goods were repacked for the remaining half of the journey.

Passing through the Potala Palace provided them with a place to further reinforce their materials and weapons.

But the real challenge was in the Karakoram Pass, where conditions like brutal cold, fierce winds, scarce vegetation, and high altitude made it nearly impossible to cross over. The families that stayed behind had the chance of witnessing the “roof of the sky”, aka the Pamir Mountains.

The day they ventured through the Karakoram Pass, it started pouring and thundering. The already brutal cold weather became even more cruel, making walking even an inch difficult. The only thing they could do was wait until the storm passed before continuing on the journey.

“Alright, everyone, cheer up, we are close to our destination, so don’t let your spirit down. This might be our final obstacle in the journey. And just like before, we shall pass it with fearlessness and trust in our companions. So today, let’s play a game. A game where we tell one another why we are grateful to them.”

The inn room was soon filled with voices of gratitude, some being grateful for the company, while some grateful for being saved. But one particular speech from Wenjun melted everyone’s hearts.

“Minghao, thank you so much for bearing with me. Everyone I know, besides my family, has left me because they could not stand my non-stop chattering. You were the only one who did not run away the second I started chattering. I know you used to ignore me in the beginning, but I am still grateful to you for not running away.” Wenjun said, looking straight at Minghao’s eyes.

“Father, I want to thank you for pushing me to come along to the expedition. If you had not pushed me, I would not have had the chance to see how vast the world is and how diverse the people can be.”

“Leader, I want to thank you for giving us this opportunity and for believing in us. I am sure after our journey, the trading in this route will not only increase but will also be written in history for people to follow. Our footprints imprinted in the soil will become a pathway for our descendants. Although our journey is half completed after passing this Karakoram Pass, I know that we will cherish these memories with us for life.”

As soon as Wenjun completed his speech, everyone’s eyes started glistening. Everyone knew the harsh truth about parting, but they wanted to forget about it until they couldn’t.

That day, everyone slept with hearts filled with beautiful memories of the past months they had shared.

But what they were waiting for was Bactria, which was just behind the Paropamisus Mountains, their final destination where everything would end for them but begin for future generations.

As they rode towards the Sogdian traders and their goods, some rode with anticipation of going home, and some in excitement as they would further adventure into the world.

As the exchange of goods happened in front of Minghao’s eyes, he remembered how much he wanted this moment to happen months back, but now he suddenly wished he could slow down time.

As much as Minghao wanted to return to his hometown, he was equally sad about missing the carefree attitude he had developed. He knew once he went back, he would have to return to his boring, normal life, which he despised.

Throughout this journey, what changed about Minghao was his openness towards the world. In the beginning, all Minghao wanted to do was stay at home and laze around, but this journey opened his eyes, allowing him to see all walks of life.

His and his companions' footprints laid the foundation for the future expeditions. Their experiences will inspire newer generations to venture further than they did.

The journey took them 2 years to complete, back and forth. In these two years, they grew both mentally and physically. Both Minghao and Wenjun grew from timid boys to individuals with a level-headed personality and with curiosity about the world around them.

The Silk Road was not only a path for trading but also a path which forged friendships through tough tests. The story of Minghao was about opening up and embracing the changing world. When times change, people have to follow the times and write their story in the new times.

# Tales as Old as Time

*St. Paul's Secondary School, Savindi, Naida Baduge – 17*

Somewhere above in the heavens, a newborn god sighs to himself.

This minor god has just been mindlessly assigned by his almighty elders the role as patron of trade for the humans. A completely pointless role if you ask him. For how can there be trade among a species whose sole focus is on winning wars and bringing so-called glory? Often, the other gods would receive dull prayers from humans, wishing for their blessings to win unnecessary fights.

Millennia of wars and discontent have driven invisible walls within the human race. Long periods of separation made people unable to understand the words of one another. Various languages appeared, and people became more isolated, pivoting around their own simplistic lives. All this young god can do is just roll his eyes and find a way to make his role, if not meaningful, at least fun.

He found his way to the heavenly table fitted with the magical world map of Earth. His eyes immediately land on the middle of the table, where the humans call Persia. He recalls hearing stories of men riding camels across deserts to exchange messages between cities. He only wished it could help with his mission of promoting trade. The godling stared at the map long and hard when a wild grin started to form on his face, with a sparkle to his gaze...

Back down on Earth, its inhabitants continue with their lives:

In a quiet village in Greece, a suffering girl.

My eyes are parched. I lay lifeless on our bed. A stinging feeling burns in the back of my throat. Everything has gone cold in my touch. It has been days, but Papa has not been able to find a cure. He reached out to every medical practitioner in our village and offered to pay double once I am cured. With no avail, it seems all hope is lost. Mama has been by my bedside from dawn to dusk. Her words whispered against my ear.

“Oh, my love,” she hiccupped. “I pray every day for your recovery. Stay strong with me, dear.” A sob left her.

Papa paces around the candlelit room. “How can no one save my daughter! It is only a common cold! Those foolish practitioners only want money. I should have learnt the ways myself when I was younger, that way I would help everyone in need!” Papa claimed.

I cannot even open my eyes, yet I feel Papa’s intense gaze on my body as Mama continues to cry. I know he would fight heaven to heal me. Alas, it seems fate has had other plans. My time must be done.

A knock. Someone has come. It must be my guide to bring me to the afterlife.

“Good Sir, I have come bearing news to end your daughter’s suffering. I come from across the Great Sea, where Nature and knowledge combine to create miracles. Let me help you, friend.”

Silence. A moment of tension fills the atmosphere.

“Far South? Beyond our borders? How can I entrust someone not of my blood to save my beloved daughter? Our lands are at war. How do I know you are not here with hidden agendas? If you come for money, please find it elsewhere, as I am in no mood to test my girl’s life on some stranger.” Papa’s sharp words sliced through air. I could hear the weight of every syllable, heavy and restless.

“I am sorry if I bring you discomfort, but I am truly only here to help. You do not need to pay me, as my service should be free for all during times of peril. Your daughter has been under constant misery. No one you reached out to has cured her so far. I am afraid her willpower is beginning to diminish. Please, I beg. Let me offer what I can.”

I have never heard anyone as genuine as this man.

“Let him help. Papa, please,” I croaked, voice hoarse and ragged.

A moment passed before the wooden door creaked open. A warm hand touched my forehead and enclosed my wrist. I felt the man’s steady heartbeat pulsing. Sounds of shuffling were heard, then a cold clay cup was brought near my lips.

“Drink, young one. I hope it gives you unwavering strength.”

I took several sips from the sweet liquid; it was as smooth as the silk Mama wears when she feels happy. Already, I feel as if some unknown power has been bestowed upon me. I slowly tried sitting up on the bed, rubbed my sore eyes and felt my toes. It really was a miracle.

I quickly scanned the room to find my saviour. He was a stout man with dark, tanned skin. It is obvious he is not someone from nearby.

“Thank you, Sir. I owe you my life,” I smiled weakly.

Mama jumped to hug me, and Papa continued to stand, completely bewildered. The man’s wrinkly eyes were gleaming.

“We neighbours are here to help our fellow brothers and sisters. Our knowledge should be available to everyone. I have travelled for many moons, hoping to spread our miracles. Take my medicine and let it be a reminder: the best thing a human being can do is to help another human being know more.”

With that, he swiftly packed up and left—his words, an echo ringing in our ears.

Many miles East,  
In the Gobi Desert, a pondering camel.

The smouldering heat from the high-rise sun was warm on my fur. The sand and gravel were rough under my hooves. The cracking sounds I make when walking have become a soothing sound after countless trips along our route. Loud sounds of moving merchandise could be heard from inside the lit-up tavern across the street. The familiar shout from my master echoed from within. My Master comes out towards me with a smile, carrying several large bundles bound tightly with bamboo strings.

“Look what we have, companion!” Master beamed. “Rare silk that has never been seen before. I am sure this will reward us with unthinkable fortune. We will never have to worry about joining the war to make ends meet.”

He pulls me down on my knees while he heaves the bundles over my hump and binds them tightly along my back. He hops on my saddle and pulls me up for our recurrent trip. Endless journeys back and forth along this very route have made me stronger, as I am no longer bothered by the weight.

As my master and I trek alone for the first time towards the next city, a journey typically filled with human chatter and laughter is now met with eerie silence. The starlit night sky is all that is left to keep us company. To keep myself awake, I try to focus on the sound of my footfall and the chirping crickets. Using my heightened

senses to fill up the void. If only I could have the power to have conversations with my Master. We could talk about the twinkling stars in the sky, and I could ask why he decided to make this trip alone.

My eyelids grow heavy with the rising of the full moon. The light from the moon shone coolly across the dunes, creating shifting shadows within the sands. The view is picturesque, and every dune seemed identical, creating beauty in its symmetry. All was common occurrences apart from the sound of scuttering footsteps. I halted in my tracks and whipped my head around nervously. I can feel the heartbeat of my master quicken as he panics. He draws out his bow and arrow and aimlessly points it towards the dunes. Just then, a gang of bandits jump in on us from behind. Some of them grab hold of my reins and try to steal the merchandise, while the others fight off my master's arrows. I stomped my hooves and kicked my legs, trying to run away from their sharp blades that were scratching my skin.

After several rough exchanges in a blur, an ominous horn blows in the distance. The gang of bandits took hold of what they had and fled from the battle scene. Stealing my Master's merchandise. Leaving only the essence of the short-lived battle in the trails of disturbed sand.

Master and I stayed in our places for a while, catching our breaths and figuring out which path to take next. A cool breeze flowed through the night. In the horizon, an elderly man approaches with a donkey. He wears very little clothing that drapes over his lean body. He reaches his hand towards Master and offers him a waterskin to drink from.

"My friend, I see you have encountered trouble." His voice is soft yet full of depth.

"It was those rascal bandits!" Master roared. Anger I have never seen before seeps out of him. "They stole the precious silks that I haggled for from the mysterious merchants from the East. I could see my future lined with gold and riches. But now all gone." He buries his face in his arms and sobs. "If only I could pay my revenge on those godforsaken thieves! I would slice all their heads off!"

The elderly man just nods.

"I feel your frustration, friend. For when things do not go our way, you would wish to punish the bad tenfold." He turned to look at me. "But this is not what the Buddha says.

"Who?" Master dried up his tears.

"The Buddha," He repeated, offering Master a small cloth to wipe his face. "He advises us against the pursuit of revenge, emphasising the importance of forgiveness and understanding. Harboring vengeful thoughts will lead to your own suffering and perpetuate your cycle of inner peace. We must move on from what has happened and learn to be good people ourselves." He smiled softly. "Now think, after taking revenge and slaying lives all because of some cloth, would you be able to sleep the rest of your life peacefully?"

Master shook his head sorrowfully after a split second.

The elderly man nodded to himself and began to pack his belongings, preparing to leave.

"Remember, child," he said solemnly. "The teaching of the Buddha: if you truly love yourself, you could never hurt another." And he walks off with his donkey. Their shadows and peaceful image under the moonlight.

Master and I stared at their backs until they could not be seen. He was a simple man, full of tranquillity. His words of wisdom left a profound impact on our hearts. It is rare to meet an honest man during these times of war. But it shows that it only takes one person to remind us of our goodness as humanity.

Master recollected himself and sat on my back. We continue to trek towards the next town. Our footsteps were lighter this time.

When we arrived in town, we steered clear of the inns and merchant stalls where we often trade. Instead, Master found himself a small stall and started gathering information on Buddhism. Sharing his newfound wisdom with anyone willing to listen.

The kind words that once healed Master are now spreading far and wide as people begin to have faith in humanity.

Back in the heavens, the young god smiled to himself. Trade is never only about worldly possessions and world-class craftsmanship; it is a bridge that connects every neighbour. Knowledge and wisdom are shared among those walking on the same path. It is a road that many more will walk on as their words and miracles spread within *humanity*.



# Cleft Rock

*Victoria Shanghai Academy, Li, Hayden Jamie – 16*

## Part 1: The Tear

“You must not venture out beyond the Wall” Shouted sternly by a woman

Kaden knew he would get seen sooner or later, but his confidence did not fade, as if he rehearsed this exact moment in his mind before. He knew what laid beyond the Wall -- *Danger, Violence*, or what the Outsiders called, **The Silk Road**

The cobblestones punished Kaden's feet with every stride. As he raced toward the final, forbidden stretch of the Wall, he clenched the hem of his long robe, freeing his legs for a desperate, extended gait.

The Wall loomed, casting a silhouette on his figure, but he refused to let it slow him down. That was what failed him last time. But this was different. This was his last chance. After tomorrow, all that would remain of his desperate want would be a faint, fading itch in his memory. But tonight, he just needed was

one more look at the Gate.

He skidded to a halt. She was already there.

Teacher Miren stood before the seamless stone of the Great Gate, a shadow against a greater shadow. She didn't move, but the air around her grew colder.

“Kaden!”

Her voice hit him like a slap of cold air, sharp enough to make him flinch. In the hollowness of the Wall, it didn't fade, instead it coiled around him, sprouting quivers on his arm. He was caught.

He couldn't speak. His breath clouded between them.

She stepped forward. The scent that came with her wasn't the warm smell of the hearth—fires or the yeast of the bake—house. It was the fragrance of a wet slate—clean, bleak, and utterly without warmth. It was the smell of the Wall itself.

“I know what you wanted,” she said. Her words were precise, like thorns on the stems of roses. “You wanted to see the Nothing. To let the Absence stare back. It is a sickness in

the blood.” Her eyes, grey as the pre-dawn fog over the reservoir, held his. “And tomorrow, we will cut it out.”

But to Kaden, it sounded rehearsed

A final, stupid bolt of defiance shot through him. He tried to land a kick on her, a jerky, hopeless motion. Her hand shot out, not in anger, but with a terrifying, effortless certainty. Her fingers closed on the fabric of his tunic, right over his pounding heart, to hold him still.

“Enough.”

He shoved against her arm. It was like pushing against the mountain. He pulled back with all his weight.

It did not echo against the Wall. Instead it was swallowed whole, making it seem louder, more intimate. In a world built for silence, it was a soft, whimpering sigh.

*Snick. Snick. Snick.*

One thread at a time. Then a dozen. Then silence.

They both froze, staring at the ruin between them. Her hand was still half-clenched. His tunic—the *only* tunic that mattered to him was torn open over his chest. A web of fine, golden threads hung broken, their ends curling in the still air.

The world emptied.

All sound, all cold, even the crushing weight of Teacher Miren's presence, vanished. There was only a tear in the robe. The golden, honey-colored fabric his father had given him the night before *he* vanished forever. The fabric that was the last warm thing in Kaden's memory. He had worn it every day since he was small, had grown into it, had hidden his face in its softness on the endless nights after. It was the last piece of his world. And now, it was broken.

He couldn't make a sound. His throat was sealed shut with a pain so sharp it felt like the tear was in his own skin.

Miren finally let go.

She turned away. She knew the lesson was over.

The walk back to the living quarters was a funeral procession of one. The night air, which had been still before, now seemed to bite against the newly exposed skin of his chest. He could feel every grain of cold. He clutched the torn edges of the tunic, lifting the precious, ruined hem off the grit of the path, a pointless gesture to protect what was already lost. He didn't dare let it drag. He didn't dare let it get more damaged. He didn't dare say a word.

The silence behind him was louder than any scolding. Thoughts of the Wall, and his future in the community kept spinning in his head.

They stood painfully quiet, as the sun slowly died down, into a tomorrow that now felt like a sentencing.

## **Part 2: The Weight of a Thread**

Miren did not speak as she marched him from the Wall. Her grip on his arm was iron, but it trembled. Instead of taking the main walkway to the living quarters, she pulled him into the narrow service gap between the granary and the slate-roofed Foundry, a passage used only for hauling ash.

She stopped before a warped door of damp-swollen wood. With a key from her belt, she unlocked it and shoved him inside, following and sealing them in darkness filled with the smell of stale linen and rust. She struck a flint and a small oil lantern sputtered to life in her hand, painting her face in a frantic jumping shadow. The fear Kaden saw there was not for a broken rule. It felt much deeper.

She stared at the tear over his heart, at the dangling gold threads. “He wore that color,” she whispered, the words raw, scraped from a place her teacher’s voice never touched. She sounded raspy, as if the words coming from her mouth scratched on her throat when coming out; “The night before they sent him out.”

Kaden’s breath hitched. “My father?”

She nodded,

“He stood where you stood, but asked the questions even you were not brave enough to ask.” She leaned closer, the scent coming from her now smelling like a garden after a killing frost. “I was his teacher, too. I reported his... instability to the Council. I thought it was a mercy. To correct him before the sickness spreads.” Her grey eyes glistened, not with tears, but with a desperate, trapped light. “They assigned him to a Perimeter Patrol. He spent a few years working, and then they never saw him again.”

The confession hung between them, that was the second tear in his world.

She seized his hand. Her skin was icy. She pressed a heavy, cold key into his palm, then a stub of charcoal from her pouch. “The Foundry’s main waste chute empties into the old river tunnel beneath the Wall. It is flushed at dawn. It is the only gap they do not guard.”

With the charcoal, she drew a frantic, simple map on his forearm: a line from where they stood, through the Foundry’s lower hearth-room, to a maintenance hatch. Then she whispered in his ears, “Go, go now. There is a place... a room of discarded things. If they left anything behind, it will be there. Find your proof. Or find your peace. But you must be in the water before the first wake up bell.”

She blew out the lantern. In a sudden, absolute darkness consumed the room. The door opened, then shut. He was alone.

### **Part 3: The Underbelly and the Dead Letters**

Time ceased to be a concept for Kaden. It was a thrumming in his veins, a drumbeat in his heart. He followed the charcoal lines on his skin through a labyrinth of the citadel. He passed the banked, sleeping forges of the Foundry, their residual heat blasting him in waves. He squeezed through the hatch into a channel of slick, warm stone that reeked of metal and cinders.

Here, the citadel’s perfect order unraveled. Crumbling mortar, blackened bricks, and the constant trickle of water leakage, each drop echoed in that claustrophobic tube in the dark. He scrambled, slipped, tore his knees on rough stone. The only sound was his own ragged breath and the distant, awful *drip—drip* sound marking the passage of time he could not afford to waste.

The “room of discarded things” Teacher Miren talked about was not a room. It was a crack in the foundation, widened by corrosion and erosion, stacked to its ceiling with ledgers, shattered crates, and sacks of what felt like rotten cloth. It was the citadel’s neglected memories. Kaden knew most of the history documentations could be found in the Communal Library, but the writings here were left to rot, banished away from the community.

He began to dig, throwing aside the ledgers filled with flawless, meaningless crop yields, manifests for silk that never varied. His fingers were black with grime, numb from the cold. Then, his hand closed on something that was not parchment. It was an oilcloth, wrapped tight around a bundle. He tugged it free. The knot that bound it was not a citadel knot. It was complex, a looping puzzle, and it was tied with a strip of fabric—a faded, fraying strip of honey-gold cloth, identical to the one on his tunic.

His breath caught. This was too easy, he thought, as if the **truth** was searching for him too.

He picked the knot apart with his shaking hands.

Inside were letters. The paper was foreign, coarse and thick. The script was his father's, but wilder, freer than the neat script of the citadel's records:

*Kaden*

*I will find them. I will find every story they tried to erase.*

*There is a world beyond the Wall. It is a road, and I will walk it. They told us the outsiders were all evil. They are not. There is good here too.*

Kaden's breath stopped. The words sounded as if his father was reading it to him now, right into the silence of the tomb-like room.

*I was saved by the hands everyone told me did not exist. My blood was on their fingers, and they cared for me. And they ask for nothing but a story in return.*

*My life now is a testament. I will stand before the Wall one day, not as a ghost, but as proof. Proof that good men walk beyond the silence. Proof that the road holds more than ruin—it holds hands that help.*

*Do not believe the quiet. It is the loudest lie.*

*Look to the Cleft Rock. I will wait.*

Beneath that was a single, sealed parchment labeled:

***ARCHIVE – SECURITY DIRECTIVE.***

Regarding the Matter of Warden Elyas:

The subject, declared lost on Perimeter Patrol, has been confirmed to have made contact with external parties. He has sent unauthorised correspondence attempting to spread subversive narratives regarding the nature of the external threat.

His account is to be considered a deliberate psychological operation by hostile elements. The intent is to erode our safety as a community.

Action Ordered: All incoming material linked to subject Elyas is to be intercepted and destroyed. His name is to be removed from the memorial rolls. Any future mention of his survival is hereby classified as sedation.

All of a sudden, a thunderous CLANG reverberated through the stone above him, deep and final. That was the bell. The flush of the waste chute was imminent. Dawn was here.

--- **Part 4: The Choice in the Dark**

For one moment, Kaden was between 2 choices. The heavy, silent weight of the Wall above him. The

fragile, vivid map in his hands, and risking the lives of everyone in his community. And the other was a path, far too dangerous for his comfort.

He did not think of it as a choice between safety and danger. It was his father's legacy. Just then, the thunder of water began—a deep, groaning roar from the bowels of the

Foundry. *The flush.* He moved hurriedly. He stuffed the letters and the map inside his tunic, against the mended tear. He scrambled back through the channel, hearing the roar of the water getting louder and louder. The waste chute was a cylinder of absolute darkness in the floor of the lower hearth-room, now vibrating with the coming gush of scalding ash and spent water was seconds away. He could feel the heated blast of its approach.

He did not look back. He sat on the edge of the void, his legs dangling into the roaring blackness. He thought of his father's hand, the last time it had rested on his head. He thought of Teacher Miren's trembling grip, her shameful gift.

The first surge of hot, slurry water hit his feet, pulling with terrifying force. He let go.

### **Part 5: The River and the Rock**

The water was not clean. It was a thick, boiling soup of cinders that scoured his skin and stole his breath. It tumbled him, beat him against stone, filled his mouth with the taste of metal and extinction. He was a rag in a giant's fist.

Then, a sudden cold. The slurry met the deep, icy current of the underground river. The force lessened, spread out. He fought to the surface, gasping, spitting. Absolute darkness. Only the roar of water and the feel of a current pulling him *away*.

He swam, not with skill, but with a dumb, animal desperation to keep his head above the churning black. Minutes, or hours—time was the water, and the water was endless.

A pinprick of grey light appeared ahead. It grew. It was the sound of the river changing, echoing into something vast. The tunnel mouth.

The current spat him out into a shallow, rocky stream under a bruised pre-dawn sky. He crawled onto slick, mossy stones, heaving and shivering. He looked back.

The Wall. From the outside, it was even more immense. A sheer, silent curtain of pale stone cutting across the valley, severing the land. It looked less like a shield and more like a scar.

The first true rays of dawn struck the highest parapet, painting it in gold. The morning bell would be ringing in the citadel now. They would find him gone. They would call him lost, another victim of the Nothing.

Kaden pushed himself to his feet. The rough hide of the map chafed against the mended tear in his tunic. He oriented himself, his eyes finding the distant, jagged line of the western hills.

He took a step. The citadel's silence was behind him. Ahead, the wind moved through unseen grasses. It did not scream. It sighed. It carried the scent of wet earth and, faintly, of wild sage.

He began to walk, a single, damp, and insignificant figure against the vastness, leaving the scar on the land behind, following the line on the map toward the Cleft Rock, and the fragile, impossible hope of a person he had never seen in ten years

# The Barbarous Demise of the Silk Road

*Victoria Shanghai Academy, Yin, Hei Tung Alexis – 16*

Historians think that the silk road (TSR) merely ceased to exist, inventing fabricated explanations about the Ottoman–Empire’s closed borders. But today, I’ve decided to expose the truth. As I write this with a shaky hand, “The–Shadows” are coming for me, locating my safehouse as we speak. But the world needs to know – *the barbarous demise of TSR.*

I’m 70 and I’ve truly seen it all. I wasted 52 years being The–Shadows’ trade manager solely for a family legacy. 23 generations of my family were The–Shadows’ servants, being continuously manipulated by them, thinking they were the heroes of trade. I was constantly swayed by my parent’s persistent pleas for me to climb up The–Shadows’ hierarchy to help them bring peace to TSR. “Ember, please. Imagine the life we would have.” “Ember, please. Think about family pride.” I was a fool who believed The–Shadows did justice. I wasted years training myself to become one of them. First, it was becoming the best servant, then the most respectful head attendant, then the most obedient disciple.

Then, one disastrous day, I changed my life by signing my acceptance letter to become The–Shadows’ manager. It was ludicrous how euphoric being a part of The–Shadows was for me. From being a slave, serving tea, suddenly I was able to make decisions, ignite change towards our cherished road. I wanted to protect it; I wanted to defend it from selfish, rich idiots. Little did I know... I was what the road needed protecting from. I’m a mindless lamb throwing my life away over a hierarchical dream. A lamb to be slaughtered.

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I vividly remember what happened after I sealed my fate as manager. I remember how fast I ran to TSR’s Chang’Aan food–market... how the sand caressed my feet as I sprinted. I was so excited to boast about being a part of The–Shadows – I had fulfilled my family legacy!

The sand bathed in sunlight and embraced my every step. The smell of spices hugged the air around me. I was met with bustling cheers, vendors’ shouts and – “Ember dear!” I turned as my face instantly beamed at a pair of familiar lustrous eyes – Duang. Duang was the love of my life. He was a trade–regulator and was part of an organisation that helped maintain fair trade in TSR. At the time, there had been some illegal monopolies controlling the trade market Duang was helping stop. “It’s done! I’m one of the big guys at The–Shadows now!” I exclaimed, walking towards him with a bounce in my step. Duang’s mouth curled up into a blazing smile that radiated warmth from his brightness. “That’s amazing! It’s everything you’ve worked for. Now we can both help protect our sacred TSR,” he cheered. “I want you to meet Mei. She’s a trade–regulator with lots of experience. She has big plans for TSR!”

As Duang gestured towards a woman behind him, my gaze followed his movement to the most perfect woman I’ve met. She walked with a sense of justice that followed her. Her brown hair flowed to her waist, a symbol of the freedom she stood for. Her embodiment of perfection was a clear sign for me to listen to her.

“I’m Mei. Duang says you love TSR with all your heart. I’ve actually gotten some intel on The–Shadows lately and am determined to take them down to restore harmony to TSR.” Her melodic yet commanding voice contrasted with the war in my stomach as I processed her words.

“What do you mean... take down The–Shadows? They’re the heroes of TSR.” I stammered.

“You... actually believe their propaganda? It’s actually far from. They’re the reason TSR is out of whack. They’re human–trafficking dealers and are leveraging the economy for monopolies.”

The words were daggers to my ears, slicing through every truth and principle I dedicated my life towards. My

breath hitched as I tried pushing away my thoughts – the realisation that in a day I would be helping destroy TSR, realising I had wasted my life striving towards something that went against every cell in my body. But in the end, the thought that stood above all else – the one that pushed my worries away, my morals away and what eventually my humanity away, was denial.

“That’s nonsense.”

“Oh? My father owns The–Shadows. I was their heir. I ran away from that horrid place because I couldn’t stand hearing their victims’ screams anymore.”

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After hearing Mei’s warning, any sane person would have then marched home and ripped her acceptance letter in half. But, this day is one of the many days that prove I might as well be deemed insane. Because, the next day, I started my first day as manager.

My tasks were simple. Lang – my callous supervisor, barely looked me in the eye as he explained what I had to do. The–Shadows had been distorting the trade market to leverage monopolies and they wanted me to create fake documents to submit to the government – hiding their corruption. As I worked, documents and letters and scrolls of evidence of their human–trafficking activities were smacked on my desk for me to burn. Every time the flames caressed the paper, I would bite my lip to stop myself from whimpering. What have I come to?

My hands moved on their own. Each word I scratched on the parchment. Each number I crossed out. Each bead I moved on my abacus to fabricate numbers. I was so numb I started to believe that wasn’t me. The girl who abandoned all her morals was entirely consumed by something else. Something that would later eat her up and shove her into the realm of The–Shadows. Stripping her of all her ethics.

“ARGH!” I jumped at the sound, crackling against the silence of our office. Everyone went still as Lang’s footsteps echoed against the marble floor. He stopped in front of my desk. His eyes grazed across the room as my coworkers’ gaze immediately darted to the floor at the icy contact. “What is this?” He spat, slamming a newspaper on my desk with a headline that blared louder than the mug he then shattered to the ground in fury. The room held their breath as everyone scanned the article in fear.

Big block letters screamed the words “The Shadows’ Secret Revealed: The Real Corrupt Culprit Destroying TSR.” The name that stood next to it instantly cackled in my mind. “Mei”. Three letters, but with a terrifying revelation. Mei was carrying out her plans. She was striking back, armoring TSR up for a battle to undo everything we’ve done. The first thing she did was rip off the advantage we’ve held for so long – being able to hide our sins and keep a sparkling cover of being TSR’s heroes. Who knew what her next plans were? All we knew was that she had a full chamber of bullets up her sleeve. And the gun was pointed right at us.

The next few days were the same. I continued my work and each morning became the same routine. I got more and more detached with every shift and the guilt of what I was doing started to go away.

Almost every afternoon, an already fuming Lang would come in with a new article in his hand.

“Another betrayal. She... doesn’t know what she’s doing.” He would say, throwing the article in the trash with great force.

First it was revealing more of our faked numbers... sometimes it was one of our clients' human–trafficking jobs... other times it was one of our murders. But there was nothing we could do to stop it. Lang tried increasing our security but they still somehow managed to see right through us. Lang started to attempt to retaliate and get names of the regulators that worked for Mei but that was never to any avail.

After I got home each night, contemplating all the things I committed for The-Shadows' – the phone would ring. I already knew who it was from. From the one man who was able to drive the numbness out and wake me up from the The-Shadows' nightmare. Each ring reminded me of the passionate self I was before. The one with a dream, the one who stood firm with everything she believed in and would work hard to make it come true. But it was never enough to get me to answer and listen to a pleading Duang to leave The-Shadows. I knew I wouldn't be able to take it.

One day, The-Shadows finally started fighting back. Each second of that day is unshakably carved into my mind.

“Ember.” My heart skipped a beat at the sound of my name said with a glaze of ice.

“I heard you've been seeing... a regulator. One associated with Mei.” I couldn't bring myself to look at his stern and emotionless face as my legs started shaking.

“Sir—” I started.

“Come with me. To Penumbra street. I need you to prove your loyalty. I need to know you haven't been an insider to their organisation. I need to know you are fully committed to us. Sins and all.”

Oh... not penumbra street.

“What do you need me to do?” I breathed, still unable to stop my shaking.

“Our men have finally captured a regulator. I need you to do the honours.”

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Penumbra street was where their headquarters infamously stood – the devastating alleyway that was only ever lit by a single lamppost. Even during the day, sunlight was too afraid to take even a peek into the street. Each shaky step I took was met with a piercing shock of cold up my calves from the icy concrete floor. The aroma of gunpowder and blood stabbed my nose with every quivery breath I took. It made me never want to breathe again, to suffocate. The gun burned in my hand and felt like a shard of glass piercing through my flesh. It was a jarring juxtaposition to the heat I felt in my stomach. I tried to look away from the man standing in front of me but a pair of icy fingers instantly pressed against my temple, turning my head to face his fearful eyes.

“What are you waiting for, Em? What, are you not loyal to us? Have you been disrespecting The-Shadows by plotting against us?”

I wanted to say no. I wanted to scream “please believe me. I don't want to do this. Please believe my words.” But my body was frozen in place. My muscles were rigid. I felt my legs tremble and struggle to hold me upright. If the wind was even a little stronger, I knew it would push me over along with the weight of the sin I was about to commit.

“To think your family has been loyal to us for so long. And now... you are the one to disappoint them. The one who climbed up. The one who was supposed to make them proud.”

That did it. Hearing that sentence. Hearing the collection of all my fears and insecurities and pain verbalised in a single, casual sentence. Used against me like a weapon. It was the final push I needed to fall down the cliff of “The-Shadows”. To crawl into the canyon of their sins and be trapped in their manipulation for the rest of my life. My finger pushed backward and sent a shock down every bone in my being, an electrifying blow in every one of my veins. The rifle bellowed but everything suddenly muted around me. Everything in my body shut down as my humanity slipped away much like the bullet that just launched...



After the murder, things only got worse. Duang stopped calling me. I wasn't picking up but the fading rings of the phone were the only thing grasping me to the person I used to be. Mei, being the brilliant woman she is, doubled down on her tactics – refusing to give into The-Shadows' bluff. News articles were slapped onto my desk every morning with a raging Lang – who somehow made the office air colder than it already was. Fellow managers started disappearing every other day, never to be heard of again. More and more Kings and government officials started showing up at our office for inspections.

I thought all of this showed that Mei really knew what she was doing. She knew what buttons to press to anger us. That she was winning the fight. But, devastatingly, Mei had a blindspot; She underestimated just how far The-Shadows were willing to go to protect themselves.

One disastrous evening, Lang came into the office with a defeated demeanour. “This has gotten out of hand.” Lang said, his cold voice echoing off the wooden shelves. “We cannot keep this up. The executives have made a decision that will end all of this once and for all. And I mean everything.”

“What is it?” One of the other managers asked.

Lang froze. Even he, who many believed didn't have a heart, knew the weight of the following words that exited his mouth.

“The executives decided to remove all evidence of our wrongdoings. All traces... everything.” He couldn't look any of us in the eye as he muttered: “TSR will cease to exist.”

My heart dropped.

Lang almost choked as he said: “There have been bombs spread out on the road. Placed by our different branches. Each of you is in charge of turning one on.” The world blurred around me as Lang started assigning each manager to a bomb. This was inhumane – a step far beyond the line we crossed long ago. TSR held a special place in my heart – the one I swore to protect. It was unfathomable that I was being instructed to destroy it. Even more so that I was willing to. My body unfroze at the sound of my name.

“Ember. You are in charge of the Eastern China bomb on main street” he ordered brusquely.

No. That's where Duang works.

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Duang's hut on TSR wasn't fancy or particularly elegant. But for the both of us, it was our second home. We shared a lot of memories there. After my shifts with The-Shadows, I would go there embracing a box of extra tea leaves I got from work. I would brew him a cup of soothing, warm tea that tasted like sunshine while he worked. The sight of the hut next to the bomb weakened my muscles. Our laughter echoed in my ear. The memories flickered in my mind. I could almost smell the tea, the scrolls he stacked in his study.

I don't even remember turning on the bomb and starting the timer. All I remember was the sound of voice – all too familiar. As my body turned towards the sound I realised how much the voice had changed. The once warm and inviting tone was now replaced with apathy and impassivity. It was like hearing a stranger's voice who once sang you lullabies. “Duang.” I breathed, my vision blurry as my eyes started getting heavy at the sight of his face.

The face Duang looked at me with was full of detest and abhorrence. His eyes once lustrous and full of love were now detached and emotionless at the sight of me propped next to the bomb. His voice almost reminded me of Lang's – frigid and without a single sign of warmth.

“Go ahead. Blow it all up. I'm not moving.”

I felt my breath break off and my heartbeat halt his words. “No...” My voice tremored as I struggled to fight off the tears catching in my throat. “Please... please don’t do this.” I breathed as I let my legs give way and felt my body drop to the ground.

“I’m standing right here. Ember, I’m giving you a chance to change. The restoration of TSR we planned – it could still happen. All you need to do is plug in the password to turn it off.”

I felt my whole life replay in my mind. All the pressure I endured and the dedication I poured into standing right there where I was – in hopes of protecting TSR. Now, I knelt in front of the man I love, about to blow up the two things that gave me reason to live.

“Duang, you know I can’t.” I bit my lip in guilt and shame as I felt my arms move on their own and reach for the bomb’s trigger. Duang’s eyes widened with slight surprise as he watched me press the button.

The first beep of the bomb echoed in the heavy silence between us.

“Ember— ember. No, don’t do this.” Behind me, I heard a panting voice alongside all too familiar footsteps. Mei.

“Ember, no. You love him. You love him! You once dedicated your life to undoing all the things you stand for now.”

The second beep was even louder than the first. It acted as fuel to the already blazing tension. I could barely hear Mei’s rapid footsteps and pants coming towards me as my blurry thoughts buzzed in my head. I felt a shock of frost shoot up my hands as they brought me up on my feet again.

Beep.

The last thing I saw before I went darting south was Duang’s eyes. The eyes that were once filled with excitement and light, with love I thought would never disappear.

Beep.

Then, those eyes became icy and cold, looking at his love continuously twist the knife with every step she stumbled towards “The—Shadows”.

Beep.

Now, those eyes were looking at, not his love, but a woman he didn’t know anymore. His eyes acted as a plea for me to stop, return to who I was before. His eyes had pierced through my own with a warm brush of pain as he realised what I’d done.

Beep.

That’s the last time I saw my love.

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“This was all we could find from the victim’s safe house sir. This sheet of paper with shaky handwriting. It’s titled: ‘The Barbarous Demise of TSR.’”



Creative Writing  
**Fiction**

Group 5

# A Silk Letter Carried by the Desert Wind

*HD Beijing School, Lin, Tiffany – 16*

The first time that my fingertips brushed the Dunhuang grottoes, I thought it was a blast of icy wind, it was the scorching June morning, and sunlight filtered through the small opening at the cave's top, spotting the ground with faint gold. "This city was invaded by the Zhu's uprising..." that all boring stuff that the history teacher has taught several times. So bored that I've went to taken a sip of iced soda—resulting in a brain freeze. That reminded me of a tail that went in my mind for no reason, which was about five unlucky pirates eating ice cream, thinking of that, while I'm examining the motels near the floor, suddenly my palm bumped against something soft. It was not the rough, dusty stone I'd expected, but a piece of fabric, cold and smooth, that clung on my hand as if it was waiting for me.

It was no ordinary fabric, but with a letter sewn in the lining of it, without any hesitation, I rushed home. Using a needle to pick the threads out was a hard, one at a time, the threads went out of the fabric, revealing an "O" stitched with fluffy orange thread, barely showing any color due to rain washing and blazing sun in the deserts. But surprisingly, the letter was nicely kept and showed no sign of fading. With shaking hands, the elegant cursive of Tang dynasty catches my eyes, they flow like the silk itself, slowly revealing a story...

"Dear Hermes, two years has slipped by since I've received your last letter, the phoenix trees in our back yard has blossomed and weltered, weltered and blossomed..." It began. the writer was a girl living in the Tang dynasty, writing to her brother who left home to go on a trip to the silk road a few years ago, she told him about the things that happened during his trip out, the neighbor's son has married to the most beautiful women in the village, wearing the silk robe that he has bought him before going on the trip. "I love the sweet osmanthus cake you bring back every day. I'd wish to see your red camel bells one day ringing on the streets..." She wrote.

The letter went on, filled with small, daily details that made my eyes blur up, as I read, "dear Hermes, our city was captured by foreign troops, daddy and mommy hid me in a wooden cabinet, then was murdered by the invaders..." the letter stopped mid-sentence, as if someone has interrupted her or as if she had heard some news that made her drop the brush. There was no date, no signature, and just a half-written word. Maybe wishing that someone would pick it up and give it to her brother.

It was a long night, listening to the howls of the distanced wind, like the whispers of the lonely merchant and monks, carrying the hopes and fears with them. Letters pressed to my chest, it was luring me towards the truth, what happened to him? Had he gotten lost in the sandstorm, or is a robbery? Had he ever thought about his younger sister on his way out?

So that when the sun has just risen, I've went to the Dunhuang research center to find some information about this girl and her brother, a greyed hair grandma listened to the story, with trembling hands she watched my letter, in a split second that her eyes were blurry and full of tears. "what a miracle..." she said, "most silk letters were found in tombs or other caves... this was the only one that carried love and was not buried somewhere." Then she pointed out that there was a merchant recorded that has the same name as the girl's brother—Hermes. It was a name that meant envoy and communication, he went south carrying silk and treasure to trade and spread knowledge to the locals. But after a huge sand storm, he was never to be seen again, no one knows why and where did he go.

Three days later, I stepped on the train to Turpan, changing my trip from visiting to "cultural research". As the traditional green train rumbled through the endless desert, my mind has been blown away, wondering how did a person cross this desert with only a camel and supplies, I couldn't help but admire these people, if it wasn't them, the cultures would never have been spread between countries.

Sand danced in the winds, whirled widely, then drifting away into the boundless desert, vanishing without any trace. That was my first impression on Turpan. After wondering for a bit, a bazaar appeared midair after a sand storm whooshed by. After walking in, there were lots of merchants selling old and medieval stuff. I quickly went asking about if they have ever heard about the man Hermes or the red camel bell, most of them shook their heads, but an old man pointed at his mom, who was sitting in a corner waving blankets, "Mama knows everything, she grew up in the village that was beside the silk road." he said.

The woman was near hundred, wrinkles crawled all over her face, making her seem like the weathered rocks that were standing in the desert for too long. When I said the brother's name, the tears filled her eyes, "the one has come..." she mumbled, getting up slowly, hobbling inside the room, returning with an old rusty box, it opened with a soft "creak", revealing an corroded red bell, the red so faded that I could barely see the color inside it, when it rang, scenes revealed in front of me, a dashing man riding on a camel, slowly fading in the sand storms, tears slide down his cheeks, leaving a trail of streaks on his dusty face. The woman started to mumble in a hoarse voice, "grandpa found this on the road in the desert near the old road of desert oasis, he said that this was the camel bell from a Tang merchant that gave candy and taught knowledge to children wherever he goes. We were told to pass this bell to a girl that came and said his name. and tell her that keep going north, until reaching a village that was selling silk." I quickly realized that she meant his sister.

I turned the bell over, and sure enough, there was a tiny "s" carved on the inner side of the bell, it was the same one on the silk letter, I pressed some money onto the woman's hands, she quickly refused it, saying that "you are taking the letter back to him, he is our village's savior, that payment is already enough." Without noticing, tears blurred my eyes, after thanking the old woman, I left the old bazaar, right after leaving it, a strong sand storm whooshed by, the bazaar disappeared right in front of me, as if it was all a dream, but the dusty old bell in my pocket reminded me that I have to keep going.

From Turpan, I took the bus to Kashgar, a village in there was the only one place that was famous of collecting silk. On the way, the road got harder and harder to travel, buses kept sinking into the ground, rocks bumping the bus as if it wants to separate me into halves. People got down one by one, until the bus arrived in an old village, there was no one else then me on the bus.

Walking in, I met an old man that had a collection of silk in his room, seeing that there was a similar silk fragment in there, with the name Hermes, I knew this was the thing I'm looking for, "my mother got this from a Chinese merchant." He said. "He was ill so that she took him back and cured him, he gave this to her before he left, telling that this was written by his sister," "Phyllis I think the name it was." The letter was warm amber blending with soft pink, leaving a glow of dust – it was the same color as the sunset on the Wei river.

On the letter, he wrote that he is going to Samarkand after his injury has healed, the camel with goods was lost there, "Dear Phyllis, if you have read this letter, I'm probably dead, if I was alive, this letter would have been written fully until reaching a city to send home, how was it there, I've told the villagers to give this to you, I want to tell you that I really miss you, mother and father, if you were early enough, you could rummage the pouch on my camel and find osmanthus cakes and goods I've bought on the way, every single thing is for you, I can't go home without those put on your hands, so I will keep on going until they are found, your brother Hermes." Long silence, the low wind in the desert hummed a mournful ballad.

Traveling on the endless desert, legs going numb, I pressed ahead, mind slipped away, bit by bit. Suddenly, something hard bumped onto my foot, it was an saddle put on camels, I quickly dropped on my knees, brushing the dust coating on it, finding lots of old goods, noticing that this may be the place where Hermes died hundreds of years ago. But something beside it also caught my eye, it was a silk wrapped letter similar as Phyllis's original letter that I've found earlier.

With trembling hands, I opened it, "dear Hermes," it started, "after our house was looted, I've went on the way to find you, the world was so big to see. On the way, I've seen homeless people begging on the streets, families turning on to each other, and folks fighting for resources while scheming against one another... a villager told me that you may have went on this way, so I'm here to find you, wait for me, I will find you, where ever you are..."

She was in her 60s, still on the way to finding her brother, I took out my pen, and started to write on the frayed paper...

With every stroke of the pen, sand stirred up and scattered. Not before long, the swirling dust blotted out all colors from the world, leaving nothing but a vast, hazy place. In the blur, I seemed to see an older brother taking his little sister's hand, calling out, "Darling, let's go home." As the camel's bells tinkled softly, I passed out.

I don't know how long has passed, when I woke up, I saw my mother frantically calling my name, "thank god nothing wrong went on you my darling!" I asked weakly, "What have I been through? Why am I here!"

“Luckily, I’d put a GPS tracker on you. You passed out right beside the hotel, in the middle of the desert.” Mom said, I couldn’t help but put my hands into my pocket, and then my fingers brushed against a hard camel bell. Instantly, I felt at peace. “Mom, you’re making such a fuss, I’m all alright, see?” I said. “I’m fine.” While mom was still going about safety cautions while traveling, I glanced out the window. The sand dunes looked just like an older brother and a little sister snuggling together, smiling at me, and mouthing the words “Thank you.”

# A Journey and A Coin

*HD Beijing School, Mao, Derek – 16*

Watson had always loved history since childhood, and he always appeared in any history related museums. During the middle of summer vacation, while he is doing housework in the basement, its air smells like lots of aged paper and settled dust, he found a colorful box tucked beneath the eaves. "This seems to be something left by my grandfather." He picked up the box, and the weight of memories it carried far exceeded his imagination. Watson opened the box and found only two items inside: a faded, soft map with intricate, complex patterns, the words on it almost unrecognizable, its cloth write about a forgotten journey; the other item was some bronze coins, each one cool to the touch and stamped with a worn camel design on the top.

The words of his grandfather that talk to Watson about 5 years ago suddenly appear in his mind "If there is a chance, go complete the journey that I couldn't finished. This path is not about physical gains and losses, but about the people you meet." Watson was originally an ordinary young man who was interested in some fiction books and adventure stories, and had never personally tried a true adventure. But at this moment, he made a decision. Quitting the useless office job, spent the entire summer, brought a train ticket, following the map from Xi'an all the way to Istanbul, but he never thought that this bronze coin would become the key to unlocking the past.

The journey began in Xi'an. The ancient city walls still standing, like some giants watching at the citizens living in the city, Watson strolled along the bustling Hui Street, where the rich, and full of the smell of roasted cumin lamb made the atmosphere warm and relaxed. He saw a business man under a faded red awning, selling old fashioned pottery, Watson get interest at a sculpture and he pick up a small, dusty horse figurine.

At this moment, the bronze coin in his pocket suddenly heated. Everything around him began to spin, and the modern signs completely vanished. He found himself standing on a bustling street made of sand, with people wearing robes and headscarves on both sides, A camel walked by, leaving a trail of saliva that made Watson unbelievable.

An old man with big beard notice Watson, especially the modern attire he was wearing, the man came up with a smile, "dude, you came from a far place Isen it?" he lifted a piece of deep red silk, Watson haven't reacted yet, "It seem yes.", "I know where you from, now take this." He picked up the silk passing to Watson, "I have no money." Watson refused, But the man ignored him, "This is the finest silk, worthy of a king." Watson take over the silk, confused, "WTF." Watson's heart beat faster as he took out a bronze coin and handed it over, A hint of interest flashed across the shopkeeper's eyes as he took the coins, Watson seemed to notice a slight change in the pattern on the coin, it changes from camel into a piece of silk. Watson confused again, after he check the detail of the silk, the world twisted again. He stood in front of the modern booth again, but this time, he has a piece of exquisite ancient silk in his hand.

Watson boarded the westbound train and pay attention on scenery gradually transform into a vast yellow desert. Finally, he arrived at the Mogao Caves, a place where hundreds of murals have been carved into the cliffs. He walked into a cave, which was very cool inside. Looking up, he saw a mural depicts the monks who traveled west to obtain Buddhist scriptures. "Interesting." Studently, the bronze coins in my pocket are heating up again, the world twist again, he was no longer alone, but standing in a bustling space, which painters are mixing pigments, while monks are writing furiously. A young woman with red paint on her fingers notice him and handed him a small wooden box containing the red powder, "have a try, I know where you from." Watson take over the box, "This is used to paint Buddhist robes," she explained simply, "This color will last forever." Watson exchanged bronze coins with her, after the woman took the coin, at that moment, he returned to the silent cave, with the wooden box in his pocket. "That's strange."

The next day, Watson joined a group of tourists to experience camel riding in the desert. During the night, he sat by a campfire between a small lake. As the flame's dances, he took out a bronze coin the check the details. At that moment, the coin heated again, the world twist again, and humble camp transformed into a vast expanse of circular tents, "not again?" On the other side of the lake, a business man with blue eyes notices Watson and walk to him, showing him, an exquisite carpet woven with patterns of fruits and birds, "This wool is very sturdy," he said in a hoarse voice, "it can be passed down through several generations. And, I know where you came from.

“Watson confused, “why you guys are always talking this, there I came from? And exchanging stuff with me.” the business man didn’t answer Watson; Watson took out the red silk which he gets in Xi'an and presented one piece. The business man looked surprised, gently touching the silk with his fingers, evidently moved by its smooth texture, and immediately agreed to the exchange. Suddenly, someone shouted nearby, and the desert night returned to its original state. Watson was still sitting beside the campfire, with a wool blanket on his knees.

Next, his journey brought him to Samarkand, which the city renowned for its magnificent blue-toned architecture. He paused in the central of the city. At this moment, the bronze coins in his pocket felt unbearably hot. The empty city was suddenly filled with people wearing armor, and huge elephants carrying spice bags walked slowly by. “Wait, ancient India?” A woman dressed in a shiny silk dress attracted by the cloth Watson wears, she walks to Watson holding a small white ceramic jar in her hand, Watson get interested in those goods he had, "This is a specially made perfume from the ocean," she described meticulously, "just one drop can fill the entire room with fragrance." Watson searched in his pocket, and took out a coin, The woman's face showed joy and give two perfumes to Watson. A loud bell rang, it gave Watson a fright, the bustling square twisted and transforming it back to its modern appearance, “wait, is that it? I haven't had much time to get to know it yet.”

At the last journey, Watson arrived Istanbul. Standing on a bridge with fancy patterns on the side of the bridge, the bronze coin heated again. Suddenly, the bridge beneath his feet transformed into old wooden version, and the cars vanished, replaced by some boats and hardworking fishermen. Watson wandering around and enjoying the sights. An elderly man with a kind face and wrinkles appeared in front of him, holding a very fancy glass vase in his hand, "This is the glass we make it from here, either raw materials and technique" the old man said proudly, "It can be used to hold wine, water, or some special memories." Watson hand over the perfume he gets from India, and the old man opened the cap, sniffed, smiled, and then handed the vase to him.

Watson gripped the railing, feeling the past slipping away quietly as the city lights and distant traffic became clearer in his sight. He stood alone on the bridge, the evening wind blowing the river's surface below the bridge, and recalled all his experiences happened, his backpack was heavy and full of items from another time period: a bolt of silk, some paint made by minerals, a folded carpet, pungent spices, a vial of floral perfume, and a delicate blue glass bottle. What he did wasn’t just following a map. He embarked on the path his grandfather had once walked and met the people his grandfather had spoken of. By completing this journey, Watson finally felt that he had brought the experience back to his grandfather, and put all the goods he gets and the map and the coins into a polished wooden box, its lid closing with a soft, final sigh, waiting for the next challenger.



# The Journey of Xuan Zang

*HD Beijing School, Ning, Scott – 17*

I am Xuan Zang, this diary records an unknown history you might never heard about. The story begins with a curious kid. When I was a child, I had once heard adults say that there was a trade route called the Silk Road. This road stretches for thousands of miles, starting from Chang'an and extending all the way to Rome.

Later, when I grew up, I heard about Buddhism and decided to go to the Western Heaven to obtain the scriptures. At first, everyone believed that the true scriptures were hidden in the Kingdom of Tianzhu (nowadays India). But after years of study the scriptures and discuss Buddhism with eminent monks from all around China, I suddenly realized that the true scriptures were not in India but at the western end of the Silk Road. That is the real place for me to obtain the real scriptures.

To well-prepared, I had carefully studied the customs and habits along the way from the Hexi Corridor to the Central Asia (Still control by Tang empire). I recorded the terrain change on the tour, important specialties I need to follow and local traditions. I also talked with merchants and wandering monks that once travel along the Silk Road. I learned survival skills, cultural taboos, and how to adapt to different places from them. When everything was ready, I left Chang'an with my luggage and headed west. I crossed the Yumen Pass, passed through the Hexi Corridor, and saw the magnificent Anxi Protectorate. Then, I walked into the boundless Gobi Desert. I met many merchants and travelers along the way. When they saw me searching for scriptures alone, they often gave me dry food and water and warned me of the dangers ahead. We had a very pleasant chat. I share the culture of Central Plains, and they tell me the strange stories of the Western Regions. These exchanges strengthened my determination even more.

On my way to Central Asia, I passed through countless city-states, you can see many foreign merchants gather here. Entering a market, you can hear shouts and noises mixed with Sanskrit, Persian and Sogdian tones with in this area. From the merchant you can see tea, spices, medicinal materials, textiles, blankets, silk, furs, leather, pots, bowls, ladles, basins, porcelain, silk and many more goods were sold. Half of them is the Tang's style, and other half I have never seen before, maybe they are from Arabic Empire, or they might come from the mystery country of Rome. Most local people believe in Islam and hold prayer ceremonies every day. I respect the local traditional culture and have recorded all these cultural customs in my diary of my travels to the west. I listened to scholars talk about the trade history of the Silk Road in the ancient city of Suyab, and I shared the essence of Buddhism with people in the Arab market. In return, local scholars taught me the Arab calendar and foreign philosophy, and merchants provided me with drought-resistant fruits and sand-prevention tools. When I got lost, the merchants of the Silk Road led the way for me, making me deeply feel the kindness and simplicity of the people along the way.

The terrain in Central Asia is very diverse. At here, you can see the steep peaks, which are covered with withered bushes. At here, you can see some lush green canyon with a trickling stream flowing through. At here, you can see vast highlands, when you stand on them, with a simple raise of the hand, you can feel you can touch the clouds.

After I leave Suyab, after about three months of tour, I reach the next stop of the way to Rome, Teheran. This Persian capital city is located at the southern foot of the Elburz Mountains. When you view it from a long distance, you can see the earth yellow city walls built along the mountains. Buildings lays layer upon layer, reached all the way to the mountainside. When I entering the city, it was the time of a religious festival of the Persians. The streets were delicate with colorful brocades that embroidered with geometric patterns and Persian scriptures. The vendors use their fluent Persian language to tout their products, sometimes said with a few stiff Sogdian and Arabic words. Their forging techniques were also completely different from what I had seen within the land of the Tang. Surprisingly, many shops were filled with celadon produced in Chang'an. The stall owners told me that these goods were transported by Sogdian merchants and were highly favored by the Persian nobility, with prices that are comparable to golds. At the end of the street, there's a storyteller, dressing in a loose Persian robe and wearing a white headscarf and narrating the ancient legends of the Persian Empire.

When crossing the Armenian Plateau, I encountered heavy rain raining for several days. The muddy mountain road is very slippery and hard to walk on. The great rain destroys the walkability of the dirt road. I know it's very

dangerous to keep going. Fortunately, I received help from the local residents on the mountain settlement. They warmed me up with some warm water and gave me some whole grain bread to fill my stomach. During the three days in the local village, the villagers' express their different perception of the world from the version people in the Tang Dynasty have. Their extraordinary knowledge left a deep impression on me. From their accounts, I heard about the situation in Europe and recorded the cultures, geological features and military powers of several European countries they described, such as the Holy Roman Empire and the Frankish Empire.

After months of traveling, I finally arrived at the land of the Eastern Roman Empire. When the breeze of the Bosphorus Strait brushes on my cheek, Constantinople spreads out in my eyesight. This great city is at the junction of Europe and Asia. The capital city of Rome Empire is separate by the strait. It is the borderland of heartland of the Thrace plain in Europe and the mountain coast of Anatolia in Asia. The city wall of Theodosius encircles the city, those bricks glittering in the sunlight. This is the destination of my trip.

The Bosphorus Strait is dotted with sails and huge merchant ships. When I cross the euro Asian land bridge I can see the style change drastically from Arabic to Greek buildings. The dome of Hagia Sophia rises on a highland along the European coast. The blue glazed tiles shine in the sunlight and are reflected in the blue waves of the strait, echoing the mosques on the Asian side. I can see marble buildings lined up on both sides of the street, and people came and went in an endless stream. The sounds of Latin and Greek conversations interwove together. This place is like the crossroad of the western world and eastern world.

With the help of a monk, I meet the archbishop of the Eastern Roman Empire. He wears a richly decorated robe in the color of violet, which shows his nobility and status. He sincerely asked me the reason for coming to pick up the Bible. When I told him why I come to this place far from my homeland, he didn't make any . Instead, he smiled softly and led me through the quiet halls of the church to a small, dimly lit room deep inside, which I believe is the repository. Inside the large repository room, I see rows of wooden shelves reaching to the ceiling, and countless parchment scrolls were neatly stacked on them. The air was filled with the smell of old paper and dry ink, a warm and historically rich scent. The archbishop slowly walked up to a bookshelf, gently stroked the scrolls with his fingers, and then took out two special books. He carefully handed me the two books. One of them is an Arabic translation of the Bible, and its pages are somewhat worn out due to repeated reading. The other one is the original Latin version, with clear and elegant handwriting, and has been well preserved for many years.

I have a basic understanding of Arabic. Holding the classics, I studied them word by word. Although many doctrines were hard to understand, the archbishop patiently explained them to me. At parting, the archbishop presented me with that Latin Bible.

Carrying the true scriptures, I set off on my way home. The way back is still long. Along the way, I dictated some chapters of the Bible to the merchants traveling with me, and they chose to record them in writing. When I crossed the Gobi Desert and climbed over the snow-capped mountains again and returned to Chang 'an, the people of the city lined up on both sides to welcome me. Emperor was also waiting in person at the Zhuque Gate.

I presented to Emperor the experiences I had during my westward journey, the local customs and traditions along the way, as well as the Bible. Emperor was flipping through the travelogues I had recorded and was overjoyed. He issued an edict to establish a translation office and ordered me to preside over the translation of the Bible into Chinese. In the following years, I, along with many scholars, devoted myself to translating scriptures and finally completed the first Chinese version of the Bible.

# A Camel's Tale

*HD Beijing School, Qin, Stephen – 17*

I woke up on my owner's farm. I was the strongest camel there, raised in Dunhuang and had lived there for five more years. Yesterday morning, a caravan arrived and said something to my owner. Then an armed guy grabbed my reins and we quickly left. There were other camels and several horses traveling with us. As an old horse said, we were on a trip to different countries around the world.

"This is going to be a long trip," I said, with obvious disappointment.

"Sure it is," the old horse replied. "Time is relatively the easiest issue you will need to get used to. Other than that, you can no longer be treated like a little baby, boy." The surrounding camels laughed out loud. It seemed every one of them had been through this before.

"My name is Russell, by the way," said the old horse. "And the camel brothers over there are Adam and Bob. They were bought a week ago. They adapted really fast, though."

"What about that pony?"

"That one? He's a walking tragedy. His parents died a month ago, and now, he has nowhere to go but to stay with us."

There was nothing in the desert but extremely dangerous creatures. Toxic scorpions were everywhere, and I could see skeletons every five miles. It reminded me of how difficult it was to survive.

The sun rose higher. The heat grew. My feet sank into the sand with each step. Russell, the old horse, walked beside me. "We are going west," he said. "First through the big desert. Then to towns with strange names. We carry silk, spices, and tea. These things are valuable. Guardians sometimes fight for them."

I looked at the other camels—Adam and Bob. They walked steadily and did not seem tired. The little pony walked behind us. His head was low, and he was strangely quiet.

Days passed. The desert was vast and empty. The wind blew sand into our faces. Water was scarce, so we could only drink very little. Our food was dry grass and hard grain. At night, the cold bit deep. We slept close together for warmth.

One morning, we saw dark shapes on the sand. Russell stopped. "Bandits!" he shouted. The men in our caravan gathered. They held swords and bows and looked extremely nervous. The armed guy holding my reins tightened his grip. My heart beat fast. The bandits were on horses. They wanted our goods. A fight began. It was loud and chaotic. Arrows flew, and swords clashed. I was really terrified. I wanted to run, but Adam and Bob stopped me. They looked calm. "Stand still!" Adam shouted. "If we run, we cause trouble. The team still needs us to carry things." We tried to stay together. The little pony trembled. Russell stood in front of him. "Stay behind me!" Russell said. The fight did not last long. Our guards were strong. The bandits ran away. One of our horses got hurt and limped. The doctor quickly bandaged his wound. We moved on again.

That night, the mood was somber. The little pony finally spoke. His name was Finn. "I saw my parents fall in a fight like that," he said. "They did not make it." The entire caravan had quieted down. Russell nudged Finn gently. "You are with us now, and you will never lose anyone from now on. We should keep moving. Time is not our friend."

More days went by. The landscape changed slowly. Sand turned into rocky hills. Then we saw green. A small oasis appeared. There were trees and water. We drank deeply and finally got the chance to eat fresh grass. It felt like a dream. At the oasis, we met another caravan. They came from the opposite direction. They had camels like us, and their goods were different: glassware, wool, and strange fruits. The guards traded stories, and we had a break together. An old camel from the other group came to me. "You are from Dunhuang," he said. I nodded. "I was born there too, many years ago. This road is long, but it is full of stories. You will see great cities and cross high mountains. You will learn to endure..."

His words stayed with me. I was no longer just the strongest camel on a farm. I was part of something bigger—a line of travelers connecting east and west.

We left the oasis. The journey continued. We climbed hills and crossed a shallow river. The weather turned cold. Snow appeared on distant peaks. "The mountains are next," Russell said. "The path is narrow and steep. You must step carefully." The climb was hard. The air grew thin. My legs ached, but I still remembered the old camel's words. I had to endure. Adam and Bob encouraged me. "Do not look down. Look ahead. Take one step at a time." Finn the pony struggled more. His small legs slipped on the ice. Russell helped him. "Use my tail for balance," Russell said. Finn held on. We moved slowly as a group. No one was left behind.

After many days, we reached the top of a pass. The view opened up. Green valleys lay below. Smoke rose from villages. The world was huge and varied. I felt small but not afraid.

We descended into a new land. The people looked different. Their clothes were bright. Their language was strange. The smells changed too—spices, smoke, animals, and bread.

We entered a busy town. The market was loud and crowded. Our goods were unloaded, and new goods were placed on our backs. I saw Russell talking to a local donkey. "We rest here for two days," Russell told us later. "Eat well. Rest well. The next part is longer."

In the stable, we shared food and stories. Adam and Bob talked about their first trip. They had been scared too. Now they were calm. They knew the routine.

Finn asked, "Will we ever stop traveling?" Russell was quiet for a moment. "Maybe," he said. "Some animals settle in new places, some return home, and some keep walking until they grow old. But home is not just a place. It can be the road itself, or the group you travel with."

I thought about the farm in Dunhuang. It felt far away. These animals felt like my new family. The caravan was my home now.

We left the town when the sky was pink with dawn. Our loads were different but still heavy. Our path stretched west again. I did not know how many miles lay ahead. I did not know what dangers waited. But I knew I was not alone. I walked with friends. I carried my share. I was a camel of the Silk Road, and my journey had just begun.

The wind carried distant sounds—bells from other caravans, calls of strange birds, voices in many tongues. The world was wide, but under my feet, the road was one. Step by step, we moved forward, into the next sunrise, into the next story, together.

# A Crack of Gold on the Silk Road

*HD Beijing School, Wang, Lorie – 16*

Wandering in the museum of Dunhuang Ancient Cultural Relics, browsing through the exhibitions. Suddenly, I was attracted to an accessory with a jade disc on it, the inlaid gold wire was glittering under the display lighting. It seemed to be calling out to me, urging me to walk towards it. After a dizzy spell, I felt the whole world was spinning and I was almost fainting. I didn't know the time, but I guessed I must have slept for a long time. I rubbed my eyes, the surroundings have undergone earth-shaking changes, I realized I was no longer in that museum.

I felt stroking from a pair of rough hands, they're from an old artisan. He stared at me for a while, seemed to be thinking about something. Then, I was placed on an old-fashioned grinding machine, water and the grinding stone shaped me, polished me. After, a carving knife was carving and grinding on me, the old man examines me against the light over and over again. Once, a young guy comes, it should be his apprentice. 'Such an exquisite jade! It's a pity that there is a crack.' 'Not exactly,' he chuckled, 'you think this as a damage, but when you change your perspective, it's uniqueness made it charming.' With these words, he took out a gold thread, carefully hammered the gold wire into the groove and firmly 'locked' it in my body. In the midst of flames, the gold thread bind tighter with me.

The next day, I was sold on the trade market, lying with the other delicate crafts. Various languages lingers in my ears, hardly I can identify what they're saying. Suddenly, I was picked up by a rough and powerful hand. He touches the crack inlaid with gold. I read his feeling in his eyes, he saw the craftsmanship and ingenuity beyond the craft. Subsequently, it was his deep voice: "I'll take this. What's your offer?" The old artisan smiled: "You have a good eye." The deal has been concluded, with a paper with an extensive transaction. I was wrapped in a soft Chinese silk and nestled in a wooden box, starting my journey on the silk road. Like a seed chosen by fate, I'm about to be blown by the wind towards an unknown land.

Bouncing in the wooden box, it must be a bumpy track. Where will my next destination be? I wandered. In a daze, drowsiness swept over me. As the wooden case opened, my conscious was awakened. Lifted by a pair of hands, I was able to catch a glimpse of the surroundings. Quickly I recognized my position and the situation—I was in an oriental palace-style architecture. Seems that the jade was a part of the tribute for the host of this palace. The owner was the princess of that nation. I've heard her name before on the way to the palace. She was renowned for her unparalleled beauty and for being talented. The envoy from the imperial court who was young and accomplished with rich thoughts and ambitious. Since he met the princess, he was deeply impressed by this mysterious princess. She had amber-gold eyes, looking into those luminous eyes, it was a cool and still gaze with profoundly intelligent. Her hair was gathered an elegant style, subtly woven into the intricate braid is the strands of Chinese silk and tiny Persian glass beads glittering under the light. Traveling downward, her costume was a symphony in gold, just like a masterpiece of the scenery during the sunset. Deeper golden threads are laid on the brocade, bringing a mysterious atmosphere.

Now, the envoy was lifting the jade to the princess. The princess stared at it, picking the jade up calmly and deliberately. The envoy started introducing this jade, 'Princess, look at this jade. Its whiteness is like the snow of Kunlun Mountain; this gold's redness is like the sunset glowing in the desert. And this crack...' He pointed at the gold thread, 'It is not a flaw, but rather a river sealed with gold, a 'road' connecting the Western Regions and Chang'an. Your Majesty gave this as a gift, meaning that although the two places are separated by the shifting sands, the friendship between the Tang Dynasty and the Western Regions is like the fusion of gold and jade, with roads connecting and people being harmonious.'

Finally, a smile of satisfaction gracing her lips, she spoke. 'I really appreciate this jade.' As their eyes met, both grasped the implicit meaning of each other.

After the first impressions of the envoy and the princess, they often discuss their ideas about culture, aesthetics, politics, and the surrounding people and affairs. They are kindred spirits. They talked about murals integrating Central Asian and Central Plains styles. They were immersed in analyzing the style of traditional Chinese

landscape paintings. The envoy and the princess fell in love very soon. But their world was shattered as the political relation of the two countries getting serious unexpectedly. The fumes of war permeated the air between the two countries. Bound by duty, the envoy was compelled to return to the capital. The night before the envoy leaves, the couple about to part ways were having the final farewell in the palace of the princess.

‘Tomorrow, I will set off to head east again.’ His voice was very low. ‘This journey will take me across thousands of miles of mountains and through countless layers of sand. All that I can leave behind... is just a jade pendant.’

He picked up the jade, gently brushed his fingertips over the golden crack on the jade pendant.

Look, this golden crack is like the Silk Road, connecting you and me. Gold won't rust; jade won't decay. As long as it exists, this path that leads me to you will never be cut off.

The princess's eyes were already filled with tears, but her lips were trying to curl into a smile.

‘All right.’ She merely said a few words, her voice trembling slightly.

‘I also swore by this jade pendant. I, for the rest of my life, will never forget you.’

She picked up the jade pendant and gazed at the crack illuminated by the candlelight.

‘Even if the world undergoes tremendous changes, this heart of mine will remain as firm and clear as this jade, never changing.’

The princess kept the jade pendant till the end of her life. Her country was unfortunately invaded by the neighboring country. The jade pendant was missing after the palace was in ruins. I slept as the jade was covered with sand and dust.

At the remote frontier, a general was guarding the military camp. He suddenly kicked something. Then, he bended down and discovered the jade pendant under the sandy soil. I was finally waking up, the man who picked me up has a dark color skin, with a dull reddish hue that indicated prolonged exposure to the scorching sun and the biting cold wind. His hand was also rough, but differ to the old artisan's hand, his was covered with scars. Through the conversation between the general and the military counsellor, I discovered that time has passed over centuries.

In the evening, the cold wind was blowing fiercely. Beside the campfire in the military camp, the general was talking with his soldiers. Taking out the jade pendant. ‘I recognized this jade pendant hidden in the soil today.’ He mentioned the jade he found. ‘The carving technique was from our hometown, the Central Plains. This jade appears to be aged. I saw ourselves from this jade pendant. The jade was carved in its motherland and sold to the Silk Road. Meanwhile, as the army guarding the border, we were all polished by the innumerable campaigns and the relentless siege of wind and sand, then traveled a long distance by the Silk Road to our camp now here. The golden thread grooved in the jade symbols our connection with our country, our homeland. Although we are far away from home, our heart always belongs to our homeland, beats in rhythm with the land we call home. No distance can change that, even from the edge of the world.’

I deeply impressed by the general's speak, how greatness of his spirit in contributing to the security of the country.

Several years later, the general sacrificed in the campaign defending his country. The jade pendant was again buried under the sand.

My consciousness was abruptly pulled back to the present. I return to the museum, standing in front of the display case. The golden crack split open the memories of thousand years.

Suddenly, a visitor comes beside me. ‘This golden crack looks quite interesting,’ he said. ‘Of course,’ I immediately replied. ‘There are countless exquisite jade artifacts. But within this crack, there are many stories behind, lies the true voice of the Silk Road --the craftsmanship spirit of the artisan, the bond between lovers, and the patriotism of the soldiers.’ The visitor nodded thoughtfully, his eyes shown curiosity to my words.

‘Would you like to listen to me tell the story in detail?’ I ask.

# A Woven Silk Tale

*HD Beijing School, Zhang, Ethan – 18*

I stretched out my limbs on the heated brick bed. The camel bell rang quite long before I woke up, so dad should of gone out for a while, probably before dawn. The sound of sand grains came from the paper window. It seems that the wind is very strong today.

After leaving my room, my mother had already prepared breakfast for me. It was a coarse-grain pancake. Although it was very dry, it wasn't too hard to swallow when paired with the porridge. After leaving my room, my mother had already prepared breakfast for me. It was a coarse-grain pancake. Although it was very dry, it wasn't too hard to swallow when paired with the porridge.

Wang was strolling outside the gate. He should have been waiting for me to wake up. Seeing me come out of the room, he excitedly shouted, "QI! Come out and go to the market!" My mother had already left. I said, "I'll do some housework at home," "Then I'll come with you," Wang said. I was just getting up and a bit reluctant to make a decision, so I let him come in to help.

In order, I first went to feed the chickens, and then I was going to pick leaves from the trees. These leaves were for feeding the silkworms. Our silkworms were all raised in earthenware enclosures. Wang was scared of those worms. I taunted him, "Perhaps they are even more scared of you than you are of them?" But I didn't continue, after all, when I first came into contact with these worms, I was even more scared than he was. I could only gradually get used to it, and then I wasn't so afraid anymore.

After finishing all these trivial tasks, it was time for lunch. On the way to the market, there were camels tied up everywhere. The months after August you can see the largest number of camels. Perhaps the desert wasn't too hot at that time, which was the reason for my father's travels. During this period, he would ride camels to transport goods. I don't know exactly what they were, but it was probably some fabrics. At the end of the street was the grocery store. But before that, we passed by Uncle Li's barbecue restaurant. Although the cost of the barbecue had already taken up two-thirds of our budget, we didn't hesitate for too long.

Uncle Li is about 50 years old this year. According to his seniority, he should be called "grandpa", but he doesn't have the kind of verbose behavior typical of elders. Instead, when chatting, he always asks about the things happening around us. Many young people in the village like to have a few conversations with him. He always wore an oval hat, which looked rather stiff and had red and white patterns carved on it. His hands seemed to have uneven calluses, which I guessed were caused by those iron rods used for stringing meat. Later, when I talked to him, I learned that he was once one of those people who transported goods by riding camels.

"You can only be a freeman When you truly redeem yourself from this desert," said Li. This statement seems rather comical. In my opinion, he merely got off from the camel and has not truly emerged from this desert. After remaining silent for a long time, he said: "In fact, it's quite interesting. I once detested this desert intensely, thinking it was dull and repetitive. But when you stay here for a long time, you'll find that this place actually gives you a sense of belonging". Even i didn't give him too much feat back, he still continues to talk just like i keep asking; " Once, during a sandstorm, the caravan got scattered. I found my way with the help of an old camel. The beast was quite intelligent, but it died by the salt lake in the end. He scratched the patterns on his hat as he spoke. "The route your father took this time is the same one I took back then." At that moment, the sound of bells from a returning camel caravan came from afar. Uncle Li looked at them and frowned again. "There's more in the desert than just goods. There are stories. Did your father ever mention that he once transported a kind of fabric embroidered with blue lotus flowers?"

## Chapter 2

Three months later, one evening, Wang and I were chatting in the yard. The sound of camel bells rang out. Father rode back on his camel, his cloak still damp with the cold from the distant sand dunes.

I stood up from the stone bench and helped him unload the packages. In the saddlebag of the third camel, I felt a leather bag wrapped in coarse linen. When Father took it from my hand, there was something unusual about his reaction. He whispered, "Don't touch this. Go and help your mother boil water."

But curiosity was like wildfire and couldn't be quenched. At midnight, while Father and Mother were still sleeping, I still unfastened the leather bag wrapped in fabric. I unfolded it on the floor of the bed, and the astonishingly blue fabric spread out on the earthen floor, like a desert galaxy. The lotus patterns were not embroidered on it; they were woven with different shades of blue threads during the weaving process. When touched, they were smooth and flat, but in the light, they showed waves-like layers.

I was so absorbed that I didn't notice the footsteps behind the wall. When Mother came in, I was staring intently at this piece of fabric. The candle in her hand dropped "clunk" to the ground.

"Where... where did this come from?" Her voice was very soft, as if afraid of disturbing something.

"It's from Dad."

Mother sat slowly on the bed, her fingers hovering over the fabric, as if about to touch it, but then withdrew.

She didn't touch it; she just hung there, as if there was a wall on this piece of fabric. After a long time, she got up and locked the door. She took out a faded embroidery bag from the bottom of the dowry chest of cypress wood and poured out a small bunch of silk threads.

—These threads were five different shades of blue, from the navy blue before dawn to the cobalt blue of the midday sky.

"These threads," Mother's voice returned to calmness, "are yours, Aunt Alan's."

My mother took out five bundles of blue silk thread from a sack. She said it was from Auntie Alan, who had asked someone to bring it to me, saying it should be given to "the one who can produce a complete piece of fabric." I handed the fabric to Uncle Li. His hands, cracked and full of calluses, gently stroked it. His voice was hoarse as he said, "This is Alan's 'Deep Sea Blue.' It was almost finished."

The story is simple: Twenty years ago, young camel driver Uncle Li and weaver Alan fell in love. She spent nine months weaving this fabric, saying that when the final dyeing was done, they would get married. On the day of the sandstorm, she ran towards the cave to protect the fabric and never returned.

"I thought it was buried under the sand forever," Uncle Li said, looking at a blank spot on the corner of the fabric. "She said she would embroider a complete lotus here as her signature."

Mother handed him the silk thread. Uncle Li washed his hands and finished the last stitch on the seventh evening. The small lotus flower in the twilight looked as if it had just been touched by dew.

He didn't hang the fabric up. Instead, he cut off the embroidered corner and carefully sewed it inside the hat he had worn for twenty years.

"That's it," he said.

Mother made me a dress with the remaining fabric. Uncle Li's barbecue stand opened as usual, but he began to teach the village children about desert plants — which ones could be used for dyeing fabric and which ones could indicate directions.

"All this, Alan taught me," he always began like this.

The wind still blew sand against the paper window. But now I understood that it was the stitches of time, turning the unfulfilled promise into another kind of completeness. When my blue dress shimmered in the sunlight, mother said softly,

"Auntie Alan would be happy."

And the flower in Uncle Li's hat, from then on, lay close to his heart, accompanying him through every dawn when the fireworks rose.



# Searching For Silk

*HD Beijing School, Zhang, Jack – 18*

Changan City in the Tang Dynasty until the Zhenguan period.

It was a light drizzle, and the traffic in the street was getting out of full sail. The rattle of only a few dog-barks was disturbing the serenity of the night. Yao Zheng was himself, a youthful man, facing a lamp, as his brows were scowled with. After his eyes, he perceived an impaired dye silk scroll on the wall – "Flowing Clouds." This, however, is the ancestral treasure of the Yao family, and is woven with the hands of the finest craftsmen using the finest materials in a period of five years. But the damage in the lower left side of the scroll is most salient.

Yao family began their operations with the art of silk. But with the appearance of Yao, by that time they were still in the silk trade, but those oldest tricks were long lost in the war that his grandmother used to mention to him he was a small boy that the real origin of craftsmanship was buried somewhere on the Silk Road in an obscure land....

After a night he at length came to his resolution and took out on a long journey to discover the art of restoration.

When she got past the city gate the world started to be big, and the blazing sun burnt the hearts of people. Sometimes there may be observed a caravan of camels heading, taking people of varying languages and skin color. Yao traveled westward to the end. In every post station he came to he inquired about any sign of finger work that may have concerned silk work, but in vain. It was unheard of how long it had so far happened before he arrived one night at the Crescent Spring. It was a cool breeze that threw back the moon and stars on the surface of the water.

A girl in exotic costumes is playing freely with the moon, a distance away, by the spring. The silk in which the girl was clothed had in reality a faint lustre in the moonlight, blue in colour. The girl gazed round and her eyes were wary. The word she uttered had an odd accent. Yao hastened to inquire why the silk on her garment was so black magic, the light power on the moon, and the secret technique of it is lost, this is all made by copying the past clothes, this is only a piece of cloth in itself.

One (Yao) sought to keep the family heirlooms and the other return the secret methods of the ethnic group, Two hearts were answering to the call of the Crescent Spring. As Sunnell told, the final secret of Moonlight Dye, according to the ancient prophecy of her tribe, was connected to an old nation on the Silk Road, and she had arrived exactly on time as per the prophecy. The two got along like a house on fire and they planned to go everywhere together.

On the following day they got into the busy town of Dunhuang. They were dazzled by such magnificent murals and painted sculptures. They came before a mural of star maps and the scenery of the Western Regions, at which a Persian was holding an odd instrument.

He was Muhammad, the Persian astronomer and another man who was obsessed with star maps and geography of the antiquity.

"This is very interesting!" Muhammad then noticed that the two were interested in the mural and approached to speak to him in an accented tone. The star map on this mural did not appear haphazardly. My forefathers thought some of the lost arts had not been wholly written on books, but as carved on the star charts by the sages of old. This mural is also aligned with the site whereby stars flocked on the Silk Road that it is believed to have perfected the art of weaving stars. I did come here on this purpose.

It was a meeting of three strangers of totally different identity and background but seemingly sharing the same objective. The family tree of Yao, the prediction of the clan of Sunell and the calculation of the star charts by Muhammad. The three items supported each other and led to the same direction a mysterious secret world centuries engulfed by the wind and sand along the edge of the ancient Loulan Kingdom.

The three of them made the decision, as a result of which they bought their supplies and equipment, created a small expedition group and firmly took the first steps into the great desert.

The procession to the desert is very tedious. Blazing sun, quicksand, tornado storm... Most of the time they got lost. All this is owed to the stargazing correction route of Mohamed, Sunell and his familiarity and sensitivity to desert environment and Yao and his practicality and life experience that enabled them to survive one desperate situation, after another. The three complemented one another and became best friends.

Each time the night comes, they will gather around the camp fire and narrate their very individual and appealing stories. Yao told the good luck of Chang an City thousands of miles distant and the beauty of silk. Sunell tells the culture and traditional songs of her local place. Mohammed, however, developed the astronomical knowledge of Persia, and the respective meanings of the stars of the heavens in old maps of stars.

There is a very bright star, in the sky, which this time of night should be moon; but there, diminutive in magnificence, you see it is Venus, that Muhammed indicated. We refer to it as the spindle in Persia. The legend has it that when the spindle makes a certain Angle with the Big Dipper the moonlight will indicate the direction to the Heart of the Silk Road to the chaser.

One night, on the especial and notable evening, the relative location of Venus really corresponded to the calculations of Muhammad, and made an odd Angle with the Big Dipper. In front of us on an immensely vast stretch of land does the wind blow its eroding and shape into the most unnatural forms. A miracle occurred. The silhouette of one of the sand dunes crept slowly along in the moonshine and at length united with the silhouette of another sand dune along its side creating a shadow which faced in a certain direction.

The direction which the shadows pointed them is the path between the complex sand dunes which they pursued. They were at length able to get before a very airtight face of rock, and found there a very hidden crack, so narrow that only one man could squeeze over it. Sitting quietly, at the end of the crevice, was an old man with white hair and beard, in a white robe. I felt that he had been waiting long here.

"Welcome, Seekers, come away hither," was the old voice of the old man, which was old and fruitful, but had something in it that reached the heart. The silk thread transports your deepest feelings and the silk cloth leaves your souls. You have to undergo trials upon yourself to get to this place. Are you willing?"

The three looked at each other and could read their determination in the eyes of each other. They nodded solemnly.

The swinger waved his sleeve, and the rock walls enclosing the surrounding started shaking unveiling a passage. He got the three of them into a dim room that was flooded with bizarre light. It is as though a palace composed of plenty of silks here, and a vintage smell lingers all about. and they were respectively conducted in three directions.

Yao arrived at a stone chamber where there were looms. There is an incredibly old-fashioned loom with its parts in a shabby state in the centre, and colorful silk strands are scattered on the floor next to it. He was to test himself by weaving a piece of silk which was to bear the shape of clouds floating in the air without drops of water which are so imperceptible to the naked eye.

But whenever he started working there was a terrible noise and the silk fibers snapped one by one thrust off by the loom. The less patient he was in endeavouring to remember the contents of the ancestral scroll, the quicker he became distracted.

He was only on the point of despairing in his heart, and then he remembered to both of them a passage his grandmother had told him: Weaving is not about being obsessed with the skill, but about following your own heart. He shut the shuttle and do not obsessed with the perfect, but about integrating the experiences of the journey into the silk thread, he opened the shuttle in the hope that the thread would come out. Some weirdly radiant luster came up on the silk.....

Sunell was brought into a cave altogether dark, with a little light only at the top. The water of the cave has a central pool of clean water and above the water are some peculiar plants. Her ordeal was to make the fabric absorb the power of the moonlight again. She experimented with everything and failed to notice them through the dark light, yet none of them reacted. She remembered the words of the primitive folk song of her people: The girl of the moon bathed in dew weaves the drapes of dreams With the starlight....

Dew? She gazed upon the dewdrops on the leaves of the plants by the pool and then lifted her head about to the weak light at the top of the cave. An idea ran through my mind. She brought out some common silk, and moistened it with the dewdrop which had soaked up the weird starlight of this place, and strung that in the dim light, praying in her heart. One by one those silks that had been at first so commonplace started up to drink that faint light, and a very slight, deep blue gloss. She succeeded. After recognizing that the real secret is on the intention and the medium.

The star system which Muhammad was faced with was enormous and tangled with silk fibers suspended in the air. These silk threads have connection points whose points are associated with various stars, and the silk threads themselves consist of complicated geometrical designs. His ordeal is to derive meaning out of this star map and find the way out that is in it. This perfectly fits with his competence. He drew out the astronomical chart and tools with which he had travelled, looked and computed, and adjusted the same to the findings in the old books of the Persians which he had in his recollection. He discovered that this star map was not fixed but the movement of celestial bodies was simulated. He had after an hour or two of reason-seeking discovered the key. When he superimposed some sections of the star map on the modern location of the starry sky in space, a channel due to the association of particular star locations would emerge. Not only did he solve it but he had learned a secret of turning the paths of stars into a form of weaving, and this was the very model of the art of weaving stars that he was having.

As soon as the three of them individually finished their trials, reunited, the old man with the white robe showed up again. His smile was a smile of approval. He brought them three, to the innermost spot in the dim world, a glorious "Silk Palace". The top of the hall is a circulatory star map, and the four sides are decorated with innumerable beautiful treasures made of silk. The atmosphere is filled with good energy.

In this case, thousands of years of wisdom men and craftsmen, who have all sought to discover the real spirit of the Silk Road and strived to destroy the dividing barrier between the East and the West, have met. The spirit of the Silk Road is not in interests, but in the assimilation of civilizations. You three respectively symbolize the heritage of craftsmanship, the vision of nature and the movement of the stars. The two of you can be described as the ultimate interpretation of the genuine heartbeat of the Silk Road.

He referred to the silk which Yao had woven, the silk of Chanel, and the way of the stars which Muhammad had read. The old man put the three in a old loom that was in the middle of the hall and handled them using his hands. Just to look at the starlight, and the moonlight and the silk cloth merging with, the loom sang in a pleasant manner, and a column of light flashed into the sky to join the map of the stars on the roof.

The ray of light was lost and a fragment of silk never seen before came up on the mull. It is fluid like a flowing cloud painting but the colors are brighter as though a life has been born. The qualities of the moonlight are absorbed in it and transformed to dreamlike colors in various lighting conditions. The patterns that have been interwoven are actually parallel to the positions of the stars.

The new knowledge that the priest would have after the unification of the three was etched in the hearts of the three individuals. They were aware that their respective missions were achieved and they were on the verge of separating and going back to their home towns to practice and impart the skills they had gained. And with much of fortune and experience and thought, the three departed out of the "Heart of the Silk Road". The door to the secret world turned gradually to close behind them, vanishing into the Yardang feature as though it had never been created.

# The Last Keeper of the Stone

*Jiaxing Senior High British Columbia Osshore School, Fan, Xiaoxi Olivia – 18*

For over five hundred years, my family has passed the same story.

It's about a stone, a Tang dynasty road marker, which is buried somewhere in the desert wind. My ancestors were its keepers. They gave water and rest place for travelers, and add small markers to the stone to record what they saw. However, the caravans stopped coming then. The Silk Road gradually faded away and my family's duty became just a memory, a story told in the silent desert and dissipated in the wind.

I grew up with this story. When I was a child, my grandfather used slow and deep sound to tell me stories about that stone, which heard from his grandfather. He would point to a certain point in the open desert and say: "You see? My kid. Out there, our stone sleeps." I felt my family's responsibilities are just like the stone: forgotten and covered by the wind in the desert. I didn't want my kids to live in such a bored life as me, so I sent them left this desert to a broader world. I became the last keeper, guarding nothing but a tale.

Everything changed in 2013. I still remember, it was a very, very sunny day. A group of people with many kinds of strange tools and big smiles on their face came. They told me that the Silk Road was coming back and would bigger than five hundred before. They used machines that flew and beeped to look under the sand. One day, they find the stone, the road marker. They dug up it, but they didn't want to take it away. They took pictures of it from every angle with professional cameras, saved it into "Digital Cloud". They told me happily, now, the stone and its story could be seen by anyone in anywhere of the world. Engineers explained to me, the New Silk Road use technology to protect and share culture treasure, and then revive the ancient Silk Road to the world through it. I didn't understand many professional words, but I also infected by their passion.

At first, I got a mixed feeling. One side, I truly felt excited about this incredible project. But for the other side, I felt a little bit depression, because my family's duty was over and not be needed any more. At that time, a lady from the group came to talk to me. "We still need your help." She said, "The real story is not just in the stone, but in what your family members."

I felt my heart popped hardly in that second.

I began to tell them what my grandfather told me, not about kings or big battles, but about some small moments. About a Persian Trader, he felt grateful for the water when he felt really thirsty the Road Marker Keeper gave him, when he left, he gave the Keeper one big and bright blue bead. About a monk who rested in this desert, before he left, he taught Buddhism to other people. About the argument between two cart drivers form different caravans and countries. One driver spoke in Chinese and other driver spoke in Persian. Finally they laughed and hugged together.....

Workers typed my words into computers. They told me they linked the stories to the digital image of the stone, then in the future, whatever someone in anywhere, looks at the stone's picture, they can read stories about the blue bead, the monk and the argument between those two cart drivers.

My duty seems to have changed, but they aren't disappeared. I will no longer guard a stone in the desert, but I still guard the memories connected to its story. Sometimes, engineers or track drivers from the New Silk Road Project come to visit me. I share old stories to them and they tell the news about the new roads and railways.

The Old Silk Road was made by caravans, carts, and goods, and the New Silk Road is made by metal, data, and thoughts. The core of it is still the same. In the past, we could touch the same stone. Now, we can share the same stories on the Silk Road. The connection there never changed.

I am still the keeper of the stone, but won't be the last one. Because more and more people from all around the world will become its "keeper", the stories of the stone will not be forgotten again in this beautiful desert.

# The Camel Bell

*Jiaxing Senior High British Columbia Osshore School, Gan, Chenchen Cici – 17*

The Persian merchant Aziz's caravan had been trapped at a pass in Hexi Corridor for three days. The sandstorm blotted out the sun and the path ahead. The most precious item among the goods was a small bag of cotton seeds, and Aziz promised his country that he would bring these seeds to the East and exchange something his homeland lacked. But the guide saw the road, shook his head, and said "the wind has hidden the road, we must wait for someone to lead the way".

At the dawn of the fourth day, the outlines of the sand dunes reappeared in the faint light, but all traces of the path had vanished. Just as Aziz felt despair, he heard a bell. This sound was clearer, once, and then again. Aziz went forward to look. The scene before them made Aziz freeze: a small Chinese caravan, just five or six camels, was moving slowly forward. The bell sound came from an instrument in the head of an old, lame man at the end of the caravan; the sound was not loud, but exceptionally clear.

"Follow us! Liu's 'Road Bell' can find the way in this desert." Aziz found it hard to believe. The compass even had failed, how could the sound of a few stones show the way? After hearing his question, the leader Chen of that Chinese caravan explained: "not him shaking, but the Earth ringing. Beneath the sand, some ancient roads are buried, but the hard ground pressed by carts and horses remaining. Different stones have different sound."

The two groups merged together. Aziz walked beside Liu. The string of road bells in his hand would sometimes shake lightly, sometimes remain still, sometimes clear and dull. During a break, Aziz couldn't contain his curiosity, so he asked again. "My grandfather walked this way, and my father too. These stones were picked up from different places along the road. The echo was beneath this desert sand."

Aziz understood, this was the memory of the Earth; they are accumulated through the lives and ears of countless generations of travelers, stored in the echo of these stones.

At the seventh day, they saw the outline of the Dunhuang City walls. Two groups were about to part ways. Aziz took out the bag of cotton seeds from his robe, poured out half, and handed it to Chen, "Plant it in Chang'an, so they can bloom warm white flowers." Chen accepted it solemnly, and he glanced at the old man. The old man silently untied the string of the road bells, took off the darkest stone, and handed it to Aziz. He then picked up a small piece of lapis lazuli. Not many words were exchanged.

Years later, in the marketplace of Samarkand, Aziz now a wealthy merchant told this story of his son. He took out the black stone.

This is not just a common stone. It is a stretch of road. That road held many sounds, from China, Samarkand and other places on the Silk Road. They are always there, waiting to be heard."

"What happened to that string of bells later?" Aziz's son asked. Aziz looked toward the East, "It must still be on the road. As long as there are still people listening, the road will never truly disappear."

Outside the window, a caravan was passing by, bells chiming. In the wind, there seemed to be a few special, clear tones, like whispers between stones, continuing the conversation that began a thousand years ago and has not yet ended.

# Whisper of the Wind

*Jiaxing Senior High British Columbia Osshore School, Jiang, Hanyu Hannah – 17*

My name is Chang'an. I cannot speak.

My family runs the last inn on the Silk Road. My father says it used to be lively, camel drivers singing in Uighur, Persian merchants arguing over the price of ore, the cheer of some games that lasted until dawn. Now, only the wind walks this path.

I like to collect things that people leave behind. A piece of broken pottery with pattern; a colorful bird feather; a piece of paper covered in strange writing. To me, they are all stories.

The first story I had kept was given to me by a Persian grandfather, who was a glassblower with kind, wrinkled eyes. He arrived on a night when the sky was clear and cold, his camels carried chunks of raw glass like frozen crystal. He saw me was watching and hidden behind a wall, and motioned me to be closer. Without a word, he built up the fire and began to work. His hands was gnarled and scarred, moving with a grace that made my breath catch. He twisted a rod of molten glass, blew into it softly, and suddenly there was a small and delicate bead in his palm. He let me look into the furnace, where the sand seemed to dance itself into blue, the same blue as the sky for that night. When he left at dawn, he pressed a small, imperfect bead into my hand. It was still warm.

My wooden box holds many other things. A wooden comb, missing teeth, left by a Turkic mother who sang her children to sleep; A piece of paper with any numbers and circles, left by an Arab scholar who calculated all night; An ancient copper coin with a square hole in the middle, left by a young homesick soldier. He traded this coin with a Sogdian merchant for a single fig. I saw the merchant looked at the coin and nodded slowly, just like completing an important ceremony.

It is an ordinary wuzhu coin, been worn smooth by countless hands, and it is threaded onto a faded red cord. I saw he sat alone in the corner of the courtyard, turning the coin over and over in his fingers. When the Sogdian merchant passed by, the soldier pointed to the basket of figs, and held out the coin. The merchant looked at the soldier's face, then at the coin. Slowly, he took it, selected the ripest fig from the basket, and placed it in the soldier's palm. It was not only a trade, but a gift. An understanding passed between them, wordless but deep, we all know what it is to be far from home.

Later, the last group of travelers came, a few camels and men, it was already evening and their eyes were tired. They stopped in front of our inn for a moment and looked around. A person in purple clothing led others to go inside, he ask my father "What was it all for, if it ends here in the dust?"

My father shook his head and went to make tea.

I don't know where the courage came from, I ran inside with my wooden box. I stood in the middle of courtyard and laid each item carefully on a cloth. Then they gathered around to see.

I pointed the blue glass bead, then the sky, I held the old coin to pretend to trade and eat a fig, and then smiled. I showed the wooden comb and softly hummed the Turkic mother's tune. I draw a line with my hand, connecting one object to another and one person to others, after that I raised my head and pointed at the most dazzling star in the sky.

The man in purple watched, then his eyes met those of the Sogdian merchant in his group, the same merchant who had traded the fig before. Without a word, the merchant knelt. He reached into his pack and took out a smooth, white stone, worn round by rivers. He placed it gently beside my blue bead, his hand rested on the stone for a moment.

No one spoke. But I think I already heard the answer.

What is the Silk Road? It is not a place that never disappears, it is the firelight in the Persian grandfather's hand, the smile when the soldier ate the fig, the beautiful flow from the Turkic mother and the shared silence of different people to see the same sky. Silk Road carries different memories, cultures, and emotions of people, and the connection of friendship of different groups.

The wind is still blowing, but the inn might be closed tomorrow, but the things in my wooden box and those moments will remain.

I cannot speak, but I believe some things are not meant to say in words.



# Walking the Silk Road Again

*Jiaying Senior High British Columbia Osshow School, Li, Yicheng Grady – 18*

“What? The ticket here costs 100 dollars!” MacGuffin couldn’t help shouting.

“What’s so surprising?” his daughter Si said, scrolling on her phone without looking up. “This ‘Walking the Silk Road Again’ project uses the most advanced technology. And is even has Zhang Qian as a famous IP.”

“Yeah,” his son Marco Poloni added as he put on his headphones, “Didn’t you insist on coming? Don’t start saying you want to leave now. I told you this place would be a waste of time.”

MacGuffin turned to his wife, “We finally made it here. Can we at least go in and take a look together?”

His wife stayed silent.

MacGuffin was a romantic who firmly believed that the “spirit of the traditional silk road” had not disappeared. His love for the Chinese Silk Road was so strong that he even gave his two children names related to it. Si is taken from Silk, and Marco Poloni is from Marco Polo. For many years, he could only imagine that legendary trade route through videos and books. Then the project “Walking the Silk Road Again” appeared. Today, he finally had the chance to see the land that once shone with glory.

After buying tickets, the family entered a spaceship-like sight seeing cabin called “Light speed”. It promised to take visitor through both the land and sea silk roads in ten minutes, with AI generated narration during the whole trip.

A virtual voice sounded from nowhere: “Now you are seeing the starting point of the land silk road, Xi’an, known as Chang’an in ancient times...”

Marco Poloni turned his music louder and started at his phone impatiently. Si carefully posed for a few photos by the window, then sank back into her seat and continued scrolling through social media.

MacGuffin ignored them and quietly looked outside. Suddenly, a 3D AI animation appeared on the glass, showing Zhang Qian’s journey to the western regions.

“This thing blocks all the real ruins! What’s the point of looking?” MacGuffin became angry.

The rough and blurry animation covered the whole window. Marco Poloni’s eyes lit up. He raised his phone and started recording, “This AI animation is hilarious! I’ll film my dad’s confused looking. If I post it, it’ll definitely go viral.” In the background, the AI voice continued calmly, as if nothing had happened.

Soon, the animation faded, and the view turned into a vast ocean. MacGuffin cheered up again and leaned closer to the glass, trying to find the routes of the sea silk road, until the 3D face of Zheng He appeared in front of him once more. He froze for a moment, then slowly sat back down. Ten minutes passed quickly under the smooth AI narration. When they left the cabin, they were led directly into the exit gift shop. The shelves were filled with Silk Road themed products: plush toys and figures of Zhang Qian and Zheng He, cartoon murals, printed T-shirts... Everything sparked like a carefully planned shopping festival.

When cultural exchange becomes one-way cultural selling, the diversity turns into products designed in advance.

MacGuffin stood in front of the souvenir shelf and picked up a Zhang Qian figure with a stiff smile. A question that had troubled him for a long time came to his mind: Wasn’t the silk road born because mountains were hard to cross and travel was so difficult? People walked thousands of miles just to exchange goods from far away. But today, when technology has erased distance, and reaching far away takes only ten minutes, has this road lost all its meaning?

He looked around. His children were busy collecting likes on filtered photos, the AI kept repeating its made up glory again and again. The road had never really disappeared, it had just been folded, compressed and packaged inside this bright shop. The road no longer needed brave travelers who crossed deserts, it only needed paying customers. It no longer created real encounters, only safe illusions.

What lay under their feet now was only a specimen of the road, carefully preserved and displayed in an age that kept speeding up.

The Silk Road, MacGulffin thought, has never been merely a historical relic.

It has been the driving force propelling us forward not only in the past, but also in the present, and will continue to do so in the future.

MacGuffin gently put the figure back on the shelf. Outside the glass wall, the sunset painted the artificial “ancient” building in gold, like the final scene of a grand performance.

The Silk Road never ends

# The Path on the Sand

*Jiaxing Senior High British Columbia Osshore School, Wu, Zixi Jessy – 18*

year fell in Chang'an, we set off. The emperor said they would seek out the Great Yuezhi and fight against the Xiongnu together. Zhang Qian led the way, holding a stick in his hand.

Beyond Yumen Pass, all that remains is sand.

The sand is yellow, and the sky is yellow as well. Sometimes when the wind blows, the sky and the earth get mixed together, making it impossible to tell which is up and which is down. Zhang Qian's clothes gradually turned the color of the sand, except for the tuft of red on his stick, which was still bright red and stood out sharply. I was riding on the camel, counting its steps. When I reached one thousand, I started counting again. The camel didn't understand where we were going. It just kept walking, step by step, with great patience.

On the day when the water was almost gone, we met another group of people.

They emerged from behind the dunes, as if growing out of the ground. The leader was named Hassan, with very pale green eyes like the water of the Wei River in autumn. He gave us water to drink. When the water bag was passed to us, I saw that he had a piece of cloth tied around his wrist, and the pattern on it I recognized — it was the kind sold regularly at the Chang'an East Market's silk shop.

When lighting the fire in the evening, Hassan began to play the guitar.

The sound of the guitar was muffled, like an old man's cough. But as I listened, I suddenly sat up straight — I recognized this tune! Last year on the festival of Ashura, that blind musician played this very piece. Only Hassan played it more slowly and in a more hoarse tone, as if this piece had traveled a long distance and was tired out.

Zhang Qian also noticed this. He asked, "Where did this piece of music come from?"

Hassan said that he learned it from the west, and the person who taught him this piece of music said that it was learned from even further west. It turns out that some things have traveled farther than people. If you keep walking further, you'll see more.

One night, in the market of Shelu, torches illuminated people's faces half bright and half dark. A girl was dancing.

She walked barefoot on the muddy ground, like a bird that was not afraid of the heat. Her dress was so strange. The sleeves were wide like those of the Han people, but the flowers embroidered on it, I dare say, there was not a single one like it in Chang'an. The drum was beaten so fast that it seemed about to fall over, but the flute played slowly, as if coaxing the drum not to cry. I was so stunned that I forgot to put the naan in my mouth.

Then she turned around — ha, I saw it! The jade on her waist gave a furtive flash. The light was gentle, like the piece of Lantian jade I had touched in my mother's jewelry box when I was a child. The wind blew the torch askew and the shadow jumped, and I saw it even more clearly: it was that kind of light, absorbed into the night and then emitted, soft and like a secret.

Zhang Qian's wine cup wobbled. The wine spilled out, spreading slowly on his old robe, as if a new patch was growing.

The girl spun even faster. The moonlight poured down, white and bright. Her silver bracelets jingled and clanged, like a drumbeat growing ever denser, so thick it felt like ten thousand horses were stomping on my ears. Suddenly, I couldn't breathe. It was as if the snow of Chang'an, the sands of the Western Regions, and the blue, blue sea I had never seen, all swirled together in this dizzying spin.

Zhang Qian stood up. The red tassels on his staff swayed in the wind, like a small ball of fire that refused to sleep. Suddenly, I understood: it turns out that things, just like people, would travel long distances. When they grew tired, they would lie down in unexpected places, allowing those who came later to recognize their homeland.

The flute sound broke off, like a string that had been stretched too tight finally gave way. The girl lay prone on the ground, her shoulders rising and falling as if she had just had a fight with the wind. The sand slowly settled,

covering her footprints, gently, as if covering a dream. The surroundings quieted down, so quiet that the sound of sparks bursting could be heard — pop, crackle, one, two, scorching out tiny black holes.

Later, Zhang Qian sat by the earthen wall for a long time. He drank half a cup more of wine, his eyes were shining brightly, looking at the place where the girl had just danced, as if dancing shadows could still grow there.

After the show ended, I climbed onto the dirt roof. The desert nights were cold and there were so many stars that they were frightening. The wind blew from the west, carrying a smell I couldn't identify. I remembered what my father had said before we left: "When you get there, keep your eyes wide open."

I now understand what he meant.

There are certain things that can be understood without words. For instance, the gestures Hassan made when giving water, or the glimmer that flashed in the eyes of the dancing girls as they turned around. They are more direct than words, penetrating directly from the eyes into the heart.

We set off again.

The sun rose, stretching out the shadows of the sand dunes for a long distance. The road ahead was still far away, and behind each sand dune there was another one. The camel walked unhurriedly, and the bells jingled melodiously. This sound would travel far, reaching those places we haven't reached yet, greeting us in advance.

The wind was pushing us from behind, gently. On the sandy ground, our footprints formed a row, some deep and some shallow. Before long, they would be covered by new sand. But it didn't matter. There would be others coming behind, and new footprints would cover them.

That's how the road was formed.

# The Imperfect Pearl

*Jiaxing Senior High British Columbia Osshore School, Yao, Yi Yolanda – 17*

I am a pearl that isn't round. Morning light seeped into my sandalwood box when the merchant's daughter first touched me. There was ink under her fingernails—she was learning to write.

“Dad, it's not round,” she said.

Wang Wu, the merchant, was tying up his goods. “Things on the Silk Road don't need to be round.”

“Why?”

“Round things roll away,” he said, standing up. “Things that aren't round... they hold onto the road.”

He placed me in his leather bag, next to a flint, some salt, and a letter. The envelope was soft at the edges. It read: “Return in March. Don't worry. ——Wang Wu.” He never said which year.

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The night before crossing Jade Gate Pass, Wang Wu held me by the fire. Mr.Chen, the camel rider, grinned when he saw me.

“Ever seen a round pearl?” Wang Wu asked.

“In Persian hands,” said Mr.Chen. “Round as a teardrop. And expensive.” He weighed me in his palm. “But on the Silk Road, the story is worth more than the shape.”

That night, Wang Wu put me in his right boot, beside his little toe. They said it was the safest place.

For seventeen days to Dunhuang, I learned his walk: left light, right heavy. His right foot was hurt long ago.

In Dunhuang, a jade merchant offered triple my price. Wang Wu shook his head. “This one is going to Fulin (the ancient Chinese name for Byzantium),” he said, patting his boot. “It has to finish the journey for me.”

Fulin. That was the first time I heard that name.

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I stayed in Wang Wu's boot for two years, seven months, and three days. Until spring in Samarkand, when apricot blossoms were falling like pink snow.

Wang Wu lay burning with fever. He pulled me from his boot—stained with blood and sand.

“Sell it and see a doctor,” urged the innkeeper.

“It must go to Fulin,” he whispered.

“You won't make it!”

After a long silence, he said, “Then sell it to someone... who will keep going west.”

A Parthian merchant named Sascha came. He smelled me and smiled. “Yumen Pass sand, Dunhuang rain, and ointment for a foot injury,” he said. “I am a spice merchant's son. Scents tell stories.”

He bought me not as a pearl, but to collect the stories of the road. He tied me to a string of brass bells on his strongest camel.

From then on, every step had sound: Ding—dong—. Like a heartbeat.

At night, Sascha would tell me stories under the starlight. And I dreamed of the sea—not the sea of Hepu, but the Roman sea Sascha described: “Blue, with no border. White birds hovering above.”

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Sascha fell ill in Antioch and sold me to a Greek doctor for medicine. The doctor took me to his sister Eirene, a scripture copier in a monastery.

Her hands were cold. When she held me, she was copying the Gospel of Mark. Then, she stopped and pressed me to her ear.

“It’s ringing,” she said.

Her companion laughed. “How can a pearl ring?”

“It’s not the pearl,” Eirene whispered. “It’s the road inside it.”

She placed me on her windowsill. Each morning, with seagulls crying and bells ringing, she would hold me and pray: “May those on the road be safe. May those who wait keep faith. May those who cannot reach the end still see light along the way.”

A young novice once asked, “Why do you always hold that pearl?”

“It isn’t round. It isn’t bright. It has scars,” Eirene said. “But because of that, it is real.”

“Is being real more important than being perfect?”

“Being real means you are not alone,” she replied. “We know the sand of Yumen Pass. We know Samarkand’s apricot blossoms. We know a merchant named Wang Wu once had an injury on his right foot... These imperfections make us fellow travelers with strangers from long ago.”

I stayed with Eirene for thirty years. One March morning, she did not wake up.

Before the end, she gave me to the youngest novice. “Sell it to someone going west.”

“But west is the sea, Sister.”

“Then tell them,” Eirene said softly, “the sea is not the end. It is the beginning of another road.”

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For three hundred years I passed through markets. I sat on a Doge’s finger. I was set into a queen’s crown. Now I rest in a museum case.

The label says: “Tang Dynasty Pearl. Silk Road.”

They tested my age, analyzed my makeup, argued over my origin. But they never heard the sounds inside me—Jade Gate Pass wind, Sascha’s camel bells, Eirene’s morning prayers.

Until this afternoon.

A little boy pressed his face to the glass. “Mom, it’s not round.”

His mother knelt down. “Every place where it isn’t round... might be a story.”

“What story?”

“Like this little hollow,” she said, pointing. “Maybe in the desert, a grain of sand harder than itself wanted to leave its name.”

“Does sand have a name?”

“Everything has a name. We just don’t know it.”

The boy looked a long time. As the closing bell rang, he asked, “Do you think it misses home?”

His mother smiled gently. “It carries its home with it. Every road it walked became a part of it.”

After they left, the last light fell through the dome. Dust danced in the air—like Jade Gate Pass sand, Samarkand blossoms, sea mist.

And I understood.

Wang Wu didn’t reach Fulin. Sascha didn’t see the Roman sea. Eirene didn’t finish all the scriptures.

So what?

The best things on the Silk Road were never about finally arriving.

They were about,

The sand remembering a merchant whose right foot felt a little heavier.

The bells remembering a Parthian who believed scents tell stories.

The morning light remembering a woman who prayed for all travelers.

And me, a pearl that isn’t round, I remember it all.

Before darkness fell, I lay still.

I thought of Wang Wu’s letter: “Return in March. Don’t worry.”

So all the “arriving” was really for the sake of “returning.”

All the “journeying far” was really pointing “home.”

Every step forward was drawing one vast circle,

So that a thousand years later, a child could point and say, “Look, it’s not round.”

And his mother could answer, “But it makes the hearts of those who see it feel whole.”

This is the road I had to walk.

# The Silk Road: An Eternal Bridge Between Disconnection and Reunion

*Jiaxing Senior High British Columbia Osshore School, Zhu, XiaoLei Judy – 17*

Imagine a caravan laden with silk and spices disappearing into the dust of a closing mountain pass. This image marks not only the end of a journey but also the silencing of a millennia-old dialogue between East and West. For over fifteen hundred years, the Silk Road thrived as history's greatest network of exchange, carrying goods, ideas, and innovations across continents. Its fading in the mid-15th century left these corridors silent, revealing the fragility of global connection. Yet the human desire for exchange proved unbreakable. In 2013, China's Belt and Road Initiative revived this ancient concept on an unprecedented scale, involving over 150 countries. This essay argues that the history of the Silk Road, its fracture and its revival that demonstrates that the drive for cross-cultural exchange and mutual understanding is an irreversible force in human civilization.

The disintegration of the Silk Road in the 15th century did more than alter trade routes; it marked a poignant retreat from a profound state of interconnectedness. Wars, political isolation, and the shift to maritime travel closed the overland passages, severing more than commercial ties. Cities such as Samarkand and Dunhuang, once bustling hubs where languages and customs intertwined, fell into a quiet decay that was cultural as much as economic. Their caravanserais emptied, and their markets shrank from international crossroads to local bazaars. The flow of knowledge—the translation of texts in Baghdad, the exchange of scientific and artistic ideas—slowed to a trickle, stifling the creative cross-pollination that had once flourished. This silence was not merely economic but civilizational: it showed that when pathways close, the result is a profound impoverishment. A loss of the shared cultural soil where innovation and mutual awareness grow, paving the way for centuries of suspicion and fragmentation born from ignorance.

Yet the human need for connection, in all its forms, could not be extinguished. The spirit of the Silk Road did not vanish with its physical routes; it transformed and found new channels. The Age of Discovery opened maritime "Silk Roads," linking continents by sea and continuing the exchange of commodities and, subtly, cultures. Centuries later, the Industrial Revolution with steamships, railways, and the telegraph, shrank the world once more, accelerating the movement of people and ideas. The 20th century saw the rise of institutions like the World Trade Organization, embedding the principles of multilateral trade into the global framework. Today, the digital age and complex global supply chains interweave economies more deeply than ever. This relentless progress from sail to satellite confirms a fundamental truth: the forces driving integration and exchange are intrinsic to human development. Though the physical paths faded, the urge to reach beyond one's horizon to trade, to learn, and to connect remained an unbroken thread through history, patiently awaiting its next grand expression.

The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) is not a simple repetition of the past but a deliberate and expanded revival of the Silk Road's core philosophy for the modern age. It consciously moves beyond the ancient trade of luxuries to build the essential infrastructure, the "hardware" of 21st-century connectivity. Projects such as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, the Yiwu-Madrid railway, and the port of Piraeus in Greece form the concrete arteries of this new network, lowering trade costs and stimulating regional growth. Crucially, understanding that true connection transcends concrete and steel, the BRI explicitly promotes "people-to-people bonds" through educational exchanges, tourism, and cultural dialogue. This focus aims directly at mending the civilizational silence that followed the old road's decline, seeking to reignite the creative synergy born of sustained encounter. In an era of global challenges like climate change, it further offers a platform for collaborative solutions in green energy and digital cooperation. Thus, the new Silk Road channels humanity's timeless desire for interaction toward a constructive and holistic goal, to create a resilient world where open exchange prevents walls from rising again, fostering not only shared wealth but also the deeper understanding and innovation that come from lasting partnership.



In summary, the epic of the Silk Road from vibrant life to melancholic fracture and spectacular revival, serves as a powerful metaphor for the human journey. The silence that fell in the 15th century reminds us of the poverty that comes with isolation. Yet the unbroken current of globalization that followed confirms that exchange, dialogue, and mutual benefit are woven into the fabric of our societies. The Belt and Road Initiative, as the latest chapter, turns this enduring impulse into a structured vision for the future. It strives to ensure that the “last traveler” facing a closed pass becomes a figure of the past, replaced by millions engaged in open exchange. Ultimately, the Silk Road teaches us that our world grows not by building walls, but by building bridges, not by severing ties, but by strengthening bonds of shared interest and shared care for our common destiny.

# The Girl with the Red Silk Sash

*Shanghai High School International Division, Fu, Felina – 16*

*“Hush now, αγοράκι. He is coming for you.”*

Elias’ face stung. His throat felt like sandpaper, and his eyes watered. All he could see was the horizon, separating two colors: blue and glittering gold. He carried no more than the exquisite silk tunic on his back and a golden enkolpion around his neck, and yet his little legs trembled with soreness as the sand underneath sunk him deeper and deeper with every step. Running had turned to walking, and walking to crawling. As long as he moved forward, she had said, he would find safety.

Slowly, the ringing in his ears grew louder, and his eyes fluttered shut.

Droplets of water caressed the boy’s youthful cheeks, dampening the violent, stinging sensation. Elias snapped fully alert as he felt the soft press of a finger on the tall bridge of his nose. Before his eyes could readjust to the desert’s bright morning, he was scrambling backwards, struggling to stand. A girl was kneeling next to his makeshift bed of sand, her head tilted curiously. Her skin gleamed like polished oak, and her tunic was oddly cut. She seemed so small that she must have been even younger than Elias, but her features resembled none of the thousands of people he had seen in his life.

Her hair, black as coal, darker yet shinier than he ever knew hair could be, was tied back with a thin silk sash, glowing the color of fire even in the scorching sun.

The intensity of her stare paralyzed him. It held no menace, nor trepidation, only sheer curiosity that made Elias realize that his was probably the same.

Elias touched the water on his face and saw the damp cloth in the girl’s hand. A man, dressed in the same strange clothing as the little girl stood next to her, squinting at him with his eyebrows slightly raised. He, too, had strange features, much resembling the girls’.

“Who are you?” Elias asked, his voice hoarse yet loud and steady. The girl exchanged looks with the man, an unreadable smile playing on her lips.

“Can you not speak? I command you to answer me.” The man shouted something to someone behind Elias in a strange tongue. Turning, he saw the small caravan not far away. Seven or eight men, all of them resembling the man and the girl in front of him, stood peering at Elias. When he looked back, the girl had risen to her feet, pointing at the caravan, holding Elias’ gaze. The man stepped forward, gesturing for him to walk. His gaze softened when Elias would not move, and he held out a bag of water.

Snatching the hide bag from the man’s hand, he gulped the water down to the last drop. Next to him, he heard the girl giggle as she pushed him towards the caravan.

Their camels carried heaps of cloth and bags of covered goods. Like the man, the merchants’ frames were lanky and their cheeks hollow. The clothes they wore were bland and worn, no gems were studded on their collars, no gold plated on their harnesses; they were the kinds of merchants, peasants, that Elias had been told to stay away from. Godless, worthless, filth is what his father had called them. Smiling, the men, some old and some young, spoke their strange language amongst themselves, watching the young boy walking towards them.

When they stopped in front of a resting camel, a creature that barely regarded them with its bored, long-lashed eyes, Elias turned to the man behind him, eyes questioning. Instead of answering, the man’s skinny arms wrapped around the little girl to hoist her on the camel’s back. Elias was set down in front of her, facing her awkwardly. The camel rose gracefully, and the caravan continued its voyage.

Elias felt a tap on his shoulder. Turning his head, he saw the girl point at herself.

“Mei!” She said, with a smile, proceeding to poke Elias’ shoulder.

“Elias.” He replied. Then, hesitantly, he poked the girl’s shoulder back, repeating her name to her. Mei’s smile widened at the sound of her name, and Elias noticed the light dimples below each corner of her smile.

“E-li-as,” she repeated slowly, the round syllables unfamiliar and clumsy on her tongue. She poked his shoulder again, a game now established, and Elias found himself mirroring her smile with a tentative one of his own. Mei’s eyes moved past Elias, and she pointed at the man sitting on the camel in front of theirs.

“Ba-bal!” Mei shouted something at him, and his attention shifted towards Elias.

“Lu,” the man said, gesturing at himself.

The world lurched and swayed as the beasts made their long strides. He marveled at why the merchants had helped him, and he wondered where they were taking him. He wondered if his father would have heard of his disappearance by now.

Elias watched the dunes turn in the distance in silence, not knowing how anyone would know where he was, and waited for the sun to descend. The skin on his nose was burning up again, and he felt sun rays reflect to his eyes in the sharp golden glitter.

Squinting, he turned to face the girl again, only to find her already watching him, musingly, her bright grin turned into a wide-eyed gaze. Her head was covered with a thin cloth. She reached into a saddle pocket and handed Elias a similar cloth, saying something he could not comprehend. Muttering a quiet “thank you”, he draped the cloth over his head as Mei watched him.

From another pocket, she retrieved a small candy looking like an old, withered sun. She popped it in her mouth and gave another to Elias. It felt sticky in the heat, and looked much like dried fruit. He tasted it hesitantly, before the familiar apricot flavor dawned on him and he lit up in silent joy with its sweet, syrupy taste. Mei held her hand between the two of them, the candies in her palm, and they ate silently.

Elias realized that Mei had resumed watching him silently. The girl slowly raised her finger, pointing at her own eye. Then, nodding at Elias, she speaks up again. Seeing his puzzled look, she attempts to point at Elias’s light-blue eyes from a safe distance. Elias understood that she was studying him. She traced the fine and colorful embroideries on Elias’ sleeve, and the single jewel around his neck. Mei studied his cross with the same penetrating curiosity she fixed upon his face. They sat quietly, unblinking, letting the sun and each other’s wondrous gazes wash over them, their cheeks burning.

The first streaks of rose and honey were bleeding into the sky when Mei pointed forward excitedly. It was but a blurry smudge of green, floating on the horizon, half a shimmering illusion. But as they approached it, it became much more real. They felt the air turn damp before they mounted the last dune, an oasis unveiling itself below. A pool of light cradled in the desert’s palm, a great wooden wheel turning beside it, spilling water into small, geometric gardens beside it. A mudbrick inn, protected by a low stone wall, was surrounded by camps of tents and pavilions. A forest of domed yurts of felt, waves of striped cloth and stacks of saddles adorned the small city of temporary homes.

Among it all was the commotion of people. First they saw men in similar clothing as Lu and Mei, their eyes small and hair black. He saw dark-bearded men with wrapped heads, just like he had seen many times in his own city. Some wore clothes of the strangest patterns. Others had skin the hue of obsidian. Finally, he caught sight of the homely faces of those who looked like him, dressed in simple tunics, the curves and jolts of their words finally recognizable. Elias wanted to speak to the men, but felt that he was in no rush.

Their own caravan found its spot among the tents, on a patch of hardened earth near a grove of tamarisk trees. Mei seized his hand in a firm grip, pulling them into a dash, into the stream of lively humanity ahead.

Mei’s red sash guided him like a beacon through the lively crowd. The sights and sounds became distinct as they moved forward: the sharp barter over a bolt of silk in a merchant’s hand, the chants of sitting songsters who practice their faiths, the clatter of the water wheel. The last rays of twilight were slowly traded for the lighting of torches and cooking fires, their smoke enveloping the scene, weaving a tapestry of aromas with the bitterness of spices, the sweetness of overripe fruit, and the musk of the resting animals.

The girl’s eyes shone. Pointing and chattered in her musical tongue, They shared the sight of merchants trading the prized commodities of their homelands in the makeshift marketplace. Intricate carpets, fragile clay pots, and bags of bundled cinnamon lay before them, all the world’s most beautiful possessions just for them to admire.

Her eyes stopped their impatient jumps at a glittering necklace. Three stones, polished into a heavenly blue, were embedded into a silver chain, dotted with golden pyrite stars. The owner of them, an old woman, smiled warmly up at the two children.

“I wish to have these for my friend,” said Elias, pointing at the necklace.

She did not speak, but raised her hand instead, showing four fingers.

Elias did not know what she meant, but he did know that people always wanted something in return. He had been taught that no gift, no gesture, and certainly no jewel, was priceless. He knew, but he did not always understand.

He caught the old woman pass a gaze onto his tunic, and when he looked down he was reminded of his enkolpion. Before they were parted, his nurse had told him that this cross would be what would help him, and he need only pray. He could not see that it was God who had helped him.

He untied the golden medallion from his neck, carefully handing it to the woman. Her wrinkled face transfigured with rapture, and she hurried up to retrieve the precious stone necklace from its case. Mei’s jaw dropped slightly as the old woman tied the precious necklace around the young girl’s neck, but she remained still,

a bright blush crawling towards her cheeks as she looked down and her hands caressed the gift. Elias was pleased and prepared for them to continue their exploration, walking ahead, but he was stopped by Mei's sudden fierce embrace. She released him swiftly, smiling at him, and muttered too syllables of what Elias understood to be gratitude.

When they returned to the tents, Mei showed off her necklace to all the merchants, occasionally pointing at Elias as she twirled in happiness. They sat around a fire, roasting flatbread over the fire. A man passed the baked loaves around, dropping one in Elias' hands, warming them. To him the food was simple, but it was comforting, despite all he had been through in the last two days.

The oasis's lights died one by one, signaling their long awaited sleep. Elias was given a mat and a blanket, and a place in one of their tents. He bid Mei goodnight.

Elias woke to the soft, warm light of dawn. The men were already preparing for their long day's journey, tending to the camels and packing their tents. Mei was nowhere in sight.

Elias wandered through the camps, hoping to find her, until he soon found himself reach the stone wall of the Inn.

Going along it, he was about to turn the corner toward the gate when the sound of hooves stopped him cold. It was not the soft plod of camels, but the impatient clatter of horses.

He pressed himself against the rough stone and peered around the corner, cold dread pooling in the pit of his stomach. A dozen men were at the gate on horseback, dressed in tunics of felt and fur; on each and everyone of their hips, a long-curved sword. Their leader was already inside, barking at the innkeeper. Elias didn't have to see their leader to recognize his rough voice scraping across the courtyard.

*Elias' nurse took his cheeks in her hands. "Run, αγοράκι. Keep running and don't look back. It's you they want." The sour smell of sweating camels in the air mixed with a metallic taste in his throat. With a violent jerk, his nurse was taken by her waist. Elias could do nothing else but run, into the dunes, before the raiders could notice he was missing. When he looked back, the horses had already trampled up a storm of sand in the distance, leaving behind his flaming caravan.*

Elias was a statue against the wall. The raiders were beginning to rouse with impatience, their hands coming up to their swords. Before he could fathom what was happening, a small hand had grabbed his shoulder, pulling him backwards. Mei broke into a sprint, and Elias followed. As they approached their caravan, Mei shouted frantically, and the merchant's movements became hurried. Bags were thrown on camel backs and saddles were secured roughly. Mei and Elias were lifted onto their camels, and the caravan escaped the oasis within minutes. Behind them, they heard the oasis's peace erupt into bedlam.

"How—how did you know the—they were..?" Elias' voice was still strangled with panic as he asked Mei. She looked as though she understood him, but only nodded compassionately in return.

The day passed much faster than the day before. Mei's smile had soon flickered back like a candle flame in the dark, startling their tense silence. Elias learned to understand more of Mei's wit, and they taught each other the simple words of hello and goodbye through a struggle of mute charades. The sun blazed less relentlessly and the sand hissed less viciously. Forward and backward swayed their camel. By the time the vast blue was painted over by violet and gold again, the only oasis in sight was the one of their own making as they set up camp among the endless hills of sand.

They sat on the crest of a great dune, watching the sun preform its final trick of light with their small shadows thrown on the eastern hill in the distance. Mei stood, and for a moment, she was an elongated giant, one with the dune's golden canvas. The great ambassador of the desert spirit, she flared her arms and flicked her legs, her giggles the most contagious sound. Her silhouette faded as the sun dipped over, sinking the desert in a deep blue velvet dome. They resumed their comfortable silence as the first dim stars pricked through, watching the cold diamonds shyly reveal themselves one by one.

Orange light lit the trough between the dunes beneath them, casting flickering shadows of the men around the fire. Elias spent the evening listening to the sound of the men telling stories, seeing the rise of kingdoms on the knit brow above Mei's sparkling eyes and the fall of empires on the small "o" formed by her mouth. Their voices faded away as he watched the face of the girl who granted him more familiarity than he had ever thought possible.

He did not know when the men had set up the tents, nor did he know how much time had passed, when he was in his blanket again, waiting for sleep to come. Not far beside him, he heard the soft utterance of a sweet voice.

“Gud–nigh!”

Elias woke to the thunder of hooves.

He blinked, but he was disoriented in the dim light of his empty tent. Panicked shouts outside broke the early morning silence; the low bellows of fear from the camels, the screeching and clanking of metals, the violent sound of ripping tents. Elias listened more closely to the shouts outside. He felt a surge of relief when he realized some were speaking his language. But when he finally exited his tent, the sight whipped it all away in an instant.

Soldiers, their familiar armor polished and gleaming with his father’s crest, an armor of grace and honor, were the cause of the chaos. The merchants scrambled in the sand, not to fight, but to salvage what they could if not themselves, looking around helplessly. Above the broken anthill of a sight were the soldiers on horseback. The dispersed troop was double the size of their caravan. Fine, colorful fabric was scattered on the ground, along with bags of dried leaves and other cloths.

The armored men laughed. One tossed a bag of spices onto the pile of spoils. The sack ruptured, releasing a cloud of sweetness—the same scent that had hung over the oasis market.

Some were drawing their swords.

A rough hand clamped down on Elias’ shoulder.

“Your father, King Theodus of Aetopetra, has searched for you. You’ll be safe now, my prince.”

Elias was snatched by the waist and placed on the soldier’s horse before he could utter a sound. As they rode away, he saw it, abandoned in the sand.

A red silk sash.

“No! No! Let go, I command you! Mei!” Elias screamed and thrashed, but the soldier would not budge. Twisting his neck back desperately, the last thing he saw was Lu, lying on his side. His eyes stared blankly ahead, his face drained of color, as the desert silently wove him a blanket of flowing sand.

A single shrill scream lingered in the air, and all the boy could taste was apricot and ash.

# The Eyes

*Shanghai High School International Division, Lee, Aria – 16*

Human beings walk their own unique paths, each gazing through their own eyes. Some with eyes wide open, brimming with vitality and curiosity; some with eyes closed — unaware they've wrapped a thin, red silk scarf around them; some with eerie, secretive eyes always looking in places known only to themselves, known only to themselves. Whenever you recalled ordinary eyes, something invariably came to your mind: shuddering, shivering crimson ropes, strangling those pure white, round spheres, pumping those oxygen-struggling red blood cells across the water pressure of a river. Whenever you recalled it, the sight of its roots brazenly entrenched on land felt both repulsive and wondrous. Drawn by some call, or perhaps some gust of wind, you felt your heart struck by a hammer, pulsing that irregular, peculiar rhythm, as it arrived without warning. Why, of all things, did those crimson threads have to capture your eyes? Before your eyes were the eyes radiating light, eyes with pupils that seemed to hold the depths of the universe and a veil of pure white. Yet, why did your heart respond to the "blood vessel"? Perhaps in it, you saw a greater world. You must have sensed something connecting that greater world to your own surroundings. Then, for the first time in your life, you felt your soul faintly drawn into the earth of your heart. You will open your eyes. Entwined in those crimson veins, your samsara too shall eventually vanish.

*Then came a feather-light touch, a rustle of lashes brushing against lashes—and I opened my eyes.*

That crimson, bizarre serpent was nowhere to be seen; instead, a stark white ceiling greeted me. Outside, it was still dark, and the sun seemed in no hurry to pierce it. A pale pink silk scarf lay on my skin, so gentle it might be absorbed into my flesh at any moment. The feeling of the numbers staring at me sent a shiver down my spine, and I glanced at the clock: 5:55.

No, was it actually destroying it, peeling away the skin? To escape this sensation, I replayed scenes from dreams, inadvertently swimming in my memory when I slept: a figure, walking down a path with a red silk hood wrapped around their eyes, a shimmering red silk scarf beneath their feet, and a grotesquely intricate yet wondrous network of blood vessels across a colossal eye. Eyes. Possessed by some fantastical obsession, cold yet fiercely intense as they locked gazes — they played endlessly in my mind like a desert storm.

Then, at some point, I fell into the labyrinth of my thoughts: within it, I quietly observed those eyes. With those repulsive red legs, they dived across the ground into the transparent, salty river. According to the original laws of the Earth, those fragile red ropes should have dissolved in that liquid. Yet, no matter how I stared at them, no matter what spells I cast, no matter how loudly I shouted, they clung to that white sphere like tenacious parasites, entwined like weeds. In this world now, only that red evil and I existed.

*What are you?* You are too new and vivid to be ordinary blood. Nor are you fresh. You are... Just that. A futile flaw pulled by the gravity weighing down my heart. That's all. You're affected by gravity too, aren't you? You had infiltrated my very brain, dominating me like that white pearl. So, I stopped thinking. *No, I left that world. That horribly vivid, bizarre world! What are you? What were those red lines?*

I opened my eyes again. This time, a brighter light assaulted my eyes. Ouch. I felt an urge to close them again, but I kept them open to blind me from that world. Is this what it feels like for your pupils to burn in the light? My eyes stung terribly. Something moist bled from my eyes and caressed my skin. It was the liquid from the transparent river. This time it was rainbow-coloured. Was it an illusion projected by the light? My head was spinning, so I got out of bed. Aspirin. Aspirin... Aspirin.... Found it. But that bloody red case. I sought you to avoid that red colour, yet it too screamed red. I tore the disgusting box to shreds and poured its contents down the long drain in my body. Thankfully, it was white. Had it been red too, I might have looked no different from a mad virus.

Gradually, the pain began to subside. And then, I passed through the white-walled building, stepping outside under the piercing glare of the Sun. The red light, this time not the sun itself, but the reflection of sunlight off those crimson silk scarves, red canopies, merchants clad in red, cats with red eyes. That damned red tormented me eternally. It was like each red blood cell struggling through a crimson conduit. Moving solely for oxygen and survival. It was sickening. Desperately averting my eyes from the red hues piercing my vision, I sought out anything not red. 'Angel number': pink and navy, purple and white blended together, a sign reflecting the vastness of the cosmos caught my eye.

As if drawn into a black hole by gravity, my body was pulled towards it. There, an old woman with an enigmatic, dreamy gaze spoke to me, "Are you interested in numerology?" A fleeting memory surfaced of a moment long ago when I had once studied numerology. "I have heard of it, though I don't know what connection it has to me." The old woman replied, "In my homeland, Greece, we believe angel numbers hold significant meaning for foreseeing the future of our real world. Among numbers as old as the universe, the one that resonated most profoundly with me was 555. The angel number 555 signifies transformation, freedom and personal growth." Indeed, the Buddha I had met before had told me something similar; the meaning of the number 5 is the transformation of human qualities into enlightened ones. So then, the 5:55 I saw when I awoke. Was that time a mere coincidence, or some clue to synchronicity?

Thud. My heart felt like it had dropped. This place was spooky. I slipped out from beneath this tent. Outside was a hell of red-clad beings and things. Except for me. Yes, I was different from those mere mortals. I would leave this place to attain a higher, more complete state. I cared not for how much others earned in a day, what splendid goods they traded, or who stole from whom. They were like parasites craving oxygen. I was different from those mindless creatures merely struggling to survive. They who adorn themselves in those crimson hues are but beings of red blood cells. It brought back scenes from my dreams: pale eyeballs covered in a snow-white membrane, those eternally tormenting red knots invading my ideal world, whose pure white colour once brought me serene peace.

Feeling my brain dissolve, I lifted my eyelids again. Reality unfolded like a scene mirroring the dream itself. Lifeforms resembling red blood cells invading a pure white desert, all those objects. They connected to form a single desperate desire and path for survival, a red silk scarf resembling a blood vessel, its luxurious sheen brazenly reflecting sunlight and covering the land. I must escape this place. I will escape this place and become a transcendent being. I ran. Again. I ran. I ran until my breath rose to the very brink, threatening to burst my throat. No matter how hard I strained along that infinite path, the same fragments of red silk, the threads, all that red, never vanished from my sight. Why must my heart be torn apart so? I'm sick of it all, all the red. The colour of the craving to survive, the colour of intensity. I closed my eyelids again, staining the red black, and ran. Until I reached the end of this road.

Perhaps five seconds had passed. Crack! A red pebble beneath my foot caught my ankle, and simultaneously, gravity hurled my body to the ground. When I instinctively opened my eyes, flesh tore, and everything I had held back exploded like a crimson-tinged, pungent liquid erupting like lava. A feast of red: It was my blood. A deep crimson light, as if embracing darkness, and intense red pigments reflecting sunlight. That colour which had struck my heart so profoundly. A colour as strange, thrilling, and intense as the birth of life itself. I couldn't tear my eyes away from it for a long while. The colour that gave me the sensation of being alive in this world. The wonder of life, its vitality, and all its energies. It felt like being struck on the head.

What on earth had I been racing towards? What had I been seeking, what realisation had made me tremble in this mundane world? Yes, I too was but a mere human. Merely the red blood cells within the vast bloodstream. That intense crimson knot tethering and connecting that pale, pure sphere with vitality... This place, from which even I could not escape. Those red blood vessels that invaded my white vacuum space, tenaciously binding my soul to this earth. The pure white sphere I saw in the realm of dreams, the crimson red thread and silk scarf. All were me.

And once again, you opened your eyes. In your world, there exists both the shattered, round, white sphere of you and within the sticky red paint, the trapped red blood cell of you. Before the eyes of that mere human, cast upon the infinitely long red path of that pale sphere, now appears a pink Egyptian silk scarf, bearing a lovely, bashful smile. Pink, a blend of red and white. That pink must have seen things vast, intricate, and wondrous, as vast as the great continents of the globe, round as an eyeball, as vast as the interconnected universe itself, crossing countless rivers and bridges, traversing the boundaries of countless realms. What, for what purpose, do you press onward, you who are but a mere human? You walk that path whose end cannot be seen, not knowing whether your eyes are closed or open, no, not even knowing where that true eye resides. That crimson path, connected like blood vessels, that path fiercely fought upon for survival. You gaze upon that path, passionate and horribly overlaid with desires for survival and material things. A cold, pure, untainted, pallid sphere-shaped planet, that path dominated by processions of passionate crimson silk scarves. You sought to become a being free from those knots of survivalist desire, attaining whole and complete enlightenment, yet your eyes, already dominated by crimson blood vessels, blink desperately, thirsting for oxygen. When will the moment truly dawn? The path to enlightenment must be akin to suffering. How much longer must you open, close, and reopen your eyes to reach the final destination of your pilgrimage?

# We Who Trudge the Sand

*Shanghai High School International Division, Lin, Jenny – 16*

*Samarkand—713CE, Tang dynasty*

*Zarmukh*

It wasn't common for Papa to bring a Wazār into the household, but Zhao Gong wasn't just anyone. He and Papa had travelled many times throughout the years, and by the end of each journey Zhao Gong would always return to Samarkand—his caravans laden with fine treasures of pale porcelains, blocks of dry, shriveled leaves, and odd-looking objects that he would distribute among the children. Patiently, he instructed each of us to use the whip and gave the small, colorful nut a whiplash that sent it spinning like a miniature storm.

"Come, *Zhamu*," he had smiled, back bending as he gave the nut another whiplash.

There was a thick accent when he spoke our language, common among the Han, and he would always mispronounce my name. Instead of *Zarmukh*, he would call me *Zhamu*, with a heavy emphasis on both syllables.

And quite oddly, *Gong* wasn't his name. It was more of a title from what I learned from Papa, like *lord* or *master* among the Sogdians. Once, I even tried to ask Zhao Gong of his real name, but Papa had been mad and told me to mind my own business. I was embarrassed, but Zhao Gong simply laughed and poured Papa another cup of tea. I can still recall the way he'd pour it. If you didn't know better, you'd think they were the very essence of morning dew collected from the peak of the Himalayas.

It had been three years since Zhao Gong last visited Samarkand. I had never seen Papa smile so brightly as the time when Zhao Gong's letter had arrived at our village. That night, Papa read to us, word for word from the bamboo scroll.

*"There are multiple accounts when my caravans had fallen under the evil hands of the Xiongnu. Looking back on it, it must have been the prayers of my Zu Zong that had been keeping me alive, so far along this long, windy road."*

I frowned over Papa's hands, the clean scribbled Chinese was impossible to comprehend, "What's *Zu Zong*?" I asked him.

"It's what Zhao's people call their ancestors. Like how we Sogdians refer to our *patars*." He said.

"Like grandpa?"

He belched out a laugh, "Much older than him." Papa chuckled, "But someday, he will become the ancestor to your offspring."

The letter was exceptionally long. A yawn escaped my mouth, and Papa set down the letters with a grunt.

"Go to sleep, Zarmukh."

"But I want to hear Zhao Gong's letter, Papa."

He chuckled, "Another time, Zarmukh—no, very soon. You will join us on our journey and see what he sees." His thick, wiry beard shuddered with the faintest hint of a smile, "Now go to sleep, he shall arrive any day now. And when he comes, you can finally begin your first trip along the Silk Road—with us. You can also bring Big-Hump along. Show them how well a young Sogdian can train his first camel."

A wave of pride washed over me. It had long been the village tradition for a young Sogdian to attend their first trip with the camel they trained. It was a sign of maturity and strength for a camel driver to navigate his way through the harsh desert and his ability to bond with the animals. Big-Hump was my very first, and I was a faithful believer in Papa's saying: *A camel driver may have up to one hundred camels in their lives, but it is always the first that truly bonds with us. Treat them as you would to a brother or a sister.*

It was impossible for a boy to not become attached to his camel when they had spent the last five years growing up together.

"I must check on her again," I scrambled to my feet, beaming brightly at the thought of the day I can finally show Big-Hump to the caravans, "I will make you proud, Papa. I promise you."

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*Samarkand—Months Later*

*Zhao Gong*

I wasn't surprised when Marshak's boy had not recognized me.



Dinner was decent inside their small Sogdian hut. I couldn't tell if the stillness looming over the dinner table was over my presence, though I wouldn't be surprised if it was. So I simply drank from the ceramic bowl and enjoyed the scented warmth of the meat broth.

"Thank you," I told Marshak and his wife, "For letting me stay. Dinner was good."

*It was a feast of heavenly grace.* Yet despite my efforts throughout the years, my Sogdian tongue remained painfully limited to the most fundamental terms. I never had the time to learn Sogdian properly, but again, you never had the time to do anything properly when you were a merchant. Just like there wasn't much time to catch up on our old tales. My caravans await, and tomorrow we shall depart again at dawn to travel across the Gobi Desert.

A light knock came upon the wooden frame of my room that evening.

"Come in," I said.

A young man hastily entered, and he halted when seeing that I was already in bed.

"Z-Zhao Gong," he stammered, bashful in his adolescence. His eyes momentarily locked over my face before breaking off with a shiver, "D-didn't know you slept... early."

I chuckled at his attempt to communicate in what he recalled of my language. It warms me immensely to hear the language of home. Even a thickly accented one spoken by a Sogdian boy was enough to quench that homesickness.

"You didn't recognize me at first, Zhamu," I feigned a stern look, "And your father, Marshak. He had told me that you've been waiting many months for my return. You *are* going to join us this time, aren't you?"

His face was pale as he abused the threaded hem of his shirt. There was a dreadful silence between us, long enough that I started to think he'd forgotten the Chinese I whispered into him when he was only a small boy.

At last, as he spoke, Zarmukh puffed out his chest like a little rooster, "I shall bring Big-Hump. Tomorrow. My camel. Remember?" he looked intently at me, "She's strong and can help you. I will...be good camel driver, like Papa."

I bellowed in laughter. Clapping my thigh beneath the blanket his mother had lent me.

"Extraordinary!" I motioned for him, and he trotted forward obediently. I put one hand over his shoulder and gave the young Sogdian a firm shake, "You are a man now, *Zhamu*," looking into those determined young eyes, my emotion was beyond what words can describe, "Now go to bed. We must depart at dawn, bid your mother and sisters goodbye."

He gave a big nod, a gleeful smile blooming across his dark, youthful face. He muttered his greetings and scampered back to his family.

I remained in bed. The remnants of that smile still tugged against my weathered cheeks. My eye ached with unshed tears. Slowly, I let them slip away. All those memories, at that moment, threatened to reemerge.

Leaning on one elbow, I blew out the candle.

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## *Gobi Desert—713CE*

### *Zarmukh*

It had been several months since we left Samarkand. The sun was hideous as always, and the desert sand ever so yellow. Humps of sandy hills stretched on into the sky-blue distance we could never reach, and my enthusiasm back home was long eroded by the cruel Gobi wind.

For the initial weeks, the skin on my face was horribly sensitive, the charred cheeks stung even when the slightest slips of sand brushed against them. It was about a month later did the torture of sunburns ended, and the peeling and tingling had stopped altogether. I remember wiping off the sweat beading across my forehead, taken aback by surprise to find the rougher layer of skin where there had once been smoothness.

My mind was vague when I had let go of Big-Hump's reins. I staggered sideways from the caravans, legs giving way into numbness under the dazing heat. But instead of the usual firmness that always catches our steps, the sand had surrendered under the weight of my form. My balance was undone, and myself vanished immediately beneath the soft, devouring ground.

*Sand...everywhere...surging from all directions. Entering my eyes, filling and muting my mouth, blocking and suffocating my nostrils as I attempted to breathe—it was all in vain.*

A tug suddenly secured at the back of my shirt, a burst of strength yanking upward with inhuman force. Then the sand around me parted as I was pulled out by that brutal yank. I found myself lying flat on the yellow

sand. My camel was licking the dusty particles off me with such frantic fervor. Behind her, the blueness of the cloudless sky reappeared before my eyes.

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*Zhao Gong*

None of my journeys had prepared me enough to see Zarmukh's body lying limp in his father's arms.

"Marshak! What happened?" I cried out from the caravans, where we had halted upon this abrupt misfortune.

"The sand. It almost got him." Marshak's teeth were clenched, knuckles white and cracked as he seized the boy tightly by his dusted clothes.

I got down from the caravan and broke into a small run. The poor camel still attempted to lick the remaining sand from the boy's tousled hair.

"Oh, Zhamu..." I murmured, hand shaking as I reached for the boy's crusted face. A thin river of sand softly rolled down where my fingers had laid.

Marshak regarded me with desperate eyes. It always hurt him to part those chapped, bleeding lips.

"Bring him to my caravan," I said, "I'll watch over the boy, feed him some water while he recovers."

Marshak blinked slowly, as if still deciphering the nonexistent mischief in my words. Still troubled by his self-perceived disparity in our status.

"Come on!" I shook his hardened shoulder, "Bring him over."

—★—

The Gobi days went on in a haze of suffocating heat while the nights passed by in its unyielding frost. It wasn't till the scorching day had ended did the boy finally awake. And when he did, he seemed more taken aback by the fact that he was lying under the same wool I had rested rather than the fact that he'd almost yielded his young life hours ago.

No matter how much I'd tried to soothe his restless nerves, the boy's heart remained in the desert, where his camel limped slowly beside our caravan, silently trudging the sand.

"She limps," he whispered, "I think she hurt herself trying to save me. Maybe I should go out and—"

"Get some rest, Zarmukh. Don't let me repeat again."

He flinched in the small cot, glancing nervously at my direction before uttering a soft apology.

But he was right, though—the camel was limping. At first, it lingered stubbornly beside our caravan, exchanging brief glances with the young Sogdian, and Zarmukh would reach out to stroke its light caramel fur. Yet when night falls, she began to fall behind. Little by little, her hooves would catch in a lapse of feeble clatter. A small limp, followed by another.

As dawn cracked its deep tangerine glory across the dark, starry sky, the camel had fallen behind the caravan for quite a distance. I was unable to keep Zarmukh at bay anymore. He simply grabbed his pelt and left our carriage in haste, rushing to the very back where his camel struggled alone to keep up.

For an entire day, they staggered through the desert. Neither heat nor sand may separate the boy from the camel. So farther and farther, they drifted from the caravans until finally, the camel managed one last shuddering step before buckling down upon the yellow ground.

In his desperation, Zarmukh had learned to whip the creature, knowing that the only alternative was for them both to be buried and forgotten under the scorching trail.

The caravans were called to a stop. Marshak marched back in a powerful stride, his bearded face lit with unconcealed rage. Yanking the whip from his son's hands, he lashed down upon the camel, over and over, terrible loud cracks that echoed across the vast desert sand. The creature didn't let out as much of a groan, but neither did it move an inch from where it lay.

"STOP! STOP IT! You are hurting her!" Mortified by his father's aggression, the boy surged up and tackled Marshak, trying to grab the whip from the man's crude, calloused hands. Marshak delivered a blow, and Zarmukh, too preoccupied in his tug of war, was flung back into the sand.

"Stop it, both of you!" I shouted, jogging to their direction with servants running behind.

Zarmukh stirred on the sand, back arching up as he sputtered—a puddle of bloody phlegm seeping into the ground.

"Don't you see what's going on?" Marshak cried out, "That camel is *crippled*. Do you have ANY IDEA how far we are from Luo Yang? We don't have a choice. You must leave her behind!"

"Your father is right," gritting my teeth, I said, "We cannot afford to stop every time that camel needs rest. We already removed all the cargo it carries, yet its condition had not gotten better—"

Zarmukh staggered to his feet, wiping the blood from his mouth. There was a strange sort of fire burning behind those dark eyes. It was no glaring petulance of a child's, and neither was it the vengeful hate held by the most deceived. The innocence that had once flickered behind those eyes was reduced to ashes.

He trudged back to the camel and put a barrier between them and us. His left eye was starting to swell up from the blow, yet he raised his chin and regarded us with wary before dropping down on his knees before me. There, he had spoken again the tongue of my country.

"*Sister*," he said, "It's my sister. It's family—" Zarmukh's voice cracked apart, and he pressed a fist to his mouth.

Marshak was lost in silence. The whip trembled gently in his grip. He glanced at me, bewildered. Guilt took hold of me, knowing that I couldn't offer him an answer. That poor man, Marshak, and his poor, stubborn son.

"Look at me, boy," I yanked Zarmukh up by the arms until those dark watery eyes were digging right into the black, missing hole in my socket.

"Do you understand where we are at?" I yelled, "The Gobi Desert! We are in the middle of nowhere!"

His body trembled violently beneath my hands, beads of tears spilling down his injured cheeks.

"You have no idea what happens to those who travel the sand now, do you?" I felt my eye burning into his spirit. The fear and discomfort finally seizing the boy who had tried so hard to act unbothered by this disfigurement.

The back of my teeth clenched sharply as my nails dug deeper into his arms, "Have your father told you about the sandstorms? The plagues? The men we lost along the way? The times when Xiongnu raided our caravans and left us with nothing in the middle of the desert to die? *Do you know what it feels like, bleeding alone in the desert—knowing you would never see tomorrow's sun; knowing that no one living will remember you!*" my eye burned sharp and bitter, and I pushed him down in disgust. Not to him—*never*—but toward myself.

Zarmukh tumbled into the sand but immediately crawled back on his feet. Tears leaked down those eyes, and he said to me with the saddest tranquility, "I remember you."

His voice was shakingly firm.

"We...are family. You and I... and Papa...and home in Samarkand," he pursed his lips as his face contorted in another sob, "And so is Big-Hump. We are *family...if you want us*."

It was the duty of a man to retain his dignity, not to have others see him shedding his tears, but at that moment, in this damned, empty desert, we were nothing more than a mere shadow of history.

I forgot how long we had remained in that wordless state. Letting the loneliness of the desert consume us as it will.

I ordered the servants to clear a caravan of cargo and had them stacked elsewhere. The men then tended to Big-Hump and eased her into the empty crate that shall now carry her along our remaining journey until her recovery.

I had offered Zarmukh a seat in the caravan to rest. To which he declined with the most subtle fashion and claimed he would ride with Big-Hump instead.

"Would you like to join me?" he asked with a trifle of uncertainty, "She might smell a bit from the heat."

"Well, don't they always?" I smiled sadly. Together, we sat down beside the camel's large caramel pelt and tried to make ourselves comfortable.

The clouds drifted high and reverent that day, ever so frightening with the hint of golden sun that hid beneath its red orange veils. It made me wonder how much more of such scenery could be observed in one's life. But even with one eye, I can foresee that this shall be my very last journey. Whatever comes after that, whether I breathe for another day or I rest among the sand, I live on the hope that tomorrow's sun always arrives, and our stories marked by those who walked the same lonely path—and at last, to home I return.

# When the Silk Still Shines

*Shanghai High School International Division, Nian, Guoshwan – 16*

A man, a boy, and a wolf ran across the desert.

The night hung menacingly overhead, watching with a thousand shining eyes and hanging curved, moonlit fang agape. The wolf simply ran harder, slipping perfectly into the night with welded fur of shadow, save for six glimmering emerald eyes that carved the dark open with a hot light.

On its massive back was a handcrafted saddle, and on top of that saddle was a boy in a man's lap. The boy slept, but it was a rough sleep. The man stroked him with one old, ragged hand. White spools of weariness intermingled his once shining black hair. The other hand rested lightly a coarse wooden coffin of a scabbard, sheathing a sword he hoped to never use.

Tied behind the boy, at the rear end of the saddle, was a locked wooden box.

Eventually, the wolf stopped its voyage. It bent down, and its partner slipped off. The boy was still in the man's arms, half-asleep. The man, who never really slept, gently put his boy on the ground. "We're here."

"Okay," murmured the boy, groggily standing up as he opened his sleepy eyes. Aquamarine, crystallized blue, reminiscent of the once clean oceans. "How much longer?"

"I don't know." The man averted his gaze from those blue eyes. They were too painful. "I don't know, boy."

The man took out a flashlight and flicked it on. Hulking metal carcasses emerged into the light. Skeletons of steel, extended to the sky with their outstretched, fleshless hands. Shattered bits of glass remained here and there, like glistening remains not yet consumed by time's ravenous appetite. The man pointed the flashlight downwards and they saw a crumbled concrete road, cracks long bled dry and now stuffed with sand.

"What happened here?" asked the boy. The man said nothing, simply continued to show the dead bodies of steel as he navigated a safe path forward. Cracked clock towers, crooked traffic lights, crumbled brick buildings with their rocky insides spilt out.

"What happened here?" repeated the boy.

"Back off!" roared the man. The boy jerked back and shielded himself with two arms... only to realize that he was talking to their six-legged wolf, who was curiously sniffing at one of the cracked cars.

"Thought you were talking to me," murmured the boy.

"Quiet, you," ordered the man. He turned back to the wolf and yelled "Oil is dangerous!" Sensing anger, the wolf reluctantly retreated.

The boy slowly put his two arms down. "...Dad, what's oil?"

"Shiny black poison, boy," responded the man. "Toxic if consumed. Nothing good comes from it."

"Dad, why?"

"Why what?"

"If people knew oil was dangerous, why did they have it around?"

"It was useful for... other things," said the man. "Machinery, conveniences, the like. You won't understand even if I told you. It was all the rage just a couple decades back, you know? Nearly drove people to their damn deaths."

"Is it still useful?" asked the boy.

"Never was." The wolf returned to the man's side, and the man scratched its chin. "Turns out, oil is toxic if consumed. Shocker."

The man spun the flashlight around some more, his oily black eyes coldly analyzing possibilities. "Doesn't seem that dangerous around here," concluded the man. "We'll make shelter here when the sun comes up, and once it gets dark again, we'll leave."

...

The next night, the boy was a little more awake. He blocked the desert winds with one hand and half-shut eyelids. He looked up at his father, then quickly looked back at the wooden box attached to the end of the saddle.

"Hey, Dad," he whispered, as though the night would notice if he spoke too loudly. "What's in the box?"

Dad didn't answer.

"What's in the box?" he asked again.

“It’s a special item,” replied the man. “Think of it as a precious gift.”

“For who?”

“To...” the man paused. “To your mother.”

“Oh. But isn’t she...” The boy turned his head, looked at the box again.

“Don’t look back, it’s dangerous.” Sharp. The boy flipped forward.

They continued in silence for a bit. Looking at the rigid frame of the man’s back, the boy imagined (as any boy would) the image of his mother. What would she be like? Would she perhaps caress his cheek, when his father spites him with harsh words? Maybe give him her spare morsels? Teach him how to read and write? Anyone except his father? While the boy conjured fantasy after fruitless fantasy, the man just looked ahead.

Suddenly, the wolf’s six eyes caught something. It stopped.

It crouched. It growled, just so slightly. The man’s hands went to his sword’s handle. The boy watched. Dead still, all of them.

They waited.

Not a sound –

A soft, heavy foot into the sand. A foot that belonged to no one. A slow, mournful wail reverberated across the pitch black. The man loosened his fingers. “It’s safe,” he whispered. “So long as we don’t make any sudden noises.”

He gestured at the wolf. Slowly, still crouching its six legs, it walked tentatively on the sand. Another wail bellowed out from beyond, bottomless as the darkness around them.

“What is it?” asked the boy.

The man took out his flashlight and sliced the shadowed secrets apart. Right there, out on the sand, was the creature. Four human legs, four fleshy pillars with four human feet, slowly loomed over them across the sand. The boy looked up – that body was some blob, some amalgamation of flesh that never should’ve existed. Bone and skin and cartilage tied each other around in gruesome, unnatural angles. The thing wailed again, and only then did the boy realize that the body was a human face, with hollow eye sockets and tongueless mouths forever agape.

A cold shiver wormed down the boy’s spine.

“Not pretty, is it?” softly chuckled the man. He swung the flashlight around. A whole herd of those poor creatures, murmuring, wailing, plodding onwards without any real goal. “So much like us, yet so much different.”

The man realized that the boy was shaking. “Don’t be scared,” murmured the man, slowly hugging the boy with one arm. “They won’t attack, unless you provoke them. Lord, do they have a vengeance.” The boy’s shaking, unsurprisingly, only became worse.

One of the things suddenly shambled over towards their wolf. The wolf bared its teeth, but the sallow face simply whimpered and shambled on. With a crooked fleshy blob, a nose, it sniffed at the box. A deep, deep inhale, as though smelling something long forgotten.

Others began following suit. One shambling flesh–face after another, their four legs looming over the wolf and his company. The holes in their faces whirled, sucked, drew in the smell of the box.

“Dad...”

“I... goddamn it,” cursed the man. “Damn all the dead gods out there. To think they still...”

One of the faces suddenly opened its formless mouth wide. The bellow emerged from a bottomless anguish, a fathomless abyss of despair stretching on its face as it roared louder and louder until the very night shook with echoing despairing howls. As though the scent tore off long–sealed wounds and slit their mouths open.

The man cursed and immediately spurred the mutant wolf. Shrieks and howls bounded across the shadows, each scream outstretching sonic claws to seize them. The wolf ran, ran, ran as fast it could, while the swarms of things began moving their lethargic legs and charged towards the wolf with their mouths screaming so wide and bellowing so hollow that the boy could see flecks of blood spray from their agonizing mouths –

...

They did not stop running for four hours.

When the wolf – even with its unnatural endurance – finally whimpered with exhaustion, the man sighed and allowed it to rest.

“We shook them off,” He looked at the box and patted it, hesitantly, with one hand.

“Dad,” said the boy, still shivering. “I’m scared.”

The man looked back at the boy. Tears began dripping from the boy's aquamarine eyes, like those clean oceans of old. Yes, the boy tried to stop them, but tear after tear, fear after fear just kept stinging. He knelt down onto the sand and just cried.

The man wrapped one old arm around his son and hugged him, letting his tears pour wastefully into his sleeve. Sobs punctured an endless, unforgiving night.

The box lay on the wolf's back, forgotten.

...

"You know," said the father to his son, as they traveled through another pitch black night, "we aren't traveling a desolate road. Thousands of years ago, this road was a hub of trade, cultural exchange, and... no, I don't you know what that really means."

The boy waited patiently.

"Think of it like this," continued the man after a moment of deliberation. "People, so many people you couldn't even count them, swarming together. Think of all those people traveling this road, the road we're traveling right now. Talking, or laughing, or arguing, or exchanging their goods with each other. Interactions with hundreds of different, unique people, with funny tongues and funnier customs. The world was large then."

"What happened?" asked his son.

"Well, many things." The man rambled on, like a desperate tutor who finally found a pupil that understood his teachings. "It was thousands of years ago, you know? People found different ways to traveling. Through the seas. Through the skies. Then the planet was dying. Then the people killed each other —"

"Why did people kill each other?" asked the boy innocuously.

The man paused. He thought, really contemplating that question. He gripped the scabbard of his sword, then hesitantly relaxed his grip.

"I don't know," he admitted after a while. "That was just a thing people did at the time."

"Why don't they do that now?" asked his son.

"Not enough people to kill," his father replied simply.

"But why did that happen?" urged the boy. "What happened to all the people?"

The man shrugged. "Many different things. See, back in the older days, people were always killing each other. The numbers just keep growing. And the scale. It's... like a pissing contest," he paused, struggling to describe the carnage of the human condition to someone who never heard of either concept. "It just kept growing, you know? More killing, more and more and more, until they built the weapon to end all weapons, and —"

The man stopped, his heart stuck in his throat. He swallowed it back down.

"And then," he continued, "One day, the people were just gone. In a blink of an eye. Destroyed." He opened his hand, like the blooming of a bloodstained flower. "Just dead."

They rode in silence for a bit, as the boy digested this.

"Now, not everyone died. Some survived. We're one of the luckier ones, boy. We had a shelter, a small room to protect us. Most don't. Most that survived were changed, mutated. The aftermath of the Ultimate Weapon. Like my dog here," said the man, patting the wolf they rode on. "You know he had a name? That he was once small enough to be held in my arms?"

"Really?" asked the boy disbelievingly.

The man smiled a sad smile. "We used to play many games, him and I." He shook his head, forlorn. "Now, he doesn't even remember his name. So I just called him 'wolf', 'thing', insults basically. And now, not even I remember what his name was."

They continued riding.

"And it's not just our dog. It's everything. Grass and grasshoppers and snakes and rabbits. It's fine," he added as the boy opened his mouth, "you don't need to know what they are. They don't exist now."

The man paused for a bit.

"It even happened to humans," he continued. "They were changed. Changed by the wars, and they could never go back. You saw them yesterday, remember?"

"Yes, I remember," said the boy timidly.

"Yes, well... All I can say is that you and I are, as far as I know, the last two humans around here." The man gazed upwards, where the clouds of shadow still obscured the moon and stars. "Maybe in the whole world. And, in just six or seven decades, we would be forgotten too."

...

After three more nights, they'd arrived. In front of them lay a simple little hut—like structure of flimsy, rusting metal. So pathetic it looked, just sitting alone in the desert, that the boy struggled to find words to even describe it. Certainly, it didn't look like anything worth traveling so many nights for.

"That's... it?"

"That's it," affirmed the man. "Get the box."

The boy touched the plain wooden box. He unstripped it from the wolf's back. It was surprisingly light. Grasping the soft wood, the boy dismounted right after the man, his little fingers tightly clasping the fruit of their journey.

They approached the structure's unassuming metal doors, sealing the entrance. The man walked up and pressed his thumb on an indent in the door. "*Access granted!*" rang a shrill, metallic voice, and the doors slid open.

"How does that work?" ask the boy in amazement.

The man didn't bother explaining. He just walked to a hatch on the floor and flung it open.

They descended down the hatch, down a ladder, and let the shadows swallow them. First the man, then the boy. When they finally hit the floor, the man flicked a switch, and suddenly, the ceiling illuminated itself.

The light revealed a rather large room, spacious enough for dozens of people. The walls were still a sterile white, and on the sand-ridden floor, the boy could still see glimpses of a metallic floor. It seemed exactly the same as when they left it.

The boy looked to the sides and saw the words *Nuclear Bunker* laid out on the side of a wall.

Besides those words, there was almost nothing noteworthy in the room. They already used all of the food and resources packed in here. Now, it was empty, a sort of hollow empty that pangs the heart. No chairs. No tables. Absolutely nothing. There was just that little oblong rectangle of metal, standing upright at the very edge of the wall opposite the ladder.

The man already had one knee planted on the floor, facing a completely bare wall. His sword was laid out in front, still in its sheath. The man's eyes were shut tight, as though actively trying not seeing what lay in front of him.

The boy, with the box, walked up to him. "Dad, where should I lay this down?"

"Ah, thank you," said his father. "Lay it right next to me." The boy did so.

The man unlatched the box and opened it.

Inside was the most beautiful thing the boy ever saw. It was a sort of... fabric, yet it was nothing like the rags he and his father strapped themselves in. This fabric was far gentler, far softer, far brighter than anything he'd seen. A floral, vivid pink, with the slightest stitched patterns of flowers. The boy had almost forgotten what pink and flowers looked like.

"Wh... what is it, father?"

"Silk," said his father. He said it with unusual stillness, like a flaccid corpse. "Silk. One of the rarest commodities in the world, back in the day. Remember the trading rode I told you about?"

"A hub of trade and cultural exchange," remembered the boy. "People talking, or laughing, or arguing, or exchanging their goods with each other. Interactions with hundreds of different, unique people, with funny tongues and funnier customs."

"Yes." The man's coarse fingers slowly scooped up the smooth fabric. So gentle it was, seemingly slipping past his fingers like vivid pink mist of dreams. The boy stared at the fabric, mesmerized.

"Your mother wanted a silk dress," spoke the man, out of nowhere. "She really, really wanted one."

The man's mouth hung open, trying to find the words. He couldn't.

"This was the bunker she was supposed to be in," mumbled the father, placing his hands on the wall. "We had a whole plan. A whole plan. Then..."

"I mean," chuckled the father a little, a mirthless chuckle. "I couldn't even recover her remains. No point in burying her. So we came here."

The father draped the silk over his sheathed sword. The soft, rosy pink dressed the scabbard in dazzling smoothness. A tiny drop of color bloomed right there, such a tiny drop, and yet so pretty.

"I got your silk," said the man. "Isn't it pretty?"

A single tear leaked from his left eye. He didn't even realize it at first, not until the tear fell from his bloodshot eye onto the floor.

Then followed another. Then another. Drop after drop, each sting unmistakably his. And just like that, he broke. Sobs wracked through his body, crashing out in wave after released wave of emotion. The man

covered his face, letting the pain burst from his throbbing chest out of his wet—hot lungs, as all the more tears cascaded down his face. He finally cried, clutching that tombstone as he sobbed and sobbed and sobbed.

As his father broke down, the boy leaned his head on his father's chest. He felt the rickety heart, felt the tears drop down on his own cheek, felt his father tightly embrace him as tears streamed on and on and on. The boy hugged his father, letting his father cry all his pain and aches and tears and bitterness on his shoulder. The two clutched each other, desperately clutched the only other living person in this dead, dead world.



# A New Endless World

*Shanghai High School International Division, Tan, Aeryn – 16*

My eyes were wide awake. Where was I? The question echoed in the back of my head, three times. I think I had just been knocked out. That was twice. Encircled by sand? Once. Out of fear and a natural reflex, my hands and legs shuddered at the vast sight of the dunes that entombed me from shoulder to leg, and I tried to peer past the edge of the known world, even with sand in my pupils. The last bit of curiosity and strength I had propelled me up from the ground, and I gazed around in every direction, in thorough denial. Not far from sight, I saw houses made of adobe, sun-dried mud brick that structured the entire village together, and there were groups of merchants on domesticated camels, bartering silk, innovations, religious texts, edibles, and other commodities throughout the village. People traded within their villages, and this village was rich in resources. This was a new world, a world that seemed genuinely immeasurable; there was so much to explore beyond the boundaries that limited our privileges. I was in the Gobi Desert.

The mornings were regular ones: the bright, aglow rays shone across the transparent rooftops of a small bunker I got thrown in around sunrise, along with the blaring noises of foreign traders exchanging and bargaining for material goods that woke me up. I walked out of the bunker to catch a blurry sight of neighboring traders mumbling a few confidential sentences about me. I writhed into the corner of the walls behind them, settling my head gently on the walls, demanding to absorb every indistinct word that they muttered.

“He fainted on the sand yesterday! Let’s sell him as a slave.”

Slave markets were often lingered on the edge of the Silk Road, and I couldn’t possibly consent that form of suffering happening to myself. I managed to catch the context of a few words before the traders caught me in their sight. Their voice trembled as these last three words gradually poured out, overlooking at each other in agitation, as if they were hiding secretive situations against me. I couldn’t help but to act like I didn’t overhear. The two men fell silent. One shuffled their feet into the sand while the other avoided my confused gaze, his hand gradually tightening on the reins of his precious camel, and I suggested in a high-pitched voice, “I can be a trader. I will learn!” The two men looked at me with a spark of interrogation. There was an anxious ambience surrounding the three of us. Both of them frowned at me in contemplation, and were momentarily stunned.

“I can help. I can learn what it takes. I beg you, do not force me out of here. I have no alternative sanctuary. I rushed. I was certainly in a rush. But I could tell this slight discomfort has been relieved through this exclamation. The two men nodded in agreement that they would teach me about the history, geography, and culture of trade along a portion of the Silk Road, but I would have to be confined to their words, their actions, and their rules. This was the Silk Road after all, an all-encompassing route that extended in two directions, branching across one or more continents, descending from the lands of Asia, which, in the eyes of the villagers, became the one of the most prevalent and efficient trade centers that ever ceased to exist. Yet, at this point, no one, even these traders, knew where the Silk Road ended, or the villages that were paved on the road. Did no one have any desperation to find them?

Out of this desperation, there was a spark that was gradually ignited deep down into the abyss of my heart, like an arrow finding its bow at last. From that convergence, a purpose, a goal was born, ruthless and absolute, that would henceforth decree my every action. I wanted to uncover and tie the ends of where the Silk Road led us to. Days passed, and my information of these trade routes were enlarged on broader perspectives, learning how the intertwining of geographical and historical aspects dictated the path of this road, how five silk road routes that began from China, possibly extending west— into regions of the Middle East and parts of Anatolia, probably even Europe, and the goods that traders frequently exchanged when assembling in markets together. Silk, domestic animals, horses, paper, innovations, cultures, religions— essentially anything that merchants had in their pockets— was used as trade material. This was the lifestyle that had shaped and confined me for the next few months: reading global routing maps listing country names, the texts of past merchants who had operated, and lectures on trade taught by experienced traders. It was an ordeal.

The next step after acknowledging the fundamental facts, information, experiences, and precautions, was to apply them in actual trading affairs. Hours. Days. Months passed. Uncertainty became a certainty as the days passed, and I counted on myself to discover the boundaries beyond our footpaths, the limits of where they reached. Those stern merchants and impenetrable rules have enveloped me for the past few months, and I have felt a sense of desperation to break free from the confines. There was a force inside of me that felt the need to be altered, as if being confined wasn’t the solution to my existence. As the moon descended into my sight, it felt like

the perfect time to run. I gathered the maps, texts, informative experiences, and silk shawls with me. I didn't hesitate; I slowly crept out of the village, taking a last look at the shelter that had detained me for months. I felt a cold shiver down my spine as the turbulent winds pierced through my skin, temperatures grasping by the negative; my fingers insensible.

Thoughts raced through my head, my inner conscience started to try and convince me, "Turn back! Safety and warmth are just a meter away from you!" My legs didn't resonate with that conviction. They kept on moving forward, as if I was being dragged into the unknown abyss of things. I took one last glance at the village, and sprinted into the abyss that cried for me. Days turned into nights, the cold winds had a blend of comforting warmth, yet the scorching sunrays took an extreme toll on me, leaving behind an angry, crimson mark that pulsed with the sun's flames. Everything surrounding me felt exceedingly colossal, my perspectives grew wider by the days, yet I felt lost. It felt fictitious, as these panoramas felt like imaginative visions I would have dreamed about during profound nights of wanting to find ends that tied the Silk Road together.

Finding the end wasn't easy. Difficulties, dangers, and despair marked it. Broiling afternoons, shivering nights, desolated deserts, weeks of starvation, days of dehydration, and abnormal elevations of pinnacles after crossing the Gobi. This was all part of one's plan; these hardships weren't exaggerate—they were realistic. After two and a half weeks of walking, I saw around a group of five merchants on camels walking towards a center that was about a mile or two away from my current position. I caught up to them, puffing and catching my breath under scorching humidity.

"Hey! Help!" I screamed with the last breath that caught up to my throat, before falling face down into a batch of sand. These were the experiences that traders on the Silk Road had to endure. It wasn't a process of tranquility; it was a realm of the unknown.

My eyes were stung with tears from the sand in my eyes, my hands and feet numb before to the weeks of unrelenting escapades. There was hope, there wasn't desperation in any means, there was finally something to anticipate for. The traders looked in my direction, dismounted their camels, and set down their supplies to observe me.

They questioned, "What are you doing here alone?"

"I'm here to find the end of the Silk Road," I responded in confidence tied with a bit of exaggeration.

It was an impossible mission for even professional, experienced merchants, and as an amateur, I'm surely aware. There was a moment of silence, followed by bursts of laughter.

"Did that guy just say he wanted to walk the entire road?" said one, "He must be kidding me, three more days down the road and he'll be done for!" another repeated. "Listen, no one has walked from the Gobi Desert down to Anadolu. You'll be done for. Give up."

The merchants pointed at their map, eagerly persuading me to return back. They handed me three jars of fluid and non-perishable staples like dried meat, rice, and naan bread help me make it back to the original settlement. Everyone doubted my actions, reveries, and goals of finding this new, endless world. The active heatwaves pierced my skin, sweat running down my face, yet this wasn't enough to stop me from continuing to pace my rhythm and route towards this new world I was desperate to discover. I had the slightest thought of considering their words. Their words were minimal, yet full of ridicule, trying to demotivate me, but that was a false alarm. I kept on going, and I could never be more unquestionable that I would reach that destination. I traded their staples for a few shawls of silk to have a continuity of survival for the next few days, or maybe, who knows, how long it would take me to get there. Seemed illusory, but the spirit in hardships was to always be prepared for upcoming challenges and confrontations.

Another week passed, days still concealed with blistering ultraviolet rays, and the nights remained motionless, murky, and mild. Staple foods started to run out by the hour; everyday was a drift in dehydration and hunger that made this trip vastly intense. On the final day, out in the distance, around 400 yards away from where I was standing, there was a sign with words and borderlines; yards after that felt so familiar. People and camels were standing at these borders, and there was a sense of belonging and recognition that made me feel that there was an actual, a beyond the boundaries of geographical China. There was sand on top of the sign, and I went over to dust it off for a clearer vision, and it read "Anadolu".

That word sounded and appeared recognizable, as if I had been taught it or had heard it from someone a few days ago. I instantly grabbed the routing map out of my bag, and looked towards Eastern Europe. This was the country of Anatolia! I was in Anatolia! I have reached Anatolia! I came to a realization—one that left me in tears of bliss—that I actually discovered new territories within these limited fields that traders were restricted from travelling. So, I stepped in to the villages of the Anatolians. They were people who had no idea about the

lands of the Silk Road outside their territories, similar to those of the Gobi Desert. Roads weren't linked, trade wasn't systematically organized, people and their resources remained crowded in their own villages, and the maximum parameters only allowed trade between neighbors. This was the probable situation of every trading village that was situated on mountains, in deserts, or isolated by geographical boundaries. They needed someone to link them together, to create bonds of cooperation among intersecting cities, populations, resources, and traders. Stretching the paths from China to Eastern Europe, I was proud to be the one who opened this road. I was the first of men who unwrapped the paths of the Silk Road. This was the new endless world— The Silk Road, a famous trading route that stretched from China, through India, and all the way to Europe; all from the diligent discoveries and uphill struggles of the many merchants and traders who opened these roads, not just roads of trade and resources, but roads of opportunities, communication, and diversity.

# The Shadow Protocol

*Yew Wah International Education School of Yantai, Sun, Xiaohan Ellie – 18*

The Florida sun was a hammer. The air tasted of swamp and dying oranges. Sweat traced the scar over Luke Parker's eyebrow, dripped onto the hidden bandage.

He was a man built for shadows, not sunlight.

Clang.

Not rock. Metal.

He dug with bare hands and pulled a rusted lockbox from the earth. A twist – the lock snapped.

Inside: a tarnished silver ring, a crescent moon swallowing a star. Beneath it, parchment. Words in blood-red ink:

The Road remembers.

Klaus Schilmme. The ghost from Yantai.

Parker's blood went cold.

He looked at the house, at the single whiskey glass waiting on the sill. A ghost from another life. Some devils never leave.

She entered at 7 p.m., medical kit in hand. The air smelled of lemon and loneliness. He stood rigid, staring at the ring on the table like it was a live wire.

He moved before she could speak – three silent strides. He pinned her, his gaze a storm.

“If I don't make it back —”

“You will.” Her voice was steel.

A flicker of defiance. Then his hands were on her waist, spinning her – once, twice, three times – a ritual from a safer past. He pulled her close, his vow hot against her skin.

“I will make it.”

She felt the fresh bandage under his shirt. Liar, she thought. But she held him tighter.

Xi'an's Muslim Quarter was a sensory ambush. Sizzling meat, clattering tiles, the thick scent of cumin and ancient stone.

Ambush.

The door swung shut. Darkness.

Figures emerged from the stacks of tea bricks. No guns. This was quiet. Personal.

A knife flashed. Parker sidestepped, slammed the attacker into a shelf. Ceramic urns exploded into dust and shards.

He snatched a spear of porcelain – sharp as a blade.

Another came low. A knee cracked a jaw. A slash – a cry, a dropped weapon.

They were amateurs, Klaus was testing him.

In the wrecked office, haze of tea dust, he found it: a map fragment showing caves in Dunhuang.

Tucked in a ledger of smuggled artifacts disguised as tea.

Klaus wasn't just a thief. He was a polluter of history.

Alone in his hotel, bruises throbbing under his skin.

His phone buzzed. Unknown number.

One line:  
The alley in Miami smelled like rain and regret.

She was the only one who knew.

His hand twitched towards the minibar.

A memory, sharp and sudden:  
Cordite. Wet asphalt. Levi's body hitting the ground. Police lights painting puddles red and blue.  
And her – hands steady, bandaging his wound (his blood, not Levi's). Her silence, an entire opera.

He picked up water, drank it down, ice clinking like a melody against the glass.  
The cold ground him.

The Mogao Caves were a silent city carved into cliff faces. A tomb of colors and whispered prayers.  
Cold, dry air, smelling of incense and endless sand.

He found Claus in a restricted chamber. A tall, gaunt man, elegant and out of place. The silver ring gleamed on his finger.

"You are as persistent as rumor, Detective Parker," Klaus said, voice smooth and hollow. "The fossil was merely an overture."  
He gestured to a vast Silk Road mural. "This is the true performance."

A section of the painting slid back, stone groaning.  
Inside, on a rock pedestal: a bronze compass, needle floating in quicksilver, swirling like a malevolent eye.

"A Yuan Dynasty marvel," Klaus breathed. "It doesn't point north. It points to mercury. Emperors hid tombs with such tricks. Misdirection. Secrets in plain sight."  
As Klaus reached, Parker moved. "Don't."  
Klaus smiled. "Or what? You'll arrest me? You break things, Parker. Like you broke Levi. Like you break yourself, seeking absolution you don't deserve."

He circled. "You don't build. You ruin. You hunt redemption in the wrong desert."

Parker's jaw tightened. He drew his gun. "The ring. Hands where I can see them."

Klaus laughed, dry and hollow. He complied; eyes locked on Parker's.  
"You may have the compass. But the Shadow remains."  
Parker slammed him against the mural, dust pluming. Snapped cuffs on tight.

"The Road ends for you here."

He took the compass—bronze, cold, inert.

Klaus's whisper chased him: "It never ends."  
He didn't call. He just came home.

The lock clicked open after 9 p.m. She waited in the lamplight. The room smelled of safety and her perfume.

He stood on the threshold. She jumped.

He turned his head, showing his profile: one side familiar, the other a mask of white bandage, covering temple to jaw.

A phantom's disguise. His jacket torn, one eye burning with feral light.

He looked at her, and his strength left. He fell into her arms.

She caught him. He shook, a fine tremor.

She fetched her kit. As she reached for the bandage, his hand shot out, gripping hers—feeling her pulse. Proof.

“Klaus,” she said.

“He had a ring,” Parker’s voice was ragged. “A dark echo of yours.”

Words tumbled out—the cave, the compass, the taunts, the final punch.

“He said I was a phantom. That I only break things.”

She listened, silent. She peeled back the white mask. Underneath: a clean, sutured wound from temple to cheek.

She tended it, touch gentle. His face revealed, piece by piece, whole again.

Then, without a word, she picked up his torn jacket and began to sew.

His eyes fell on her hand, on the simple black ring—a twin to his own. A promise.

He took the half-mended jacket. His fingers brushed hers—a current of life.

“I thought that’s all I was,” he whispered. “A weapon. Leaving ruins.”

He looked at her. “But I built this. With you. That’s what the road was guarding. Not a compass. Not gold. This.”

The fear in his eyes was primal—the terror of losing the one thing that banishes phantoms.

She stood, poured a glass of whiskey, brought it to him.

He looked at it, then at her, face fully visible. He took the glass.

It was no longer a temptation. It was a choice.

He set it down, full and untouched.

He was already full.

Outside, a breeze stirred the leaves of his orange tree, rustling with the imminent weight of new fruit.

# Fiction

Group 6



# The Helpful Camel

*Korean International School Springboard, Tsui, Yau Yau Claire Summer – 11*

## Chapter 1 : Not very helpful

On a very peculiar day in the Taklamakan desert, there was an equally peculiar camel. This camel, along with the caravan of hardworking merchants, helpful servants and ordinary camels, was a camel that was remarkably lazy. In the desert, where food is dry and meager, and the journey complicated and long, the lazy camel refused to walk, ate food, and burped. In fact, this camel was soooooo unhelpful that he would never help his owner, never. His owner was understandably very unhappy. In fact, he was so sad that he didn't want to talk to this camel anymore.

Everything changed when a note from the king. One day, on holiday, the camel was lounging and enjoying his camel snacks. Then, a note was delivered by a pigeon named, well, Pigeon to the merchants – a valuable looking scroll made of silk, with extra fancy writings on it. The camel got curious – what could it be? Crudely and rudely, he snatched the note with his big camel teeth. The merchant who had the note was really angry with the camel. “ Hey! how rude of you to snatch my note!” yelled the Merchant.

But the camel did not care about the man, or what he was saying. He was too busy opening the scroll with his camel feet! After a lot of struggling, stomping and pushing and shoveling, he finally opened it. On the note, it said “Please, we are going to finish building the Silk Road. Next year, there will be a contest to bring the most valuable item to the emperor. The owner of that camel will become the emperor and rule all of China.” The camel was very excited but realised he was so lazy that he could not join the contest.

After crying very hard about himself, the lazy camel decided to give up on junk food. Sadly, he cannot resist the food and keep eating. The berries and the sweets are just too good! The bed, too comfy; the caravan, walking too fast; the goods, too heavy! Frustrated, the camel kept rolling on the floor and stumbled upon a book.

The camel read the book and found a magic cave on page 15. It said,” This is a magical cave that has the legendary golden dragon statue located to the north of China, it is the rarest treasure in the world.” The camel knows what to bring to the emperor “the legendary golden dragon statue.” murmured the camel. So, the camel is set out on an adventure to find the treasure.

In the middle of the night, the camel escaped his house and went outside of the desert. The city was quiet and everyone was fast asleep, so the camel escaped safely from the people and their camels. ”The book said that I would have to go through the oasis, then I would have to walk through the city where they only allowed local people and did not allow camels , and in the end I would have to go back to the China mountains and survive from the dragon guardian.” the camel shuddered. Determined, he set out on his way anyway.

In the morning the camel's owner woke up to find the camel missing. Worried he got kidnapped, the owner called the royal guards (police at the time). “Sorry we can't find your camel, we looked everywhere but still no evidence!” The police said. The owner was shocked and decided to go to the oasis to find the camel.

Turns out, the desert is quite big, and everywhere looks the same – lots and lots of sand, some dunes, and a random rock. The camel went his way to get to the oasis but it was tooooooo complicated to find his way. “What was I thinking?” sighed the camel. Dragging his feet, he was very ready to walk back home when he saw a cat and a dog. “ We are tour guides to people's directions. We want to help you go to the oasis, but first we need your help to fix our boat. It's broken .”sang the cat and dog. The camel agreed and decided to make the promise to fix it so that he could go to the oasis.

During the journey a pack of wolves were secretly watching the camel, dog and cat. They were scavengers, and their LOVE treasures!

“If I kidnapped the cat” Said wolf 1, “we would be able to find the way to the treasures!”



“We need to be sneaky.” One wolf said. “Wolves, we should pretend to be camels so we can camouflage through the oasis and later we can catch the cat.” The wolves disguised as camels and later arrived at a shortcut to the oasis.

## **Chapter 2 : The adventure begins**

With great difficulty, the camel finished building the boat. It was tough to find the wood to make a raft!

”Thank you camel now we can travel to the oasis.” thanked the cat and dog.

Once the raft was finished, the camel, dog and the cat rowed the boat. It was a little shaky, but it managed to set out to the sea until a terrible storm appeared. The raft shook like an autumn leaf in the stormy sea.

”Maybe I was right, it is not a good idea to not go on an adventure.” cried the camel. The cat and dog comforted the camel and said.” It's ok we can still find a way to the oasis.” The camel now has more confidence and found another way to get to the oasis – getting back on land, keep making lefts and walking into the jungle. The cat and dog were surprised when they found out the camel was able to find another way by the book.

2 hours later the owner walked to the oasis and said.” Excuse me, where is my camel?.” asked the camel’s owner, a merchant said.” sorry the camel ran away to the dark jungle.” The owner was sad and went back home to wait for the camel, hoping he would come back soon. The owner prayed to the saints so that the camel could come back soon but he didn't know that saints did not exist.

At last the camel, dog and cat arrived at the oasis with the book’s help. The dog and cat said.” Thank you camel for helping us all go to the oasis. This book must be very helpful.” The camel said.” This is a secret only between us, you should not tell your owner.” The dog and cat promised they would never tell anyone.

Finally they arrived at the oasis. The oasis was very busy –there were lots of people, lots of camels and also many shops. The camel has never seen something so amazing. He wished to live there forever.” I wish that I could live in this oasis.” amazed the camel.

Suddenly a group of camels came and grabbed the cat. The cat screamed for help but it was too late the camel and the dog couldn't grab her paws. Suddenly the camel realised that they were not camels, but they were wolves in disguise. The wolves brought the cat to Egypt and gave her to the pharaoh. The pharaoh said.” Wow this cat’s fur is good for making a new carpet but first I must kill her.” But the dog came and later went to stop the pharaoh.” Don’t kill the cat because she is my only friend, and meet my new camel friend. Please don’t make fun of him for being lazy.” cried the dog. But the pharaoh didn't listen and laughed at the camel.

The camel felt sad and decided to give up but the dog said.” Camel lets me deal with the pharaoh later and starts the adventure with 2 of us.” The camel went with the dog to the city that did not allow black people and camels. In the city there were many beautiful structures and fancy 5 star restaurants. But the problem is that there was a family’s daughter that was punished by the mayor.” Stop hitting our daughter.” sobbed the family.” No, I would not allow your daughter because she is black.” yelled the mayor. The camel and dog saw everything and decided to hide in a bush. The camel bravely came and kicked the mayor’s butt.” owwwww!” screamed the mayor. The camel and dog ran away and secretly brought the family to a random hotel.” Thank you camel and dog, what can we do to repay you, but please go away because the mayor is going to find you.” cried the father.

The camel and dog ran away as fast as they could but were in big trouble.” Why are you taking me away.” yelled the camel. The mayor’s guards said.” This city is restricted for camels. We can't let you in. The dog came and said.” Mayor’s guards, if you try to take the camel away then you will have to face the consequences.” The mayor’s guards ran away as fast as they could and decided to quit their jobs. Later all the people praised the camel and dog and now the city has never restricted the black people and camels ever again.

## **Chapter 3: Rescuing the cat**

Right in Egypt the pharaoh and his wolves were hitting and yelling at the cat.” You disobedient cat, keep cleaning my shoes or else I will kill you.” the pharaoh yelled. The cat tried to clean but she couldn't because she is a cat. The cat sobbed.” Please why do you want to kidnap me? I am just a cat.” The pharaoh yelled .” Shut up you disrespectful cat.” The pharaoh taped the cat’s mouth and later the cat could not breathe.

The camel and dog were later given a magic statue.” take this book it has real magic in it, if the pharaoh tries to attack you, use this statue to bring the characters to life.” encouraged the librarian.” Thank you librarian.” said the camel and dog. During the adventure they arrived at the pharaoh’s palace. The pharaoh asked.” You strangers, why are you here?”. We are here for revenge, I will teach you.” yelled the camel and dog. The characters from the statue appeared and quickly freed the cat.” That will teach you.” yelled the characters from the statue. The pharaoh decided to tell his wolves to come for another plan for revenge. Later his wolves decided to dress up as humans so that they could capture the cat again.

Soon the camel, dog and cat followed the book that said.” To get to the mountains you must walk to the saffron village, and you must use this magic book to heal the richest man in this village.” The camel, dog and cat walked to the saffron village and saw many dead flowers, many fishermen and one extraordinary wooden mansion. The camel said.” I think this wooden mansion belongs to the richest man in this village.” The dog and cat decided to agree and they all went to the mansion. They saw the richest man inside of the mansion and saw a sick old man inside.”Help me.” cried the old man.” I only have 3 days to live.” The camel didn't even know what to do but remembered what the book had said, so the camel read some strange words and later found out that the old man suddenly turned into a rich young quadrillionaire and said.” Thank you camel, dog and cat. You saved my life. As a reward I give you a digital map so that it can help you easily get to the high mountains.” The camel, dog and cat thanked the old man and left to walk to the mountains.

#### **Chapter 4: The trading day**

A year later there was an alliteration about the silk road trading from the emperor.” At 8pm everyone must trade their most extraordinary treasure to me, but if you trade me something in common, you would be exiled forever, don’t embarrass yourself!” yelled the emperor furiously. But then the camel’s owner saw this and called the camel.” You only have an hour before the event, come back quickly or else you would be exiled!” cried the owner.” I promise I will be here soon.” reminded the camel. But when the camel, dog and cat arrived at the mountains it was too late. The silk road event has already started.” Oh no!” the camel screamed.” I don’t know what to do.” The dog and cat decided to comfort the camel and said.” It’s ok, we will find a way to get here as fast as we can, but first let's just find the golden dragon statue first and we will have plenty of time.”

Suddenly the camel realised the digital map and opened it. Suddenly it started to talk.” Hello I am the digital map. How can I help you.” said the digital map.” please show us the destination to the mountains.” said the cat. The digital map shows the camel, dog and cat the destination.” Thank you.” said the dog. They followed the destination and saw the legendary golden dragon statue. The statue was ancient and very beautiful. Suddenly the dragon guardian came and yelled.” Who are those trespassers? We do not want strangers in my temple.” We are here to bring your legendary golden dragon statue to the emperor.” said the camel, dog and cat.” Let's make a deal. If we can answer your question you can come with us to the adventure and trade the emperor your legendary golden dragon statue.” The dragon guardian gave the camel, dog and cat a question and said.” what is  $6x(145 - 56) + 5 =$ .” The dog answered.” The answer is 539 because when you add the extra numbers this is the answer.” Wow.” said the camel and cat.” Dog, you are so smart.” The dragon guardian was pleased.” Dog you are correct, the answer is 539.” said the dragon guardian.

Later the camel, dog and cat were about to give the emperor the legendary golden dragon statue until the pharaoh and his pack of wolves snatched the legendary golden dragon statue.” Hahahahaha you will be exiled forever.” shouted the pharaoh. The camel was depressed and said.” I am sorry but would be exiled because the only thing left is nothing.” So the dragon guardian gave the camel a broken vase. Embarrassed, the camel hid under a bush. Then the emperor came and said.” may I look at your treasure?” But when the emperor saw this he was surprised.” Wow this vase would be worth millions, this is the most legendary treasure I’ve ever seen.” cried the emperor. Suddenly the dog, cat and the dragon guardian saw this and said.” Well done camel you are now the king.” Turns out the legendary golden dragon statue was just made of plastic instead of real gold.

The camel was crowned emperor and told the emperor’s guards.” Arrest the pharaoh and his pack of wolves. We do not want something in common.” Why did we not win.” yelled the pharaoh.” The emperor said.” Because

the legendary golden dragon statue is not made of real gold. It's made of plastic painted in gold. The camel was soon helpful and was never remarkably lazy again. The End

### **Chapter 5: A trip to shenzhen**

So the day continued with the camel, dog, cat and the dragon guardian when the day went on another adventure to travel to Shenzhen and visit all of the destinations. Another peculiar day in the Taklamakan desert the camel's owner said, "Are you sure you can go on a holiday without your owner." The camel said, "It is not only me. I have my friends named dog, cat and dragon guardian." The camel made a promise from his owner, in fact he actually broke his promise from his owner. There was a bus waiting for the camel to come in. The driver cried, "Please get here as fast as you can or we would have left earlier." The camel ran to the bus but his suitcases dropped when he was getting inside of the bus. The dog, cat and dragon guardian were waiting until they were shocked. "Where are your bags," yelled the dog. "I dropped my suitcases when I was running. The dog ran out of the bus and picked out all of the camel's suitcases and ran back to the bus.

During the adventure the bus driver drove very fast to the city but then the cat felt very sick. "I need a vomit bag," cried the cat. The camel gave his vomit bag but did not feel better. But tragically the plane has left already, the camel was sad. "It's ok camel there is another plane in 3 hours," comforted the dragon guardian. So the camel, dog, cat and dragon guardian decided to explore the airport to the shops, the restaurants, and the resorts just in case the plane was delayed.

Later an evil gang of hyenas had a secret plan. "This is our goal to steal the emperor's crown and become the emperor of all of China," Laughed one of the hyenas. The leader of the hyenas said, "This is our only chance to steal the throne. This quest should be ironic or else you all are fired. To be continued

# The Journey to the Silk Road

*Korean International School Springboard, Yuen, Shun Otto – 11*

Camels live in the hot desert, they used to help people carry fruit, grains, and heavy things like bags full of rice. There was a Camel named Rocky. Rocky loved eating lots of grass. The whole day he was in the hot desert. He was very resilient and adaptable.

One day, he had a job, his job was to carry heavy things like a bag full of grain. He carried them all the way to the Silk Road. The Silk Road was hot and full of quick sand so he walked slowly. The Silk Road is full of sand from China to Europe, and Arabia.

The road was a soft mountain of sand, where the people walked with the camels.

Some Silk Roads had a river, where people stopped to drink or fill water.

Rocky the camel found moving on the silk road very tough as it was hot and many times he used to get sunk in the sand.

He wanted to escape and one day at night he ran in the dark and escaped!

Finally, he managed to get out of the quick sand.

A stylized white plant graphic on a dark gray background. The plant has a central stem with several large, elongated, teardrop-shaped leaves on the right side and a feathery, fern-like structure on the left side. The leaves are arranged in a fan-like pattern, and the feathery structure is composed of many fine, parallel lines.

# Fiction

Group 7

# Six Traders, One Dream

*Korean International School Springboard, Adrian Lin – 20*

Once upon a time in Wuhan, China, there lived a family who wanted to start a trading business. They are called the Jiangnan family. Zhang is the head of the family and his wife is called Wei. They are the head of the Jiangnan Family, are in their mid 30s, and they have 4 children who are mostly boys named Yue, Nai, Lan, and Wen living together in a house. Together, they like to go fishing in the lake, make dumplings, and garden. The 4 boys are in their teens and they are joining the trading with their family. So the whole family will trade together by traveling to western China.

“We’re bored and we want to do a lot of trading to make better business!” said Lan eagerly. “Ok! We will go together as a group.” Wen replied. The family then set off on their trading route going west of China. They were trying to sell various items made in China such as gunpowder, silk, and fruits such as lychee, peaches, dragonfruits, and mandarins to the people who live there. “After gathering the fruits, Zhang suggested, ‘Let’s trade them to Jingzhou!’ ‘Good idea!’ said Nai excitedly. The family then continued with their journey westwards to do trading smoothly.

Suddenly, when they arrived in Chengdu, Sichuan, they met Dingken, a merchant guild leader. Dingken is in his 60s and he used to be friends with Wei, but was bullied by one of Wei’s friends. He is a very strict man who doesn’t allow people to visit Chengdu. Dingken yelled “What are you doing here? You guys are not allowed to enter Chengdu! My merchants are here and you shouldn’t be visiting my hometown!” The family got angry with Dingken but they tried to ignore his warnings and proceed with trading in Chengdu. “I’m going to tell the armies to escort you guys away from Chengdu!”

“We’re unhappy about Dingken’s feelings on trading in Chengdu! Let’s find a solution so that we can solve the problem together!” said Wei. The family continued to think of a way to solve the conflict with Dingken. “Dingken and Zhang negotiated and came up with a compromise on allowing them to visit Chengdu. “I’ll allow your family to do trading only if you will give me 10% of your sale!” The family accepted the deal with Dingken, but after a few days of trading. Finally, they decided to head towards Deyang because they wanted to have their full income in trading.

“Let’s head north to Deyang so that we can get back our full trading income!” Nai suggested confidently. “I agree with you Nai!” the 3 other boys echoed. After heading north to Deyang, the family continued their journey westward. In Chamdo, they faced unexpected challenges—difficult terrain and skeptical local merchants. But the Jiangnan family’s reputation for honesty and fair dealing helped them overcome these obstacles. By the time they reached Nagqu, their name was known throughout China.

“The Jiangnan family succeeded through integrity and teamwork!” merchants said with admiration. Yue’s negotiation skills, Nai’s eye for quality goods, Lan’s ability to build trust, and Wen’s careful record-keeping had all contributed to their success. Inspired by their journey and values, families across China started their own trading businesses, carrying forward the Jiangnan family’s legacy of hard work, honesty, and unity.