



# Fiction

Group 1

# Goblinland

*A.D. & F.D. of Pok Oi Hospital Mrs Cheng Yam On School, Wong Wing Chun, 8*

**I**n the big desert in northwest China, there are Goblins. Nobody knows where they live but people heard about Goblins from tales.

Goblins are very small, like a child's fist. They have a big head and grey skin. They wear grass and leaves. They hate the sun and hot weather. So they come out at night time and hide in the day time.

It is summer. Rain does not come in the Goblinland. The desert is very dry and the Goblins do not have enough water. They worry about their lives.

There is a naughty boy in Goblinland. His name is Gob. He is very thirsty and dreams of drinking water.

One day, a group of men came to the desert, riding on camels. They had bottles of water.

In the night time, the men slept. Gob walked to the camels quietly. He climbed on the bottles and drank water. He finished so many bottles of water that he was sleepy. Suddenly Gob fell off the camel's back. His big head hit another camel's foot and the camel yelled loudly, waking the men.

A man got up quickly and caught Gob. The man was interested in Gob and asked him many questions. The man was kind and knew Goblinland had no water. The man gave Gob a big bottle of water and drew him a map to tell Gob where to get water. Gob was very happy.

Then, the sun was about to rise so it was time for Gob to go home. Gob burned some leaves from his clothes and the smoke made the man sleep. Gob brought the big bottle of water to his family. They were happy too.

In the morning, the man got up and found that he had lost one bottle of water. He was not sure if it was a dream or not. He could only tell his friends the words Gob and Gob-in-land.

His tale became widespread, and now the desert is named the Gobi Desert.

# The Gobi Desert

*Clearwater Bay School, Rhea Saxena, 7*

The sky was pale blue with fluffy clouds making shapes above the Gobi Desert. There was a brown bear living in a cave, a dark spooky cave. Her name was Roygbiv. She liked to sing and dance when she was a bored.

One afternoon, Roygbiv went to search for fire wood to cook vegetable soup. She went to the forests and looked for trees to cut with her axe. She was shocked, there were no trees, the forest looked bare. She felt sad and unhappy. She would not be able to cook vegetable soup.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw footprints. Slowly and curiously, she followed them to a circle of yurts. When she got there, Roygbiv, nervously knocked on the door. Anxiously he talked to tell them about the problem. The Nomads welcomed her into a discussion. They decided that every time they cut a tree down they would plant a new one. She felt happy but she still did not have her vegetable soup. The nomads gave her some of their wood to cook her vegetable soup. Then peeping through the clouds. She saw a wonderful rainbow with Red Orange Yellow Green Blue Indigo Violet. The rainbow she was named after Roygbiv!

# The Video Game

*Diocesan Preparatory School, Cheung Kiu Ching, Nicholas, 8*

**I**t was a boring evening. While my parents were out, I was playing a video game called “Wizards and Spells”. It’d been recommended by a friend. At first I thought the game was brilliant but soon I found out that my friend was wrong. It was just a “Harry Potter” knock off. I wanted to shout, “This is so boring!”

Suddenly, a wizard popped out of the screen and exclaimed, “You want excitement? I’ll give you EXCITEMENT!”

I was so shocked. Suddenly, the wizard raised his wand and pointed it straight towards me. A lightning bolt struck me and I floated into the screen with the wizard. In a flash, the screen came into the view of a desert. Was it really? “The Gobi Desert! The biggest desert in the world!” I said. (Actually, it is only one of the biggest deserts in the world.)

I saw a terrible sight: a herd of dinosaurs was charging towards me! I ran for my life. I didn’t want to get eaten by dinosaurs! What should I do? I wanted to hide but I saw a sword and picked it up. Wow! I realised it wasn’t actually a sword: it was a wand! I whirled the wand towards the sky and a gigantic tornado whizzed towards the dinosaurs and the wizard. “I surrender!” shouted the wizard.

“If only you would send me out of the screen!” I ordered.

I picked up a few of fossils and coins and I whizzed out of the screen.

My mum asked me where I got the fossils and coins. I shouted, “I will tell you later!”

I rushed into my room and locked the door; then I saw a book called “Gobi Desert”. I opened it; inside it said, “The Gobi Desert is one of the largest deserts in Asia. It was a part of the great Mongol Empire, and along the Silk Road...”

“Mum! Did you buy a book about the Gobi Desert for me?” I inquired.

“No!” answered Mum.

Then... who bought it for me? The man on the moon? Aliens? The wizard? Let me continue to play that game and find out! I turned on the television and played the game and the wizard popped out of the screen again and said, “Like that book, don’t you?”

“Why did you give me the book about Gobi Desert?” I asked.

“I wanted to say sorry. I may have frightened you,” the wizard mumbled.

“Apology accepted and thank you for the book,” I murmured.

# New Tales of the Gobi Desert

*Peak School, Anson Li, 7*

In Year 9999, many places on Earth were heavily polluted; especially in City Choka, there were too many factories and traffic; many people there had serious health problems because of that. As the problem was becoming very serious, the President of City Choka assigned Professor Tom Jerry to explore a solution.

After many discussions, they decided to find another place with a good and fresh environment to move their people there and then they could clean up City Choka. The Gobi Desert in the Northern part of Asia was their choice because it had clear, blue sky and very fresh air; very suitable for living. So, Prof. Tom led a team to go to the Gobi Desert to build up a city for their people to move there. At the same time, some aliens from Planet Laka were also looking for a place for their citizens to move to because their planet was going to explode soon.

The King of Planet Laka assigned Professor Buluke and his team to make a trip to Earth to explore. When their spaceship landed on Earth, he saw a group of humans working there. When Prof. Buluke walked closer, he saw his old friend Prof. Tom, they had met each other in a cross-planets conference many years before. They hugged each other and found that they both had a similar reason to come here. After discussion, they decided to build a city for both humans and aliens to live. The aliens had some magic technology to do heavy construction super-fast with zero pollution, so, they were responsible for building roads, highways, tunnels, bridges, railways, man-made harbors and rivers as the desert was dry, hot and lack of water. The human team was responsible for beautiful buildings, houses, malls, shops and decorations of the city. At last, they also built a statue with Prof. Tom and Prof. Buluke shaking hands to represent the success of this project and they named the city as Ali-Hu-Peace City.

At this happy moment, when they city was ready for the human and alien citizens to move in, a big group of people suddenly arrived. Their leader was Baddy, he was a very greedy person who owned a gold-mining company. They came here because their advanced gold-exploring equipment showed there was a lot of gold under the Gobi Desert. Baddy wanted to use a bomb to destroy the city and get the gold under it. When the two professors knew his plan, they tried to discuss with Baddy but Baddy refused any discussion as he wanted the gold immediately.

In order to stop him, the two professors could only call for help! Prof. Tom blew his newly invented 'animal-whistle' to call all the camels and donkeys on the Gobi Desert to surround all the bad guys. Prof. Buluke and the aliens used their super-glue freezing guns to freeze them and called their biggest spaceship to come to send all of them to a jail. They also dug a little hole to explore the gold that Baddy mentioned. Surprisingly, it turned out was an underground forest, not gold! They dug out the forest and put it in the city for their animals to live.

Finally, both the citizens of City Choka and Planet Laka moved into this new City of Ali-Hu-Peace and lived there happily together.



# Fiction

Group 2

# Keep Calm and Stay Alive in the Gobi Desert

*Bradbury School, Anjali Darling, 9*

**H**ello, my name is Thomas, are you ready to read this terrifying story of the way I survived in the freezing cold Gobi Desert? It shows what I had to go through, how all of my hope nearly vanished when I trudged through the enormous mountains covered in fluffy snow, which blocked out the distance as far as the eye could see.

This could possibly be one of the best days of my life, I was going camping all the way to the Gobi Desert. With my family and my best friends, Harry and Ethan. So, I felt very excited but worried after all it was the Gobi Desert, miles and miles of empty spaces. The desert was surprisingly beautiful with the mountains sparkling away as if nothing bad ever happens. Anyway PPPLLEEEAAASSSEEE let me explain all of that in the morning. G-O-O-D-N-I-G-H-T!

So about what happened yesterday, we flew into the desert then exited the plane with a parachute. When we were in the air it felt as if there were billions of icicles blowing in my face. It was a freezing cold day. We then set up our tents. I was sharing with my two friends. Anyway, I wanted to explore so I sneaked off all alone. The sun was shining onto the glittering snow it made my eyes ache and squint in pain. The wind was starting to pick up and made loud howling noises. I started to walk through the snow-covered valleys. I could not hold my excitement I started running into the distance making loud crunching sounds as I ran. I put my hand over my eyes and peered in to the distance behind me.

That was when I stopped and gasped. The camp I was staying at was out of site. I decided that I would retrace my footsteps and that should lead me back to the camp. But when I looked down there was no trace of my footsteps. The wind must have blown them away. Deep inside my body I screamed a loud piercing scream, this could not be happening. I decided to climb up a towering naked tree and see if I could see the camp. Slowly I climbed up the tree but half way through I collapsed sobbing until my stomach

hurt in panic. This was unbelievable!

Could I really make it to the camp before nightfall? Lots of doubts were racing in my mind. As I walked the sound of the animals sounded like they were laughing and teasing, it was dreadful. Night was falling I needed to hurry I definitely did not want to spend the night alone with all the bugs. Though, I did not know about all the other darker creatures that lie in this desert. I shuddered at the thought. Soon it was night I slowly curled up into a ball beside a big boulder and rocked like a baby, sang a little lullaby. My fingers were numb in pain it felt like -30°C until I finally fell asleep.

As I woke up this morning the moment my eyes opened I jumped and was terrified and wondered where on earth I was. As yesterday came flooding back to me tears started springing into my eyes all of it happened to quickly. I slowly got up and started walking. I stood by a tree gasping for breath, but hold on what was that a brown dot in the distance. I started running towards it. “Wait, help, PLEASE!” I shouted. By the time I saw what it was it was too late. The bear started bounding towards me. I turned and started to run though deep down I knew I would not outrun the beast.

I heard the bear skid to a halt I turned to see what was happening but the moment I did I knew it was a big mistake. The bear was growling loudly he was breathing in my face the warm breath hit me like a punch. A paw came flying towards my chest. His long, sharp, curved talon like claws scraped me, my coat was shredded and feathers came flying out. I found myself catapulting through the sky, I landed on the snow with a very painful thud. My body froze with fear. The beast prowled over my head where it growled and nudged me. I played dead. The bear was satisfied that I was no longer a threat he grunted and slowly staggered away.

After the attack I was determined to get to safety I was also a lot more aware of my surroundings and I wasn't in my own little world anymore. My mind was filled with fear I did not want to get eaten by the beast. That was when I saw the tree and realized it was my only hope. I ran straight to the tree and lunged up desperate to grab a branch. I failed, one time, two times, three, four, my mind filled with despair I tried one last time. Finally, I made it I swung myself up and repeated the process. I reached the top of the tree just before I collapsed. My eyes were slowly closing but then I saw something out of the corner of my eye. I span around anxious to have a look it seemed to be a fire in the distance. As I looked closer I saw that there were tents and people that is when it hit me this was my camp I groaned.

What a reckless and self-absorbed boy I am!

# Dying Echoes

*Diocesan Girls' Junior School, Ng Tsz Ying, Tiffany, 11*

January 1998

Narantuyaa (sun-beam) was Mongolian. She lived with her nomadic family and had an older sister named Sarangerel (moon-light). The family had recently moved to the Gobi Desert, which Narantuyaa found entrancing.

One day Sarangerel caught Narantuyaa running and called out, "Where are you going, Naran?"

"Why, off to explore, of course," Naran grinned.

"Well, remember to come back quickly. Don't go too far," Sarangerel said bossily.

Naran trekked along the rough, rocky sand of the Gobi. She was mesmerised by the beautiful sunset. It painted the sky many colours. She saw purple, dark blue, pink—all woven together into a tapestry. Now that's priceless, Naran thought.

She wandered a bit further than usual. She found an opening caved into a large sand dune and, feeling curious, she cautiously walked into the opening. As soon as she was inside, Naran sighed in wonder. Exquisite crystals hung from the cave walls, each as big as her body and as sharp as a needle. The crystals glowed naturally, lighting up the cave.

"Narantuyaa." An elegant voice sounded behind her. Naran jumped in surprise and turned to face a snow leopard. Its fur was snowy white and its eyes shone like sapphires. It had a sleek, lithe body.

"What – who are you?" Naran spluttered.

"I am Queen Nyra of the snow leopards. I have been expecting you. Not many discover our caves here, and few are innocent children. Now I ask you a favour. Would you like to help us?"

"Um... what can I do for you?"

"Good. Humans destroy us, hunt us wanting to sell our fur as coats and make medicine from our bones. Our leopards have been starting to die out as a result. Would you ask them to stop?"

"Me? But I'm just a girl! What can I do?" Naran asked incredulously.

"You can write to your rulers, telling them to pass a law: no more hunting for animal fur. I believe in you, Narantuyaa."

She pondered this for a while.

"Alright. I promise."

"Promise is a fragile thing, as easily broken as a spider's web," murmured the wise queen. "We honour promises, Narantuyaa. Come, child. Follow me." Nyra led Naran past some guards and went deeper into the cave.

Nyra spoke to a guard and then returned with a crystal engraved with a snow leopard's head. She pressed it into Naran's hand. "Now you shall never forget your promise, Narantuyaa. Leave now, child."

Naran strolled back the way she had come, thinking about her promise while tracing the snow leopard mark on the crystal with her finger.

“I’m going to study hard and become an important government official. Then I will be able to change the snow leopards’ fate,” Naran silently vowed to herself. “I’ll never ever forget my promise to Nyra!”

Then she pictured the scene that night: her bossy sister Sarangerel demanding to see the crystal at once; her mother spellbound, seeing such a precious jewel; her father surprised, wrinkling his forehead, frowning in concentration, inspecting the crystal and then declaring it a good way to earn extra money. But Narantuyaa was determined not to have the crystal sold – she didn’t want to forget her promise.

\* \* \*

February 2013

Narantuyaa was gingerly placing her snow leopard coat on a chair in her apartment in Ulan Bator, Mongolia. She had just gone to a meeting with President Tsakhiagiin Elbegdorj.

That night as she was searching for an important document in her storage room, a crystal tumbled out from the tallest shelf onto the carpet along with the document. Naran picked up the crystal. It was delicate, and its many facets reflected the light like a diamond. Where had she gotten this? And then the past dawned on her. Nyra. Her promise. The snow leopards!

“Oh!” Naran cried out. “Oh, how foolish I have been! All those animal fur coats! Am I too late to save my dear snow leopards now?”

The next day, Naran called for her private jet and directed the pilot to land it in the Gobi Desert, where the snow leopards lived. She dashed to the snow leopards’ cave, which she had once visited as a young child.

A single snow leopard lay on the cave ground.

Its body was covered with old wounds and a recent gash on its side was bleeding ceaselessly.

Narantuyaa crouched next to it.

“I am Nightshade,” the snow leopard rasped. “Are you Narantuyaa, the girl?”

“...Yes...why is there only one of you? Are there more snow leopards?” Naran asked anxiously.

“I am the only one left. Some were trapped by hunters wanting their fur, or died of hunger.”

“How did you get your scars?” Naran queried.

“I was like a fugitive, fleeing from one place to another. I had to hide from the hunters, while trying to feed my breed. There isn’t much prey anymore, either...” Nightshade’s head drooped and her eyes rolled.

“Nightshade!” Naran embraced the snow leopard in a tight hug. “Oh, what can I do to save you?”

“You did not keep your promise to Nyra,” Nightshade murmured with her eyes closed.

“No! Oh, I should have remembered! I am a government official, I should have stopped the hunting! I should have done something!” Naran wept.

“It is too late,” Nightshade said simply, collapsing into Naran’s lap.

“No!” Naran screamed, sobbing and sobbing into Nightshade’s spotted fur.

Outside the cave, leaves rustled in the howling wind, echoing the snow leopard’s last words: It is too late. It is already too late.

\* \* \*

*There were many snow leopards but here not one remains,  
The last, the remnants, the very last stains.  
When a promise is first spoken,  
It should never be broken.  
But humans always forget  
Their promises, which brings the promised one great regret  
That he ever trusted his friend.  
Sometimes we are too late;  
Death decrees the tapestry to be cut; we could have done something, but we did not;  
now it is too late; now we must accept our fate.*

# Shifting Sands

*Discovery College, Mia Mueller, 9*

“Hello Father.” said Alex Houglan who just came home.  
“Hi Alex,” said Alex’s father, Erik Houglan quietly.

He was a very restless man, his wife died in a car crash when Alex was two. That changed his life forever. Alex had now finished college and was ready to start a new life. He still longed for a relationship with his father.

One night when his Father was sleeping, Alex crept into his Father’s study and picked up a piece of paper filled with scribbles. He held his candle up to it and read some of his notes. At first, it didn’t make any sense because he didn’t know what it was about, so he continued reading. He realised that his father was writing about his trip to the New Gobi Desert.

He was shocked. “How could he do this to me?” he thought, “Is he committing suicide or something?” He had a thousand questions in his head. Did he even know that it was the most dangerous desert in the world? There were sandstorms every couple of hours and snakes with venomous bites! Most of all, there were pyramids that looked beautiful and lured you inside, only to find yourself in a twisting tunnel, unable to come out.

He read some more. All of a sudden, he turned white and froze; he saw the date when his father would leave at the top of the page. It said, “Twenty-fourth of April 1960- but that’s tomorrow!”

It was 11:00 at night and he had to do something fast. He paced back and forth in his father’s study and picked up the piece of paper and saw what he needed for the trip. He loved his father, and didn’t want him to die. He stared at the paper, for it was the most important decision of his life.

He checked where to meet his tour guide. It hit him. If he did this, he would save his Father’s life and would appreciate him more. Ever since his mother died, his father lost interest in him and was never able to look him in the eye. He decided to prove himself to his father. He left a note on the dining table, telling where he had gone. He quickly,

but quietly crept into the storage room, packed what he needed and was ready to meet up with his tour guide at the town square. He was scared but determined. He clutched his paper, took a last look at his house and was gone.

At the Town Square, he found the tour guide that his father had hired.

“Hello Mr. Erik Hougland.” Greeted Fred.

“Um, hi”, Alex answered.

“Please call me Fred, Mr. Hougland”, Fred replied confidently.

“Ok, you can call me Al... oh wait, Erik”. He struggled to say.

Arriving at the desert, Fred bought three camels; one for Alex, one for himself, and one for luggage. They loaded the camels and got ready to travel. For the rest of the journey, they went through the desert slowly, cautious not to be harmed by dangerous animals. Upon reaching the campsite, they tied up their camels, scrambled into their tents and slept.

Morning came. They were ready to explore what Alex’s father had organized. Before they went into the pyramid, they took pictures of the animals they saw. Alex realized that the animals were poisonous, but were scared of the camels, so they were safe.

Later, they were ready to explore the dangerous pyramid, The Pyramid of Cheops. It looked extraordinary, but deadly. Its beauty and color lures you inside. It looks deceptively small, but once inside, there are about twenty tunnels to choose from. They tied their camels in front of the pyramid. Then they slowly walked in. They went down a corridor and lit their torches. Right in front of them was a choice of twenty treacherous tunnels.

All of the tunnels were painted with beautiful pictures of the olden times and it was easy to understand the amazing story they were trying to tell. Alex and Fred went into a tunnel together as their eyes traced the pictures on the wall. They lost track of time until a problem came along that would put their lives at stake...

Suddenly they realized that they had lost each other. “Where am I?” they both thought as they looked around. They called each other’s names, but it was no use. They were both truly lost, there was no escape. They had been there for days now and were both ever so thirsty. Alex called Fred’s name once more and fainted on the hard, cold ground.

“Alex? Alex? Are you awake?” Alex woke up to the sound of Fred’s voice echoing in his head. “Your Father is outside waiting for you”. Alex woke up, stunned to hear that his Father was outside. He had so many questions... “How did he get here? Is he mad? Is he not?”

Fred helped Alex get up and gave him a jug of water. Alex drank it quickly. He followed Fred outside the pyramid and was relieved to see the sunlight shining on him. Right before him was the one and only Erik Hougland.

“Father!” Alex shouted as he ran towards his dad. “My dear boy!” Mr. Hougland said as Alex reached him. They hugged each other tight to their chests.

Then the most amazing thing happened to Alex. His father looked at him in the eye and started smiling. But soon his smile slowly started to fade. “You remind me a lot of your Mother. Her face sometimes haunts me because she is no longer in this world.” Alex thought about it for a minute and realized, that’s why he always looks away from me! It’s not that he doesn’t appreciate me! His father looked puzzled that Alex looked so happy and then smiled. “Let’s walk home, my boy.” Alex nodded in approval, and they slowly faded into the distance like Father and Son forever.

# Gobi and the Desert

*Dulwich College Beijing, Michael Lu, 7*

Millions and millions of years ago, I was still a young jungle with no name. I was made out of rows and rows of lush green trees and rich fertile grasslands. On my sturdy backside lay a village, it provided shelter for a few hundred families. The red roofs were battered broken and bent with rain, the windows were cracked, and the doors were scratched.

Cruel carnivorous half-dinosaur half-lizard creatures called Dezards roamed freely on me, and I couldn't stop them from destroying the beautiful landscape on my back. They had malicious green spikes on their backs, crooked yellow teeth, and their eyeballs were red with greed. They forced the poor starving villagers to present one boy and one girl every year as sacrificial goods, or else they threatened to trample the village. I was desperate to save the children, yet I couldn't do anything to help the villagers!

It was that day of the year again for villagers to offer a boy and a girl to the Dezards. All the villagers gathered together in the meeting square before dawn. The children were huddled in semicircles around a platform made out of wood.

Everyone grew hushed as the fat chief mounted the stage. He solemnly took out a handful of straws and asked all the boys to take a straw from his hand, whoever picked the shortest straw was to be sacrificed. Small hands grabbed at the handful of straws, and then sighed in relief as they realized they weren't chosen. Finally, a large plump boy gasped as he drew away the shortest straw, his eyes grew wide with terror and he started trembling from head to toe. His mother, watching anxiously from the sidelines, screamed and fainted. The same thing happened to the girls.

The two unlucky children walked silently towards the edge of the village, clutching tightly to their parents' hands. They knew that shortly, they would meet the Dezards and face death. A steady drizzle poured down on the villagers, as if even the heavens were mourning for the two children that were to be lost. Even though it was summer everyone shuddered like it was winter.

Then, mysteriously, the grey clouds overhead took shape of an old man. Suddenly,

before the villagers could express their surprise, an old man whom the villagers had never seen before appeared in the crowd. He had wispy white hair that was unevenly cut and two front teeth that made him look like an over-grown rabbit. However, his eyes shone with wisdom and knowledge, and the villagers immediately grew silent, as they knew he was to be respected.

The man said, "My name is Gobi, and I have heard of your unhappy situation. I think that I can save your village with my powers. Why don't you sacrifice me instead?"

Although the villagers were unsure, Gobi stood firm. At last, the villagers had to give in. Gobi walked silently to the edge of the village, where the sacrificial children stood. He pushed them aside and disappeared in the mist.

POOF! All of a sudden, my precious land shook and trembled, like a fragile dandelion in a ferocious storm. After that, faint rumbling sounds were heard. I was shocked to see that lava was gushing out of my back. I also heard cries and shouts of confusion as the terrified Dezards ran for their lives. Soon, they disappeared. Then, all my green trees disappeared, leaving dust and sand.

As soon as Gobi walked calmly back to the village, my people rushed forward, showering him with praise and gratitude. However, they were disappointed to find that Gobi had also blown up the trees that they had spent long hours cultivating, and turned their fertile jungle into a harsh desert. Yet that was only a small price to pay for the destruction of the horrible Dezards.

Then the proud villagers cheered for Gobi and invited him to the feast that would take place to celebrate the defeat of the Dezards. However, Gobi refused and assured them that he hated the Dezards himself and was pleased to help.

At night, after Gobi had gone home, the people had a great feast to celebrate the unexpected defeat of the Dezards.

And, to remember Gobi forever, they named me the Gobi Desert.

# A Young Survivor

*German Swiss International School, Jade Li, 9*

I sat in the cave with its dank, darkness. I was in the middle of nowhere; a desert known as Gobi to the local people. I looked around into the threatening blackness, alone and afraid. I had no idea if the cave was safe from Genghis Khan's men. I could hear nothing, and the silence echoed around the chamber bouncing off the invisible walls. I wondered what it would be like to be home; to experience joy and a moment's rest. For two years of my life, I had been fleeing from place to place, trying to hide from the dangers even you would be afraid of, from an evil uncle to being the servant of Genghis Khan. Most of the time being a fugitive led to sneaking and stealing but with luck I found my own food.

Many people wonder how I survive. Well, if you ask me, it comes with the hunger, the determination for food and water and the desire to go home. I am now an orphan and I'm nine. I used to live in Imgur oasis and my dad was the tribal chief. Every year he travels to Ulaan Bator to trade our finest camels.

My misfortune began when my father ordered all my cousins, uncles, aunties, grandpa, grandma and friends from all around town to dine with me and to keep me company as he travelled to Ulaan Bator to trade camels. The lines of guests were endless and from all classes, both the rich and the poor. There was one person I begged my dad not to invite; I pleaded but it was too late. The invitations were already sent. On the guest list I saw uncle Enkhtuya. His name means "Ray of peace" which definitely doesn't suit his personality. He made me drop dad's most prized vase, he captured my brother who is now wondering far, far beyond where eyes can see and my father thought he went for an adventure.

My uncle led me to the garden and asked me to look down at the beach imagining everyone was joyfully playing. Whilst I was imagining, he deftly pulled a sack over my body; I found myself trapped in the sack and he swiped it over his shoulder. I was frightened and went unconscious.

When I was released from the sack, I realized ropes were secured around my wrists.

I looked around and beyond me was a crowd full of loud-mouthed adults and warriors, all showing themselves to the front of the crowd. Without a warning a black horse strutted to the front. His rider had a string moustache that started from his upper lip and dropped down to his chest and it poked out like spikes on a porcupine. Just glaring at him sent a cold shiver down my back. On his right hand he carried a magnificent bird. An eagle, I think. It squawked louder than a lion and quieted everyone down. As this man slowly dismounted his horse, he walked to where I was standing. He circled around me and inspected my teeth.

“This boy’s father is a Tribal leader. I traded a camel with him. He used to be a free boy but now he is my servant.”

The horse reared up in the air and arrived back on the ground as graceful as a swan. The strange man ordered his soldiers to tie a cloth over my mouth and put me on a camel. The travelling seemed to go on forever as the days became months. We arrived at our destination and before me stood two vast red doors. In the middle was carved a pure gold dragon face. In its mouth a glimmering gold ring flashed almost as bright as the sun. This man has high regard in this village for everyone bowed, I thought. Unexpectedly, a short thin man pulled me off the camel and dragged me towards a run down cottage where he sat me down at a table. He said,

“With Genghis Khan...” His voice trailed off.

“Who is Genghis Khan?” I interrupted.

“The man who enslaved you and brought you here, he likes everything just so. One tiny hair shorter than the other, he would send the barber flying out of the window. One pinch of salt more than his liking, he would execute the cook. What I’m telling you is: to be careful. Now run back to Genghis Khan and serve him well.”

I creaked open the door and I sprinted right out of the city gates, as far away from the palace as I could. I knew I shouldn’t but what choice did I have if I didn’t want to be a servant, let alone a servant of Genghis Khan. My feet were in enormous pain and covered with blisters in the sand. I stopped when a family said to me:

“Your Father is dead. His body was full of wounds and half buried in blood stained sand. He was robbed and killed during his journey to Ulaan Bator.”

Blinking back tears I fled deeper and deeper into the desert to find shelter. The hot sand was burning against my bloody feet. I stared at the sun and watched it set. The sun was a magnificent shade of crimson. The sand’s colour of red seemed to melt away. The breeze grew stronger but I have to keep going. I scrunched up in a ball as if it was the only way to keep me safe. When morning arose, I shook off the sand on my old ragged clothes that were once so fine. In despair, I kept going. The sun was beating against my face and the scorching sand was burning my wounded feet. I trudged further and further from the city where I escaped. Unexpectedly, I stumbled across a dark cave that I now call home, and everyday I say to myself, tomorrow is a new day and I will always have hope that I will find my home.

# New Tales of the Gobi Desert

*Glenealy School, Katya Foong, 10*

It was there. Bracing ourselves for the worst, we scrambled underneath our hut. Our leader, General Khan, stood before us like a humungous bulldog barking out orders at full speed. The worst sandstorm we ever experienced was right outside knocking on the shattered flaps of the shelter. “Sukhbataar! Gawping out the window like a mesmerized monkey doesn’t make a good warrior!” I nodded in embarrassment as the others turned to face me. “We head out in the morning, gather your weapons,” continued Khan. The warriors rushed into their own part of the torn hut, preparing themselves for whatever danger they might overcome at dawn.

As the first streak of sunlight shone like a laser beam through the cracks of our shelter, the soldiers began to mount their camels and collect their weapons. Genghis Khan gave the order with a flick of his hand, we jumped on our camels and rode off to the southern part of the desert where we would meet our enemy.

We rode harshly through the sandstorm that was still blowing powerfully. Faces full with exhaustion, we rested on our camel’s smooth silky hump. A sudden noise broke out in the distance, causing our camels to jerk in alarm. “Our battle is near, stay alert,” warned Genghis. We continued our steady pace until we came across thick, black smoke. We saw a light in the distance, curiously yet cautiously we rode up to inspect it. As we came nearer, we saw it wasn’t a light but a mysterious object! Shining in the distance lay a heavy metallic sphere, it was clicking. We came closer, closer, nearer, nearer. Daring not to say a word we swiftly jumped down from our camels and tip-toed towards the object. There were numbers flashing before our very eyes, 5....4.... “Get out of there! Fall back!” yelled Genghis. 3....2...1...BOOM!!!

The last thing I remembered was a force pulling me towards the rough ground then everything was black. Pitch black.

When I came to, I was lying on a soft surface. The world was a blur. Feeling dizzy I got up and I saw I was in a strange environment. Where was I? What happened to the war? I stood up and peered around me. The sight I saw was shocking, strange people in white coats scurrying in frenzy around what looked like a hospital. Patients lying on beds weakly fighting for their lives. There were also heart monitors, some of them showing a lively, squiggly line and then suddenly a straight one, their eyes closed..... another life had been lost.

I continued my unsteady limp wincing in pain towards the blinking exit sign when I heard my name “Sukhbataar, where are you going? You can’t leave!” Without turning back I paused, sighed, then called back,

“I’m leaving! I’m going to fight the war.”

The scorching sun lay upon me as I continued my trek through the desert, the light from the sun blinded my eyes, I rested for a moment and took a sip of water. A vaguely familiar noise rang out in the distance and guided my camel towards it. Suddenly, an arrow zoomed right past me, loud noises pierced my ears, and more arrows came by, this time missing my face by a centimeter. Then everything was silent. “Sukhbataar? What are you doing here,” a voice called out.

“General Khan? I am here to help fight for victory,” I cried back.

“Then accompany the rest of what we have left!” I bowed slightly and went off to reunite with the others.

The night sky was sleek black with pale white stars shining above the mountain tops, the slight breeze lingered in the air cooling down all my worries. We rode on in silence, with only the sound of our camels walking. The only other sound I could hear was my heart pounding against my chest.

Finally we neared our base just as the sun began to appear in the horizon. As we were setting up our camp, we heard cries coming closer towards us. General Khan rushed outside, we all followed after, bow in hand, arrows strapped to our backs. It was a young man, he carried a bleeding body over one shoulder and it sounded as if he was calling for help. “The enemy is coming, hurry, help me get this man to safety and prepare for battle.” General Khan didn’t hesitate, He called to his warriors to help save the injured man. We then collected our weapons, then Genghis piped out, “You know the rules, nobody leaves the battlefield until you die!”

The first sight of our enemy was not a pretty one. Ruthless warriors rode on heavy metal armed horses carrying swords, axes and daggers. Our army was the total opposite, petrified humans shaking on unarmed camels clenching our favorite weapon: The Mongal bow. Although underneath our heavy coat fastened with a tight leather belt lay a sword and an axe, our secret weapons.

The horn sounded, after that life would never be the same again. Galloping through the uneven ground at full speed, arrow strapped to my bow ready for anything. Out of nowhere came the sharpest sword plunging right towards my heart. I ducked and popped right back up as soon as I saw it whiz pass me like a rocket. I aimed my arrow towards my predator’s horse and shot. It only took one second for the horse to fall dead on the rough ground and my enemy along with it. I gasped in horror at what I’d done to another human, then looked away and continued the bloody battle. I ended three more lives until I finally heard the drum beat to signal that this death game was finally over. We won.

The rest of the enemy fled back into their territory and we were left alone to the sight of bleeding bodies everywhere. As we were heading back to base, I heard yells behind us, so I turned around to see what all the commotion was about, but all I saw was the arrow zooming straight towards its target: Me.

I fell off my horse and staggered backwards on the ground. The last thing I saw was all my friends rushing back to fight the enemy once again. I slowly closed my eyes and remembered seeing the people on the beds in the hospital. Motionless. Just like me now.

# The Tale of the Gobi Desert

*Kennedy School, Leia Green, 9*

## Chapter 1

Where am I?

“Are we there yet,” moaned Jack. “Can’t you wait a little longer,” replied Katy, “we’ll be at the motel in about an hour”. “But can I just ask you one little question Katy?” pleaded Jack. “Fine, go ahead, what is it?” she said. “Okay, why is there a huge, fierce and scary sand storm coming right our way?”

Katy and Jack watched the big gush of sand in silence as it started to creep up on them, it came closer and closer and... “Quick Jack! Duck down as low as you can!”. Sand came gushing into the car and the wind was like a tornado and then...

“What’s going on,” Jack whispered and tried to stand up. Jack looked up but all he could see was sand and more sand. “Where am I?” Jack puzzled and then he froze, where was Katy? “Katy!” Jack screamed as loud as he could, but it was useless, he was in the middle of nowhere with no food or water, his only choice was to walk on in the burning heat. As he walked the sun poured on the young boy giving him sunburns all over his body. He was thinking about where Katy was, but his main concern was what would happen to him. He soon realized that the burns from the sun were the most painful things he had ever experienced. I need to protect myself, this is a really dangerous climate. I need shelter. Jack found some dried up twigs on the desert ground, then he found a cactus to lay the sticks on. He laid them down one by one and when he finished he crawled under the shelter.

He fell fast asleep and when he woke up, the sun was setting and the moon was rising up from the Twin Mountains. Jack ran outside. The sky had turned a beautiful orange pink and the clouds were the color of wonderful lavender purple but Jack knew he had to get back into his shelter before it became dark. When he was inside his stomach started to grumble, he was starving! He knew he couldn’t hunt for food right now. It was pitch black outside. Jack’s only choice was to sleep. As he snored on the sand, it started to pour down with rain. When he woke up he didn’t feel the scorching sun baking on his face but a nice cool breeze. He crawled out of the shelter and looked up. It was amazing! The orange dawning sun rising from the Twin Mountains was just like sunset! And there were flowers of blue, violet and pink blooming all over the cacti. Jack found another stick and started sharpening it with a rock and when he was done he needed to go and hunt. He had his weapon, he had his bravery, and he was ready. He started walking silently, looking carefully at the sand. Suddenly something moved. Jack gasped, and then he saw that it was a mouse! The white body scurried across the sand frightened as if something was chasing it. Jack tried to spear but missed, he tried again and... BINGO!!! “Mouse soup for dinner tonight!” But there was something that was chasing the mouse, a rattlesnake.

## Chapter 2

A camel saves the day!

Jack stood there frozen with fear. The rattlesnake slithered nearer and nearer but it stopped inches away from Jack's right leg. Jack grew more pale by the second as the rattlesnake rose and started rattling its tail as if it was shaking a maraca. Jack knew what this meant: it was planning to attack. Out of nowhere a camel came galloping up and then started stamping violently on the snake. When its surprising work was done the camel raced off. Jack tried to stop it but it was just too speedy for him. Jack panted loudly as he walked back to his hut.

## Chapter 3

Survival

Jack gathered the mouse where he had killed it. He got back to his shelter where he gently put it down and ran back outside to try and find some water. He searched every nook and cranny [not that the deserted area had any] but couldn't find any water, not even a drop, not even after the rain. Jack was so devastated and furious that he stabbed a cactus with his stick and... a gush of water started flooding out. Jack was so relieved. He put his bowl under the cactus and splashed his burnt body with the cool liquid. He filled his bowl to the brim and headed back for his shelter. He would have to do this every day in order to survive.

## Chapter 4

Is that you?

After his first proper lunch in the desert he was as tired as a sloth. He settled down and in seconds was asleep. He slept and slept until... clack, clack, clack. "What is that irritating noise!" Jack snapped angrily to himself. He stomped outside. Right there was the camel that had saved him from the snake. "I-Is that you?" Jack stammered, almost frightened. The camel trotted quietly towards him and started nuzzling him and licking him all over. "Okay, that's enough" Jack laughed. "Why not some water?" Jack said gently. When the sun set over the mountains Jack suddenly had an idea, it was risky. He thought that maybe could travel behind the mountain and Katy might be there, there might be a city. "We will leave tomorrow," Jack exclaimed.

## Chapter 5

RUN!!!

The next day, Jack had only walked a few miles when something horrible happened! "RUN!!!" Jack screamed. They set off at such a speed as if they were going to die. Jack ran and ran until he had to have a rest. He looked behind him, the sand poured over him...

Jack woke up in a hospital bed. He looked around him and lying on bed 99 was a girl with short brown hair and a cut up face...

# An Odyssey to Gobi Desert

*Marymount Primary School, Annette Lam, 9*

“It’s so dark, so cold, so quiet here. I’ve no idea where I am,” I wondered when I woke up in this sheer wideness. I cleared my sleepy vision as the dawn was falling, I saw a vast area covered with bare rock and gravel, and a few sand dunes. “Is it a desert, not really, there are cars travelling freely along...” I was in a great puzzle.

Off I started my journey out of curiosity. To my surprise, having travelled for some time, I found some animals living there even though the environment seemed so harsh. I saw camels. ‘Camels’, kind of animal, associated me to ‘desert’. Here, the state-of-the-art technology applies - by using the Global Positioning System in my cellphone, I successfully located myself being somewhere between the northern and northwestern China and southern Mongolia. Hence, I guessed if it was a desert in the region of Northern China and Mongolia, it could only be the Gobi Desert.

As I was travelling on, I came across some other travelers. We had a common goal and interest in unveiling the mystery of Gobi. We opened our dialogue with some interesting facts - Gobi is a Mongolian word which means ‘waterless place’. Gobi is the largest desert region located in Asia and is the fifth largest desert in the world. It covers an area of approximately 500,000 square miles. Gobi is not covered with sand, but with bare rock and gravel, with shifting sands and salt marshes at lower levels. That explains why I could find cars travelling there. Gobi is made up of five distinct eco-regions, namely, the Eastern Gobi desert steppe, the Alashan Plateau semi-desert, the Gobi Lakes Valley desert steppe, the Junggar Basin semi-desert and the Tian Shan range.

Gobi is very ancient and historical, around 50 million years old. Back in the oldest days of the Mongol Empire, it was home to many important cities along the Silk Route. At that time, merchants travelled along the Silk Route to reach a particular destination where they could do their business by exchanging their merchandise and jewels.

Gobi is not only ‘mature’ but also ‘fascinating’. I fell in love with ‘it’ at my first glimpse. Gobi is not comparable to other deserts because it belongs to our motherland, China, where my ancestors were born. It is located in the continent, Asia, where I live.

How Gobi caught my eyes and held my breath -- I found Gobi fascinating as if it

is an arrogant, charming lady. She has her 'cool' facet because of her altitude, being situated at a height of 3,000 – 5,000 feet above sea level. In the freezing winter, temperatures in Gobi could reach as low as -40°F. Can you imagine how she looks when the whole desert is blanketed with a sheet of snow. It is so alluring that in a sense making her unrivalled! However, she could be 'hot' and 'erotic' in the blazing summer as the temperatures would rise up to 122°F especially when the wind speed gets up to 85 miles an hour. She then behaves like an unruly little girl.

She has her 'attractive' side. Apart from tourists and travelers, she does draw the attention of the explorers and scientists for Gobi in herself has a lot of treasures. She was once the home to many important cities along the Silk Route. She was once the cradle of archaeology's significant findings - the first dinosaur eggs were found in this region during the 1922-25 expeditions.

Geographically, Gobi spans two countries, sprawling from northern and northwestern China into southern Mongolia. She inherits both the attributes of Chinese and Mongolian. Gobi, definitely, has the characteristics of a Mongolian woman. She has exotic beauty, strong will and sense of pride. When I sat still in serenity in the desert, I could savor her inner beauty. Not to mention her breathtaking view whenever and wherever you find her. She could survive under such extreme weather conditions with 400 different species of plants and over 45 different species of animals and birds found in the desert. Up till now, every single step I walked in the desert, I found her full of wonders.

On the other hand, like the Chinese (who are actively penetrating into every business sector e.g. property, stock and equity, premium goods etc. shoring up the global economy), Gobi is 'aggressive' too. Gobi is growing by more than 1,300 square miles every year, overtaking southern grasslands of China. Her expansive approach in terminology is desertification. Often, China experiences dust storms but recently they appear to be coming a lot more due to the current expansion. It worries the Chinese Government and they are now planting new forests - Green Wall of China in a hope to halt her spreading. To me, both Gobi's expansion and Chinese aggression have alarmed us in the angles of environmental pollution and human behavior versus basic needs.

Heading east to the Domogobi province in Mongolia, to my dismay, I saw some deformed livestock births like lambs with two heads or without lower jaw; goat kids and baby camels with missing or shriveled limbs. The herders living around told me that large number of livestock had died mysteriously in the previous winter. The deaths have led to concerns among the villagers about water contamination and uranium radiation from mining activities in the region.

In the past two decades, massive reserves of uranium and a host of other precious metals and minerals including coal, oil and gas, copper, and gold have been uncovered between China and Russia. Most importantly, much of these resources are buried under this vast Gobi desert. It is reported that an estimated 55,000-ton uranium deposit has been located in the Ulaanbadrakh district, East Gobi. This significant uranium deposit and other mineral resources have prompted investors to rush into Gobi. Water is a precious resource in this arid region but mining activities can suck up huge volumes of water and adversely contaminate water. More unfortunate is desertification in the Gobi, which is eating up fertile grasslands that have sustained herders and their livestock for millennia.

I love Gobi but I fear that "can Gobi still survive with her uniqueness?"

Hey, here is cold, dark and quiet, where am I? ...I kicked off my quilt and I am shivering.

# Three Brothers and I

*Po Leung Kuk Choi Kai Yau School, Kylie Chong, 11*

I am the Gobi Desert. Swelteringly hot. Unforgiving. Temperamental. Lethal. Many have tried to conquer me, to walk into my depths and emerge, alive. Not many have succeeded. The ones, the unworthy, who failed, who did not persevere, sleep in my hands for all eternity. I have seen many, a mere inch from survival, collapse from exhaustion, and so I claimed their lives, as I had many more. Few can escape the wrath of the Gobi Desert, for I have been since the start of time, and will be until the end. I am ever-changing. I can go from calm and sunny to a tantrum, what you humans call sandstorms, in mere seconds. Cross me, and pay the price.

Today, mister wind came and blew through. He brought news of three brothers, whom had vowed to conquer me, at the cost of their lives. Pah! As if I have never heard these proclamations before, as if I have not claimed every life, every person that challenges me. But we shall see. Yes, we shall see.

The first brother came, with a camel, riding over my palm. I saw he had not brought any water, and smiled to myself secretly, amused at his foolishness. I heard him boasting to his brothers: “I am confident that I will not need any water, and I will be back before ten days.” “I await your good news, good brother.” “Do you fear not of perishing from lack of thirst?” asked the youngest brother. Well said, I thought. But no amount of water can help you in the desert. The older brother laughed and said: “No problem, my dear brother. I am sure that all will be well.” Well, really! Who does this man think he is? A single tantrum of mine could finish him off, as easily as I did all the others. But now is not the time. I will bide my time, and strike when the time is ripe, and not before that.

In the morn, I looked up and saw Apollo driving his chariot above me. I do not keep track of time, save morn and night. I looked down and saw the first brother walking along my arm at a snail like pace. The camel was gone, eaten by the brother. He was weak from thirst and fatigue. I admit it, I am cruel. I could not resist from showing him what he wanted most: Water and food. I called on Apollo, my friend, to make a mirage

of an oasis. The brother, with renewed hope, staggered toward the shimmering mirage, only to fall back in defeat as he saw that it was nothing but a mere illusion. Too weak to carry on, he crumpled on the desert floor, faint and desperate. He was exhausted from walking in the desert heat and had sunstroke. Too tired to do anything, all the fight went out of him at once. He simply lost the will to live and it was easy to finish him off. And so, I took the first brother for my own.

The first brother was soon followed by the second brother. He was slightly smarter and brought a water truck and a lorry full of food in strange shiny cans. At dusk, when it was cooler, he set out. At night, he slept inside some kind of triangular contraption that protected him, no matter how many fits I had and how many sandstorms I threw at him. It seemed that he was certainly well prepared. He'd learned from his brother all right. But I'll find a way, as I always do.

In the early morning, I looked down and found that I, again, had not much to do to dispose of the second brother. It seems that, smart as he was, he had forgotten one vital thing: fuel. His trucks had run out of fuel and he was faced with a problem: Should he stay here, with his food and water, or should he carry on? He chose foolishly to carry on. Had he chosen to stay, he might still be living. As it was, the second brother soon ran out of food and water and starved to death in a mere three days. And so, I took the second brother for my own.

The third brother came. I would have thought that he would have been too scared to come after the failures of his brothers, but it seems that I was mistaken. He came, with a backpack full of supplies and sunscreen, as well as another of those triangular contraptions I so deeply detest. He shouted: "I am not afraid of you! I shall conquer you, and finish what my brothers started, or else die trying! Bring it on, oh mighty desert!" I at once took a liking to this brother. He has the correct attitude. Not many people dare to talk to me like this.

The third brother is certainly resourceful. He knows how to make use of the little resources I provide, and that is a good start.

When he ran out of water, I thought that he, like his brothers before him, would despair and die. Alas, that did not happen. He walked up to a cactus, and started collecting water from its inside. Many others have been too intimidated by the sharp, prickly thorns protecting the cactus to get its water, thus paying for it with their lives.

Good thinking, I think. Good thinking. I find with surprise that I have begun to take a liking to this man. I have decided. I will bow down to this conqueror. Just this once, I tell myself. Just this once, I will be conquered; I will let this man go. A man of his talent and smarts is not to be wasted. He will do good to this world. I know it.

Today at dusk, the youngest brother finally arrived at the end, where a throng of people had gathered to await his return. Ignoring them, he shouted to the heavens: "My brothers, I have finished what you set out to do. I honor your memory forever!" And so, he set off toward the setting sun, pushing through the crowd. He didn't look back.

And that, my friends, that is the new tale of the Gobi Desert, the tale of the three brothers and I.

# Olgoi-khorkhoi

*Sha Tin Junior School, Yoki Chan, 10*

## Prelude

For millennia, though she's a vast open land, Gobi is more likened to a fortress with defences in forms of frigid sandstorms, parched lands and hostile mountains. Many have tried to conquer this land, only few succeeded. Yet however strong these defences are, legend goes that under the mountains of sand of Gobi hides an even more terrifying and powerful protector in the name of the Olgoi-khorkhoi, so much so that it's still feared by many Mongolians today. But Gobi now faces an invader with more force than even her best defences. Only time will tell if Gobi will survive.

Somewhere in the south of the Gobi Desert, at the height of summer, soaked in sweat and bathed in sweltering sunlight, Dr Snow was lost. Being her first time in Gobi, she had to rely on her electronics, especially the car's GPS. The GPS, regrettably, broke. She didn't know how it broke, and worse, she didn't know where she was. She tried retracing her route back to the town she started, but little did she know that she was already way off course. Dr Snow was in Gobi as a geologist working for a mining corporation tasked to produce a report for new mineral sites to mine.

After hours of driving, she was desperate and disoriented. She was bewildered by the real image of Gobi desert. Far from being a mere desert, Gobi was a quiet display of contradictions, where searing deserts are flanked with snow capped mountains and grassy pastures. At the height of her disorientation, she was suddenly met by an iridescent pool of liquid. Colorful plumes swirled, swelled and spread over its entirety. Out of curiosity and wanting to rest, Dr Snow stopped her car by the shimmering body of liquid, she exited her car and went to touch the water. Her finger was coated by the lustrous water. Despite its beauty, being a geologist, she instantly knew that it was polluted. Inspecting the pool, she saw on its far side pipes and tubes feeding it with polluting waste. This might be one of the many 'tailing pools' used for the dumping of chemical mining waste. Not wanting to inhale the fumes, she decided to leave.

As she stood up, she noticed a silhouette on the water. It looked like a tall column

rising behind her, gradually blocking the sun behind. It became dim as if she was under a shadow. Fearing the worse, she turned around to look. As sudden as it appeared, the source of the silhouette had all but vanished. Instead, there was a gaping hole in the ground. "Anyone there?" Her voice trembled. It was silent, all she could hear was her racing heart beat. After a moment of silence, the cavity started to collapse into itself. Disturbed, she started to move away from the void. While walking away, she felt a slight rumbling in the ground underneath her. Not wanting to provoke more fear in herself, she dismissed the sound as overactive imagination. However, before she could gather herself, the sand shook violently. Something enormous was moving underneath her. She began to wobble. Losing her balance, she fell and struggled on the sandy ground. She soon regained her foothold, at which another abyss started to form. But this hole had a spiral of dagger-like teeth. It started to rise and it became a column almost as tall as Dr Snow. She could smell a stuffy scent of rotten flesh and blood. "This isn't a hole or column, it's a creature!" She was dumbfounded at the realization. Without a moment's notice, the beast bent towards her direction with its gaping mouth. Instinctively, she leapt back just in time before getting caught. Dr Snow was aghast of the existence of such a creature, yet she was also awestruck of its majesty.

The creature wriggled out of the hole and stayed still, as if it was inspecting her. Snow reckoned it was as long as half a swimming pool. It was a worm. However, this worm was unlike any other worm. Its tapered body consists of toughened reddish segments, resembling an elongated armor-plated tank. Not knowing why, she moved toward the still creature. Nearing the worm, it pounced forward, but it did so with a sense of struggle. As she continued to cautiously walking towards the worm, it started twisting and turning. Though she was not an entomologist, Dr Snow had enough experience with worms to know that it was twisting in agony. The turning and twisting continued until their violent conclusion. All movement just suddenly stopped, the worm was finally still. Dr Snow moved cautiously until she was almost face to face with the worm.

The worm was dead.

Somehow, she knew that the pool of polluted liquid waste, a concoction of poisonous chemicals and metals, was the cause of the worm's demise.

Though deeply shaken by her encounter with a worm-like monstrosity, she couldn't stop herself from being mournful of the death of the worm. She got back to her car hoping to find a town; to find help and tell of her horrifying ordeal. After a few hours, she found a town and went straight to the authorities but her encounter fell on deaf ears. That night, she couldn't sleep for still being troubled and saddened. Feeling helpless, she decided to complete her report, not about new mineral sites to exploit, but on how humans should change for the better. She wrote:

*Today's humans have proved themselves to be nature's most dangerous animals. Wherever we go, we pave a path of destruction. Wherever we stay, we drive all else out. We are masters of destroying our one and only home along with everything and everyone in it. However, although we have the power to destroy and bring misery, we also have the power to change and bring good. We only have to choose. Either we choose to be right, or to be wrong. It is our choice.*

# The Lost Legend

*Shanghai Singapore International School, Aradhana Upadhyay, 12*

“Come my children, gather around the warm fire. Tonight, I shall tell you my story,” I beckoned to them.

Soon we were comfortably settled in my large Gher<sup>1</sup>. I closed my eyes, gathering my thoughts and decided where to start.

“I, Bataar, was born in 1214 to the youngest son of the great Genghis Khan. I was destined to rule, but unfortunately, that is not the case. It is amazing how a roll of the dice can change ones’ future. My story starts in the year 1259. Children, as you should know, this is the year my beloved brother and our esteemed ruler, Mongke Khan, was killed in battle.”

I swallowed back the lump of sorrow that began to rise at the thought of my brother, Mongke Aqa<sup>2</sup>.

When we heard the news, Kublai and I were busy laying plans to besiege Sichuan. I, as the eldest then, knew that the reigns of the Mongolian Empire were in my hands. As much planning had gone into this move, I felt it proper to continue the plan of defeating the Song Dynasty, as envisioned by Mongke Aqa. You can imagine my surprise when my loyal general, Sükh, told me about Ariq Böke’s plans of naming himself Khan. Kublai and I saw the need to quickly address this matter.

One week before the Kuiltai<sup>3</sup>, Kublai expressed his desire of becoming Khan and wished to fight me for the throne. When our mother came to know about our plans, she cried that she couldn’t bear to lose another son and made us promise to settle the matter our traditional way, by playing the game of dice.

On the day that the game was played, I woke up early, changed into the new clothes that my wife put out for me and prayed to my ancestors for good luck. The game is based on ones’ luck, if you win the game; it means that the ancestors have chosen you.

I felt very sure that I would win, but luck was not on my side. When I knew I had lost, I pulled my sword and set it in front of Kublai, and knelt down.

I went back to my room to tell my wife that I had lost. I found her gagged and surrounded by guards. Instinctively, I reached for my sword, but then I remembered, I had left it at Kublai's feet. Seven guards pounced on me. I was bound, gagged and shoved into a tiny room with my wife and son. I had hopes of Sükh coming to save me. That evening a soldier came and said with a cruel laugh, "Here comes Sükh to save you!" and flung the head of Sükh at me. Soon after I was separated from my wife. That night I heard my wife's high pitched screams and my son's loud wails, there was nothing I could do, and I knew that they would be joining my ancestors.

The next day, Kublai came into my cell clutching a dagger. As he was shutting the door, my mother barged in and flung herself between us. She made Kublai swear on her life that I would not be killed. So, I was banished. I was dressed like a beggar so that no one would recognize me. Before my departure, my mother gave me a hug and whispered that should I be in trouble, to look into the lining of my sleeve.

It was a long walk to the desert. Those who were escorting me were on horseback whereas I had to walk. When we reached the border of the Gobi Desert, from where I was to be banished, Kublai's general told a soldier to spread the word that anyone caught helping me would be executed. The general waited for me to disappear into the landscape of the Gobi before returning to Kublai."

I began to tremble with anger all over as I remembered the deceit that Kublai showed.

"I trudged along the sand in the scorching heat, my feet sinking in despite my gutul<sup>4</sup>. I had been walking for a long time but still didn't see an oasis in sight. Suddenly, in the distance, I saw a cloud of flies swarming over a spot nearby a Saltwort<sup>5</sup> plant. I ran towards the spot remembering a saying my teacher told me, 'Where there is life, there is water.' I started to dig, for there was no water on the surface.

I began to feel dizzy from exhaustion and lack of water. I passed out. The next thing I knew was that I was lying down in a Gher<sup>1</sup>. My saviours thought that I was the great Khara Bataar<sup>6</sup>, from the legend, returning to dig up the hidden treasure and make the land fertile again. As the days passed I began to trust my saviours and revealed my true identity. However, they did not believe me at first, but I remembered my mother's words and ran to find my old clothes. I slit the lining of both sleeves and found nothing. I thought my mother had fooled me but then my fingers felt something in the corner of the left sleeve. I pulled out a ring containing my parent's picture. I stayed there regaining my strength and learning how to survive in the desert. In time, some men became willing to lay down their lives for me. I have spent the last two years traveling from tribe to tribe. Today I have an army of 3000 men, whom I have trained in every art of warfare. Tomorrow, we shall march across the desert and fight to reclaim what is rightfully mine..."

Gher<sup>1</sup>: Mongolian tent

Aqa<sup>2</sup>: Older brother

Kuultai<sup>3</sup>: Gathering to decide the Emperor

Gutul<sup>4</sup>: Boots that the nomadic tribes in the Gobi wear

Saltwort<sup>5</sup>: A small weedy plant that is found in some regions of the Gobi Desert

Khara Bataar<sup>6</sup>: The great ruler of legendary lost city, Khara-hot

# The Gobi Desert

*Singapore International School, Kok Zi Suen, 10*

The Gobi Desert, might appear to most, a barren stretch of nothingness. But as they say, “Don’t judge the book by its cover”. The exterior of the desert, pale and inconspicuous as it is, is merely a façade masking the true colours of the desert.

For one, the unforgettable events of that fateful day have peeled off some of its aged façade, at least for me.

16th July 2002.

Ada, James and I had just left Khanbogd, and we were heading towards the Flaming Cliffs, situated in the Omnogov Province of Mongolia - the birthplace of the dinosaur fossil rumours.

“James! We’re almost there! Can you see beyond the sand mist?”

“Yes! Let’s go to the land of fossils! ”

“But why is the mist getting more dense? What on Earth is happening?”

“Oh my, my eyes are hurting! Why are the sand particles all flying in our direction? And why can’t I see anything?”

“Oh dear, this must be one of those violent sandstorms that occasionally visits the Gobi Desert! I read about it on the plane to Mongolia!”

“Stop talking! The sand is already getting into my mouth. Get onto the camel, crouch forwards, and gallop towards the cliffs! I remember being told that there are caves hidden on the face of the cliffs! We’ll meet at the foot later, okay?”

Our unanimous voices rung out in the air, but other than the almost unrecognizable word “Yes!”, the rest of our voices were drowned out by the roar of the wind as it enveloped us in a blanket of sand.

Eventually, I, alone with my camel, stumbled into one of the caves at the edge of the cliff, weary and irritated. Once I tied my camel to a protrusion on the cliff and I stepped into the cave, I was thrown into utter darkness. As I ventured further into the depths of the pitch black cavern, I stumbled over an object; my hand came into contact with the fall-inducing obstacle. As it fit itself into the palm of my hand, my eyes blinked in disbelief as the object in my hand started to emit an incandescent glow. Within seconds, I was encapsulated in a bubble of light that was all encompassing, before seconds later, the light faded to a pulsating bright dot. As I took a closer look at the object in my hand, I realized, shocked, that it was the skull of an infant dinosaur...

16th July B.C. 4000.

As I stepped outside the cave, a completely bizarre sight materialized before me. A mother creature was nursing its egg in a nest hidden in the foliage. Immediately, I knew - this was an adult, vegetarian *Apatosaurus*.

A quick look around my surroundings told me that I had, somehow time travelled back a few thousand years into the prehistoric age, where dinosaurs existed. The rare infant skull of the dinosaur that I had found was probably a secret link to the prehistoric past. Looking at the no longer flashing skull in my hand, I knew that it was not yet time for me to return to the 21st century. As they say, there was a purpose to reach.

The motherly instincts of a dinosaur, gentle and caring, bewildered me. Even love can be found in most legendary of creatures. Just then, a ferocious roar shook the ceiling of the cavern and induced a shiver in the mother *Apatosaurus*. It planted itself more firmly onto the eggs in the foliage-made nest, even though it was reduced to a shivering bunch of scales. The ground seemed to rumble and it was as if thunder was fast approaching.

When I looked up again, the entire sky was blocked – by a looming creature. My mind told me, by the head structure and the canine appearance, this was the greatest of the greatest dinosaurs – the *Spinosaurus*.

The sharp claws of the *Spinosaurus* seemed to yearn for the mother dinosaur's eggs in the nest. As the mother dinosaur looked on with undeniable fear and sad resignation, her small figure no comparison to the *Spinosaurus*, an overwhelming sense of pity consumed me. For another species. On impulse, I decided to risk my own wellbeing for the sake of a dinosaur. How stupid was I? Very. Stomping like a madman onto the dense undergrowth, I brandished my–torchlight–and shone it into the *Spinosaurus*'s eyes, only to see it change its target towards me, unperturbed by the light, yet fascinated by foreign me.

Just as it bared its canines and I could feel its hot, bloody, meat-laden breath contaminating my clothes, my hand wielded my last weapon - the laser light - and directed it into the *Spinosaurus*'s eyes. Prepared to lose this last battle, I winced as it inched closer and closer, and... suddenly it was gone as fast as it had arrived. When I opened my eyes again, it was fleeing in a disoriented manner. Meanwhile, the eggs were safe and sound beneath the petrified herbivorous *Apatosaurus*.

As the mother *Apatosaurus* looked into my eyes thankfully, I smiled with a quiet, blissful contentment. I felt the infant dinosaur skull pulsing in my pocket once again. As I grasped it tight, I felt myself hurled into that same dizziness and everything became light again.

16th July 2002.

As I stepped out of the cave, my eyes settled on Ada and James, whom I waved at. Yet as I walked towards them, a little smile crawled up onto my face. As I clasped the fossilized egg in my pocket and the fragment of the infant skull that had tucked itself into my jeans pocket, I knew, that it was my secret to keep. My little souvenir, to remind me, that dinosaurs were like any other creature—caring, loving—had the exact same emotions as humanity. I had understood that creature like no other human would ever do, because I was blessed with the fortune to do so. That, was the essence of adventure: *Revelation*.

# A Hole in his Heart

*St. Margaret's Co-Educational English Secondary and Primary School, Jess Yung, 11*

The moon, a white eye, watched the desert below. The sky, a black velvet fabric was emblazoned with millions of shimmering lights. The God, Tengri, had swept the land with cold, bone-chilling winds. They lifted up the small rocks into an eternal dance, jumping from one sandy hill to another. The footsteps of jerboas could be heard, their scurrying like pins dropping. The clumps of saxaul trees swayed, their branches entwined together.

Nothing else moved.

All except for one shadow.

In the middle of one certain clump of saxauls, a lonely figure was stuck. His long fingers wrapped around the thorny branches, his hair scraggly and untamed. Torn, faded, rags served as clothing, covering his frail body. He was stuck, the trees clinging onto him preventing his release. With each movement, he got even more entangled instead of actually breaking free. Do not pity him reader, for his suffering will soon end.

The man was about 70 years old. He, born in the desert, had adapted to the harsh outdoor life. However, now his body was weakened and wrinkled. He cursed himself for being in this mess in the first place, for being punished because of his foolish mistake.

Now reader, do you know what mistake he made?

He made the mistake of making his life centered around money. He made the mistake of becoming rich, selfish, greedy, and stingy. He even made the mistake of ignoring his large family in need of his love. But most of all, he made the mistake of selling one of his sons as a slave. He thought, that since he had 5 wives and 14 sons, there was no harm in selling one little boy. That day was etched into his mind - he remembered it as clearly as if it happened yesterday.

“Pa!” His 6-year old son grasped his robe, unwilling to let go. “Pa! Please! Don’t make me go!” He stared coldly into the eyes of his son. So innocent, so sweet. “You are no son of mine.” He roughly tugged his son’s small hand from his robe. “Pa! No, I am your son! I am your son!” Tears were streaming down the little boy’s face. Ignoring his son, he turned back to the slave master. “Take the boy, he is yours now.” The slave master smiled slyly at him. “Yes, yes. Very well, 14 pieces of silver for you.” The slave master dropped a small pouch of money into his hands. “Pa.. Please don’t..” His son’s voice cracked, his eyes glassy. Paying no attention whatsoever, the man gestured for the

slave master to take his offspring away. The boy screamed, his arms flailing as he was dragged onto a cart. “Pa! Pa! PA!” His son sobbed, as the cart pulled away. Even when his boy was gone, his pleas hung like smoke in the air.

A few months later, he received news that his son died from exhaustion and fever. Only then did he realize the gaping hole in his heart. But he did not want to acknowledge that.

So he ran away. He took his riches and cattle with him on a long journey. He thought that he could run away from his mistake.

But, the truth is, no one can run away from mistakes.

On one leg of the journey, a sandstorm, sent by the gods, crossed paths with them. It spun and blew, and took away everything he had. His riches were buried deep under the sand, his cattle dead. And his heart, broken.

But still, he did not acknowledge his wrongdoing.

He continued on his journey. He walked and walked, but soon grew tired. So he lay his head down to sleep.

A strong wind blew, and the man screwed his eyes shut. He felt like he was being lifted off from the ground. Not for a second did he open his eyes.

When he opened his eyes, he was inside a golden palace, with huge people. They were not made of flesh and bone, but of sand. All of them were dressed richly, and they talked to him saying, “Acknowledge your wrongs and you will be forgiven. But for now, you will be imprisoned.” They brushed their hands over his face, and the man was surrounded by saxaul trees, closing him in.

He didn’t grow hungry or thirsty. It seemed that the gods gave him a blessing of being able to survive without food or water. But he did not repent his wrongs. And he didn’t accept them for the next 55 years.

Now, the sky had become lighter, and the moon came down. Dawn was coming. Somewhere in the distance, a joyful whistling was heard. The man wished that he was free, to see life outside before he died.

Then a hand stuck itself through the branches of the saxauls.

Then another hand stuck itself through.

They pulled the branches apart, and the man saw a face he hadn’t seen for years.

His 6-year old son he had sold long ago.

“Pa!” His son pulled him up and smiled at him. “I’ve come to take you home, Pa!”

“But,” The man’s voice was cracked and hoarse, “You’re dead.”

His son didn’t answer. “Come with me Pa.”

The boy gently pulled his father out of the saxaul trees that kept him imprisoned.

“I’m sorry son,” The man croaked, “I shouldn’t have sold you. Not all things are bought with money.”

His son grinned, and held his daddy’s hand. “I’m glad you said that Pa,” His son giggled, “I’m taking you home now.”

The man broke out in a smile and nodded.

The two of them ran, across the sand and sprinted up into the air, their laughs like little silver bells.

Now, it was the sun that watched as the saxaul trees bent away, revealing a frail man in his 70’s, lifeless and curled tightly into a ball, with a smile on his face for the first time in 55 years.



# Fiction

Group 3

# Power of Sacred Fire

*British International School Shanghai, Puxi, Lydia Hanninen, 11*

“Your task for the Chinese New Year break is to create a project of any kind with your partner. The subjects are in this bowl and your partner’s name is here. Since there is an equal amount of boys and girls, ladies get to pick out the partners.” Ms. Helena instructed. I got up at the same time as my friend Evelyn and strode toward the bowl. Each girl took out a slip and read out the name of the person they were working with. I was about to reach into the bowl just as my name was called, “Holland Summers”.

I looked up and saw the popular girl, Amber, standing there in front of the class. Retracting my hand from the bowl, I strode to the other bowl where I picked out the subject: The Gobi Desert. Below was a fact file.

Name: Gobi Desert

Area: Southern Mongolia, Northern and Northwestern China

Size: 1.3 million square kilometers

Climate: Cold, yet not much snow.

Showing Amber, she grunted and went to sit back at her desk. I knew that she wouldn’t like this. Strutting angrily away in her high heels, the teacher spoke up. “Everyone has their pair? Good.” She paused and looked around “You will find the rules when you arrive. Good luck.”

The room started swirling and everything else other than Amber and I was a blur. There was a shot of white light in front of us, blinding our eyes. We felt like we were falling. Clearly yes because we crashed to the ground in a matter of seconds. Wait, scratch that. We crashed into sand. Looking around, the huge whirl around us fell down and I looked at the surroundings. Amber was standing next to me, removing her high heels. Her body language was telling me she was annoyed

“Sand really? Most importantly of all, how on earth did Ms. Helena do that?” Amber raged on.

“Tick, tock, tick, tock...” Something sounded. Frantically spinning around, I looked up at the sky. There was a huge, red timer ticking. 3 hours? Something then exploded. Sand and rock flew out of place in the distance as a tattered scroll appeared in front of my eyes. Amber appeared next to me and stared at the explosion. On the scroll read:

*“An explosion has been triggered toward the east. Run to it and grab the ring. Throw it high into the air and run away. A poem will fall from the sky and you will have to solve it. Each challenge will have an article that needs to be retrieved. Collect them and they will open the portal back to the classroom. Good luck. You have 3 hours.”*

After our eyes finished scanning the text, the scroll disappeared into thin air in my hands. I shared a quick stare with Amber, we decided to run toward the east. Our feet blistering on the rock and our arms were covered in goosebumps from the coldness. I guess it was because we were so high and the wind was picking up. It was still smoking because of the explosion. There was a huge crevice in the rock. Sand was seeping in. I spotted something gold. I dived into the crevice and swam through the heavy sand as Amber stayed on top. My hand gripped the cool metal and I lifted it up. I threw it into the air as high as I could, seeing it explode into a million pieces. A scroll came floating down. Amber caught it and read it aloud.

*“Mountains with white caps of snow, below lays the great white and black creatures. In the king’s chest lies the true key.”*

“What is this all supposed to mean?” Amber raged on.

I sighed and spoke out my mind, “Be quiet for a second will you? Mountains with white caps of snow are clearly those dunes with frost over them... The great white and black creatures... What could they be?”

“Zebras?” Amber said enthusiastically.

My palm came in contact with my face as I shook my head, “No! There aren’t zebras in Gobi!” Taking a pause, I figured it out. “Snow Leopards!”

“Well, I could have thought about that...” Amber muttered.

I read the next line, “Yes, I’m sure you could have. In their heart lies the true key... What?”

“How should I know? How about we go over there and see?” Amber said matter-of-factly.

I laughed and started to stride forwards, heading for the frost capped sand dunes.

“There they are...” Amber pointed toward a group of snow leopards to the right. “Let’s go.”

Amber started to stand up, “No, don’t. Let’s figure out what we have to do first.”

We thought for a second, flicking between the scroll and leopards. Amber shocked me by tapping on my shoulder. She was pointing to a large (male) leopard with a red, satin band around its neck. At the end of the band sat a golden key. Bullseye. Amber took one of her heels and snapped off a heel. I was shocked, she was probably desperate to get out of here to do that. She retracted her arm into a throwing stance. She was going to throw the heel. The heel came flinging out of her hand and hit the leopard square in the eye, making him fall. The other females fled and it was safe for us to run. We jumped out of our hiding place and went to the paralyzed animal. We snatched the key from his neck. I flung it into the air, triggering the same reaction as from the ring. It broke into a million pieces and another scroll emerged.

*“The final article will be found in the rushing monsoon waters. Follow the animals with the humps to your final destination.”*

“Flash flood and camels!” Amber yelled. We ran up a high sand dune and looked out into the area, searching for rushing water in the distance. I spotted some minor flash flooding to the west.

“Amber, there!”

Amber was blooming in happiness. She started rushing down the dunes, not noticing a steep fall of loose sand. I ran after her and grabbed her right arm just as she was about to run down it. “What do you want?”

She raged and ripped her arm from my grip viciously. “What do you think? You want to fall down the loose sand and get a concussion?” Amber bowed her head down as I had screamed in her face. “I’m sorry but let’s just go. We have 1 hour.”

The clock in the sky was ticking. Amber took a deep breath and nodded her head. We emerged to the flash flood another way, running and skipping over all obstacles in our way. We literally threw ourselves into the water when we were there. Using our hands to search beneath the surface, all we had found was sand and water. We were just about to give up when a herd of camels appeared out of nowhere. We knew we had to hurry or the camels would be gone. We knew these were the camels. They had a weird marking on their humps, it looked like a hand gripping it from on top. It then became scary. The sky started to set on fire. It was blazing red and orange, slowly covering up the rest of the sky and starting to spread. Before we knew it, Amber, the camels and I were trapped in a dome of fire that started closing in on us. Amber was padding in the water, petrified. I then saw something glistening on a camel’s back. The hand on its hump was blazing with fire. I decided to sacrifice something. I didn’t know if it would work. I took a risk. I slowly got up, my cupped hands filled with water. I carefully placed my hands over the burning hump. I then quickly uncapped my hands and let the water drip down.

The rest was all but a blur. Everything turned to water and I heard myself cry out in pain. In a matter of seconds, Amber and I were back in the empty classroom. There wasn’t anyone else except Ms. Helena in the front of the room. “Amber. Holland. Come here, girls.”

We slowly got up and stood in front of her. “Congratulations girls. That was my exam to see if you two could work together. You passed.” She paused and breathed in. “Show me the backs of your hands.”

Both of us showed her our hands. I gasped as I saw mine. There was a black tracing of fire on my hands. It started from my wrist and ended just under my nails. “Perfect.”

Ms. Helena laid her hands on top of mine. I felt my hands burn up. They were on fire. Once Ms. Helena had removed her hands, I could see that the tracings had turned red.

“Holland Summers, you have the power of the sacred fire.”

# A Desert for Sale

*Canadian International School of Hong Kong, Kinsey Long, 12*

I can't understand it. The fifth largest desert in the world was given to me at the price of \$10. How did I even get to buy a desert? I'm not even sure I can still remember, even though it was just yesterday. Foggy bits of pieces here and there; a postman, a letter, and a plane. That's all I can recall, and now I'm here.

I am standing in front of my new realm, the sand spraying my face. The heat of the sun burns my skin, and I chug down another bottle of water. I'm hoping that I can find something in here.

I lean my hand onto the soft sand, the grains filling the spots between my fingers. The heat of the sand surprises me, and I clench some, and release it, watching the grains disappear in the sea of yellow. I take a sip from another bottle, staring at the desert. Why had I received it for such a cheap price?

I feel a sharp pain in my left hand, as if it is being stabbed and roasted on over an open flame. My hand looks terrible, my skin is peeling off, leaving my flesh exposed. I cry out in agony, swinging my arm around, trying to shake the pain off me.

The pain stops as quickly as it had come. I dare to look at it again. The skin is rebuilding itself, layering itself over my muscles. My hand is throbbing, bright red and sore. I wince as I try to move, my hand feels stiff but it seems to relax as I arch my fingers. My skin looks like elastic, stretching and snapping back into place. It's been a few minutes now, but my hand feels as though it has been cleaned.

Is the sand poisoned? I'm not sure if I want to try again, since the pain was excruciating. Yet I need to know the trick to this desert. I donate my pinkie finger, and touch it lightly to the sand. Now the skin is peeling off. Even though it's just my smallest finger, the agony is the same. I swallow down a scream, and if anything it seems even more torturous. I come to the conclusion that the sand attacks human skin, targeting the nerve cells, torturing them.

Now that I think of it, the entire idea is completely unreasonable. You can't sell a

desert! But I bought it, for \$10. Something about this desert makes me feel unsafe, like it feels strangely alive, and angry. I'm interested, and I want to explore further into this desert. There's a sickeningly sweet smell to the air that makes me want to vomit. I'm about to, when I see a small bright light far away. What could it be? I'm going to find out.

I walk towards it, curiosity overwhelming me. The golden light seems to brighten, and as it grows, I feel more amazed. I notice it is glowing around a land of trees and rocks. There's a huge pool of water, spilling into a waterfall. Where the waterfall starts I do not know; the clean water simply pours over the large stones. The tantalizing smell of fruits and food leave a sweetness on my tongue that makes me want to pick them, to eat them. What a land. I step closer to heaven, and see the trees, bright and peaceful. A trick, my mind whispers to me, but it sounds preposterous, so I don't give it another thought.

I place my feet in the river water. The calm, crystalline water moves between my toes, and I am tempted to lie in the lush green grass. Birds sing in the distance; I want the sun to stop beating me with its heat, so I stand, and walk towards the collection of trees.

I stop. The small whiff of roses fades, replaced with a strong scent of rotting flesh. The trees shift, the sky darkens, and the river water is reddening with blood. Bird songs turn to shrieks and cries. The grass is blown away like a pile of ash, as gravestones pop out of nowhere. Terrified, I back away. This heaven has changed into hell.

The tree roots stretch out like hands, beckoning me forward. Now I see. The scene changes with every flash of lightning. It's an illusion. I had dipped my feet in blood, I had laid in a graveyard. I am running now, even though there is nowhere to run.

The darkness was trying to pull me into the land. I need to get out of this place. Sell this desert. No, that is cruel to the next buyer. I understand now! The Gobi Desert is alive. It is real. It wants something. A sacrifice? These ideas pour into my head like a wave, crashing down on me. Here and now, I make my last stand. I lie on the sand, and close my eyes, my peace blocks the pain, and I black out.

I am alive. I'm in a cave of sand, looking around. "You are worthy," booms a deep voice. It echoes through the tunnel, "You are very worthy."

I know who it is. It is the spirit of the desert. I realise I was wrong. I am dead. I am a ghost. "You have showed great courage, and strength." The voice is definitely male, it is kind, soothing, and I let it continue, "But most importantly, kindness. You sacrificed yourself for me. I am proud."

"From now on, you are the spirit of the Gobi. May you lead it well, and lead it long." His voice echoes as my spirit is pressed against the sand. I feel myself merge with it, and a strange anger from the previous spirit dissolves, being replaced by me. I am the Gobi Desert.

# A Spark of Light in Darkness

*Evangel College, Vanessa Robin Lam, 13*

**M**y nose twitched when I felt something blowing against my face. Ignoring it, I turned to lie down on my left side with my eyes still closed. It was much cooler than usual. In fact, my bed even felt softer than usual. I searched roughly for my blanket with my hand, my eyes still shut tightly, but I failed miserably.

‘Where is it? Ah! It’s freezing!’ I thought to myself and finally gave in. I sat up and opened my eyes in annoyance, but the sight in front of me made me doubt that I wasn’t dreaming. In astonishment, I rubbed my eyes, and pinched myself to reconfirm that I was in reality. I couldn’t help myself but scream at the top of my voice, ‘What’s going on?’

Everything was dark except for the twinkling stars in the sky.

‘Where am I?’ I wondered as I stood up. I was all alone, in the cold darkness. I looked around unknowingly and noticed an ancient-like scroll and a small torch on the sand next to me.

‘Welcome to the Gobi Desert. To get back to Hong Kong, you will have to retrieve an important item. Follow this map and you will find what you need.’ The words were written in cursive above a map of the desert.

‘Gobi Desert? How did I end up here?’ I murmured to myself. Not even knowing if the map can be trusted, I stood up and turned on the small torch that was lying next to the map. When I did so, I noticed a tiny compass attached to the bottom of the torch.

With the help of them, I had already walked halfway through the route marked on the map. By that time, the sun was slowly rising and gave out a brilliant radiance. The sand I stood on sparkled in harmony with the sun while the sky slowly lit up.

My feet started to struggle to stand up. My eyes barely managing to stay open. After walking through the entire night, I decided to take a nap. Lying against a nearby palm tree, I drifted to sleep.

‘Hey, are you awake yet?’ a voice said, waking me up. I blinked to clear up my vision and found myself in a hut.

‘Is something wrong?’ the owner of the voice asked and peered into my face with a

curious look, his dark eyes full of interest.

'Nope. Thanks for bringing me here. I'm Derek.' I said casually.

'I'm Mason. Were you trying to look for something?' he asked.

'Yeah. I'm not from here. I just woke up and found myself in the middle of this desert. Now I need to find a way to go back.' I said while taking out the map that I found.

'I think I know the way to your destination. Do you want me to go with you?' Mason offered.

'Definitely!' I said and flashed a smile.

'Is it okay if my cousin tags along too?' Mason asked in his deep husky voice.

'I don't mind, I guess.' I answered with a shrug. That was when a girl who looked about my age, walked into the hut.

'I assume that's your cousin?' I asked Mason.

'You're right. Derek, this is Nina. He introduced. After explaining, we set off to our quest. But of course, things didn't go as we hoped so.

We quickly made our way up a slope. As we were walking, I looked down and found that the sand was noticeably different than before. It felt the same, but the color was totally different. Stopping in my tracks, I knelt down on my knee and scooped up a handful of sand.

'What's the matter?' Nina asked, stopping as well.

'The sand here is different.' I murmured.

'You're right!' Mason gasped. Before we could speak again, I felt my body sinking into the sand.

'Is this quicksand?' I asked loudly. By that time, the sand was already over our necks.

'I don't know! Hold on!' Nina called out in despair. Then, total darkness approached us.

'Derek! Derek! Get up!' Nina shouted desperately.

I quickly opened my eyes and saw Mason lying on the ground unconscious. Both Nina and I were chained to a rusty bar. I looked up and saw a guy who looked slightly older than us. His brown hair was highlighted in silver. One of his eyes was covered by an eye patch. His cold stare gave me shivers down my spine.

'Are we in trouble?' I asked Nina, lowering my voice.

'What does it look like? Of course we are!' she answered with a hiss and tried to free herself from the chains.

'What's wrong?' I asked.

'He just said something about hope. I don't understand what he's trying to blabber about! He punched mason in the face and now he's unconscious!' Nina said in panic.

'What do you want from us?' I asked the guy.

'One of you has something I need. I'm not letting you go before I have it.' the guy said

'What is it?' Nina asked anxiously.

'Hope. I heard that it's a legendary thing that can help people reach success. Where is it? Hand it over!' he said.

'Hope isn't even a thing! It's a feeling! You weirdo!' I smirked at him.

'I'm not a weirdo! I have a name, Greyson!' he snapped.

'You can't obtain hope. You have to feel it! So please let us go.' Nina said as nicely as possible.

'No! I'm not letting anyone leave until I have it!' Greyson shouted furiously.

'Stop being unreasonable,' I murmured and rolled my eyes.

'We can teach you how to feel hope, but do you promise to let us go after that?' Nina

offered politely, trying not to anger Greyson anymore than he already was.

‘Fine!’ He grumbled in annoyance. We tried to help to help him understand what it feels like to have hope, but nothing worked. Suddenly, the map in my pocket started to glow and started to heat up to the state that my skin couldn’t stand it. I immediately took it out and threw it down on the ground in panic. When I thought nothing else would happen, the map glowed even brighter and burst into flames. The flames swirled around the room and slowly combined into one, forming a shape of a gigantic dragon made of sand.

‘Greyson! Let us go! We’re going to die if you leave us here!’ I shouted, pulling on the chains with all my strength. The dragon was looking down at us and bared its teeth hungrily.

‘It’s blocking the exit! We won’t make it!’ Greyson shouted back, eyeing the dragon in fear.

‘Just untie us and we’ll work together to get out of here!’ Nina demanded, pulling on the chains again.

‘Wait, where’s Mason?’ I asked, realizing we forgot all about him.

‘We have to carry him out of here!’ Nina shouted, her face red with anger.

‘Alright! Alright!’ Mason answered, unlocking the chains. I tossed Mason over my back and started to head to the exit ladder.

‘We’re not going to make it!’ Greyson yelled fearfully. We were already almost at the top, but the dragon was slowing us down. Attempting to grab us from time to time, it made it really hard to hold our balance while dodging.

‘You need to have hope! You need to believe that we’ll get out of this!’ Nina shouted between gasps.

‘This is where you’re supposed to have hope! Do you understand?’ I screamed at the top of my lungs.

‘Hope...We’re going to get out of here! We’re going to be safe!’ Greyson declared, climbing faster.

‘That’s it! Here! Grab Mason and throw him out first!’ I said to him.

I never felt that glad to be under the blazing sun ever in my life, but after that, the sun seemed to be what I longed to see the most after getting out of the mess in the dark hole. When I thought about it, I had almost forgotten the importance of hope. Hope is like a spark of light in darkness. Without hope, we wouldn’t have the motivation we have now. That was what the important item mentioned on the map. I looked at my new friends and waved them goodbye as I felt myself disappear into the wind and drift back to where I belong.

# The Wind

*Harrow International School Hong Kong, Isabella Clowes, 12*

*How many roads must a man walk down  
Before you call him a man?  
How many deaths will it take until he knows  
That too many have died?  
How many years can some people exist  
Before they're allowed to be free?  
The answer, my friend, is blowin' in the wind  
The answer is blowin' in the wind*

My people sang this. During exhausting labour, tedious readings of law, and to their children before bed. Although no one knew where this song came from.

I'm Assura, I guess I'm fourteen years old. That's all I know about myself since where I live information is dangerous. My town is known for horrific enslavement, if known at all. Many have escaped but their bones were found within a month. Our town is in the middle of the Gobi Desert.

"Back to work! Or that's fifteen whips on the back!" yelled Judge#56. Judges were horrible men who enjoyed our suffering more than anything else apart from alcohol. They would drown themselves in barrels of rum and beer. Then we had to drag their over bloated bodies back to the Core, the inner part of the town.

"Fine, jerk," I muttered under my breath, grinning mischievously. After all I wasn't going to waste my time much longer.

After Hour #3, that not only drained our energy but our hope, we got ten minutes sharp of break. I dashed to my "room" which is actually an obscure contaminated cave. In each room there is one bed for six girls, and when I say bed I mean the wooden frame of a bed and filthy old rags.

I dove under my bed, bashing my head against the frame, full of splinters. If I cried they would find me running away and I'd never be heard of again.

While the scarlet blood gradually trickled down my nape towards my back, I was

packing my limited possessions with intense purpose and one motivation - to get out of this living hell. I shoved my final item into my bag then scrambled to the door. It creaked open...

An intoxicated Judge had hesitated in checking I was in this room. I thought he was intoxicated but I couldn't risk it. I ripped the rancid unsteady floorboard then whacked him. Knocking him out cold.

Running out of the room after grabbing my bag. I aimed south, thrusting the old decaying gate out of my way and instantly a wave of freedom and power crashed upon me. Though how was I going to survive, was still a question. The wave suddenly transformed into a flood of regret, drowning and suffocating me.

Trudging away, I reminded myself that I would rather be in this waterless place than there. I would make it through that glacial and blistering void.

After about four hours of walking, the longing for water had increased dramatically. I could feel the thirst seize me. I glanced upon the horizon, looking for any signs of an oasis or shade. Nothing. My eyes began to shut, slowly but surely. This terrified me as I tried to control it but nothing seemed to work. Eventually, I gave up and let my consciousness tear away from me.

"Mummy! Look!" shrieked a fragile boy who sounded like he had never seen an unconscious girl. In my town, people were continually losing consciousness as a result of scorching weather or lack of resources. The less fortunate ended up in comas, this was my sixth time I had lapsed into unconsciousness.

I woke up on a bed. A real bed! A massive family was surrounding me; there were five charming sons, four beautiful girls, a father and mother. Their gleaming eyes fixed on me, but that wasn't what I first noticed. What I first noticed was a strangely familiar and magnificent structure that hung over me like a lamp, but it wasn't a lamp. It was transparent and shaped perfectly like diamonds. It struck me, my town produced this. I glared.

All of a sudden they started blurting out what sounded like questions, I couldn't concentrate my head was spinning.

"Stop!" I yelled much louder and more deafening than I expected. The family looked taken back, I instantly felt guilty. They welcomed me into their dazzling home and I was yelling at them.

"I'm sorry. I'm not used to people talking to me." I explained, hoping they would forgive me. They seemed satisfied which made me smile.

"Where did you come from?" asked one of the sons who was about my age, with a curious twinkle in his ocean blue eyes.

My smile immediately turned to a frown. What were they going to do with me if I told them? Even so I pointed north praying with all my heart that they wouldn't take me back to the depths of hell.

They all gasped, except the youngest daughter who burst into tears and tugged fiercely at a rag which was interestingly shaped as a bear.

"You come from Torna?" the mother questioned now with a look of disgust on her face.

Was my town named Torna? Why were they so surprised? I know I shouldn't ask but I was sick of unanswered questions but it would be utter rudeness to ask.

"Torna? That's the name of my town?" I asked, but I already knew the answer. The mother nodded.

"A beautiful name for an ugly town," I muttered.

The boy who was my age, as if not caring about my horrendous past, announced “She probably got help from some men who felt sorry for her. She’s just a girl. How could she have gotten out of there?”

I was sick of this family who were spoilt to death. They didn’t even know my name and they were already judging me!

Fortunately the boy who had insulted me was standing fairly close to the bed. This made it a simple task for me to punch him straight on the nose, and that is exactly what I did.

As he whimpered and freaked out at the slight sight of blood on his face, I was already grabbing my bag. The family were too preoccupied fussing over his nose to notice my departure, so just as I was about to leave through the mahogany door I answered back to his bitter insult, slowly spitting the words out one by one,

“Don’t kid yourself! Anyone in my town would laugh if I hit their nose!”

The whole family stared at me as though I was demented, but I didn’t care. My eyes were burning with fury. I marched out of the room, grinning at my triumphant message.

After about half an hour of finding my way around this horrifyingly big house, I finally found the door. I swung the hefty door out of my way and Jack Frost affronted me. This was nothing that I wasn’t used to but after spending luxurious hours in a bed, this was different.

“You didn’t answer my question,” said a demanding voice behind my back, I didn’t need to turn around, I already knew who. It was the boy.

I sprinted out the door with the wind fighting against me and bits of rock trying to trip me. I kept sprinting and sprinting, slowly I realised, I was trapped! I was in a miniature dry forest with an abundance of structures spitting water, continued blankets of gravel and an immeasurable deep maze.

I stupidly headed for the maze not noticing its depth. I turned the first corner and in the distance I heard the cackle of that witch, now knowing I was lab rat, but I kept sprinting and sprinting.

Expecting to find my way out quite rapidly I realised that dreadful mistake, I might have been running for hours! Though I kept pushing and pushing until Jack Frost struck me and I fell to my knees. I started muttering the town song. Familiarity greeted me and welcomed me in his home.

“You didn’t answer my question,” said the demanding boy.

Familiarity threw me out and told me never to come back again.

“How did you find me?” I asked impatiently. He hovered his hand from behind his back and waved a piece of paper in front of his face. It was a map.

“Now answer my question or you will never get out of here!” he yelled, as if a toddler was having a tantrum.

“What is your question?” I asked finally giving up and at the same time praying he would lead the way out of the maze.

“How did you escape Torna?” he asked demanding.

“I knocked out a drunken judge with a floorboard and ran to the fence! Now get me out of here!” I yelled back facing him directly.

“Well, that’s not how I escaped,” he muttered; my face was wide with shock. Were there any questions I would ever get the answer to?

*The answer, my friend, is blowin’ in the wind*

*The answer is blowin’ in the wind*

# The Voodoo Desert

*Hong Kong Academy, Divya Rajagopal, 11*

Summer vacation was on with my best friend Jenny. We were on Princess Marina, my private cruise. We were spending our summer holidays together. Our families were good friends, and we knew each other well. I smiled as I smelled the fresh sea and fish. It was a sunny day and I really wanted to take my ship out. Our fathers were really wealthy business men and our moms were actresses. That's how we became friends. We sailed past small inhabited islands and saw tons of dolphins!! The ship rocked gently like a cradle making us sleepy. We woke up one morning and were eating breakfast, talking about school and joked around. We laughed, probably our last laugh for a long time.

Suddenly the ship rocked violently. Jenny squeaked in surprise and the milk spilled everywhere. She looked terrified. I didn't realize I looked as scared as she did. The ship was on Auto Pilot so there was never a captain, only a camera, which had broken. I looked at my route and realized something far too late. We were getting sucked into the Bermuda Triangle. I screamed as we were sucked in. I couldn't feel my body or anything. There was no air around us and we were panting, every second counted to our body. We suddenly fainted, maybe forever.

When I woke up I only saw sand. I saw Jenny, fainted next to me. It was really hot and the sun was killing me. Jenny slowly stirred after I shook her. We were still alive but in the middle of nowhere. All we saw was sand. Jenny took a deep breath and she sat up. She looked at me, her pale grey eyes staring at me with fear. I helped her and myself up. "Where are we??!!!" she coughed, getting the sand out of her mouth. "I don't know," I worried. Jenny murmured random curses, which I tried to pretend I didn't hear. She whimpered "What now?? We don't even know where we are!!" I sighed. "You can't expect ME to know everything, I mean..." "I DON'T CARE I WANT TO GO HOME!!" She snapped. I really lost it. "WELL THEN FIND YOUR OWN WAY HOME!!!" She sat back on the sand and cried. I sat beside her and put my hand around her. "Come on this is better than you leaving...." It was true. Jenny was going to leave, to England. She nodded, interrupting my thoughts. "I know but..." I sighed and lifted her from the sand.

She gave me a small smile. I squinted my eyes to look at the horizon. Still, all I saw was sand. Suddenly I realized where we were. I looked at Jenny with dismay. "I think I know where we are." She gave me a hopeful look. I took a deep breath. "The Gobi Desert."

She stared at me like I was nuts. I suddenly spotted my backpack. Stupid me! "Here is my proof! This book!" She took the book from me and the cover made her go pale. It was the same photo as the place we stood. No doubt. She gulped. "What if we are here??!" I guessed "It might be written in the book" She flipped through the pages - "How to survive in a desert. Perfect. Surviving in the desert blah blah" Suddenly she exclaimed - Found some nice information in this crappy book." I laughed and she showed me "The most important things are..." She pointed at something. "Some plants are edible if peeled well and cooked. Some plants also provide water. Some examples of plants which are edible are..." A bunch of plants were listed. "That's..CRAZY!!" I yelled. She looked at me seriously. "If there is no other food then..." I nodded. I knew what she meant. We didn't know how long this would take or how we would survive. We spotted some plants, and I used my Swiss Army Knife to cut them. Big mistake. A green monstrous thing formed and tried to eat me. I screamed and pulled Jenny out of the way along with me. This man-eating cacti head became longer and bigger and meaner. I swore this was the last time I did this. I pressed a little button and a blue sword shimmered. The creature.. screamed? I ran, chopping its head off. It vaporized and in a "Poof" disappeared. Jenny looked at me, her eyes were blood-shot. She screamed "Really?!" I sighed. This was our families' secret. It was to be given to the daughters to learn Sword fighting. We had similar swords and learned together. Very weird huh? It was a tradition, though I only used it once. "Wow..YOU WERE AMAZING!!! MR.WALKER IS GONNA BE SO PROUD!!" I smiled at her, and we stayed like that. After a few seconds, I put my sword down. I squeezed the remains of the plants and took a small sip. "It's like coconut water." She nodded. "Umm thank you.." I smiled. She nodded. "Well we need to find a way home." "Yea.." I replied. We got up and walked for at least 5 hours. We stopped in the way to find some food. We found a few harmless plants that looked edible. We ate some and continued on our way. I hoped for at least a trail or something..but nothing popped up. Finally we got too tired and passed out. Bad mistake.

I woke up at the sound. I was assuming it was another plant. I woke Jenny and took out my sword. We stayed in silence but nothing came. I was about to lay down but suddenly I couldn't breathe. I gasped and someone choked me. I looked to see if it was Jenny but there was nothing. She was gasping too! I swung the sword aimlessly, keeping cautious. The invisible thing cackled and turned visible, though I wished after I saw it it could remain invisible. It looked like a witch. It circled around us. I charged and swung at it. The witch screamed and suddenly I realized my sword was glowing brightly and so was Jenny's. I screamed "For Chocolate!!!" Random thing to scream. I charged and I felt like a new person. The witch shrieked. "ON TON MEHT!!" I swung right in its face. The light brightened and I swung faster and with more power, using all the skills my Sensei had taught me. "Never underestimate your opponent. Try to find their weakness and strike! And make sure they don't find your weakness." Those words rung into my mind. I swung and at the corner of my eye, I saw Jenny doing the same. Finally, it vaporized and dropped two jewels. They glowed like my sword. I was covered in sweat and felt like a donkey who'd had a bad day. We slept immediately. When I woke, we discussed what happened last night. Then we took out the jewels and stared at them. I nodded and we continued walking. Many days passed. Rarely without plants.

Water had become quite scarce now.

Finally, one day I noticed a temple. It was decorated with ancient Egyptian paintings. We entered and noticed lots of seats and an empty frame-like thing. I walked and saw two pedestals next to it. Both the pedestals had one free space each. Suddenly, my jewel and the pedestal glowed. I looked at her and nodded at her. "Maybe this is..the way home.." We placed the jewels on the pedestals. A light beam prevented us from seeing anything. We fell down and looked. The frame had a picture of Earth. I cheered and we hugged each other. I noticed two bracelets near the pedestals, which now glowed brightly. The bracelets had the same jewels, only a bit smaller but it was lovely. I wore it. Together, we jumped onto the pedestals. When I opened my eyes, we were on the ship, close to home. I looked around as if it were a dream. She blinked. "Was that a dream??" I was about to say but I noticed a bracelet on my hand and grinned. "Look at your hand." She looked and smiled. Our parents greeted us at our arrival. We ate and drank like pigs! The rest of my days with Jenny were amazing. On the day she left, she and I were crying a lot but I managed a smile. She looked at her bracelet. We shook hands, and the bracelets glowed. Her parents signaled her. I hugged her. "I'll miss you a lot!! Thank you so much Jenny.. I hope soon we will see other again!" She cried on me and then she nodded. "I will never ever forget you or this adventure, Maria Gonsavles, you're the best!" I nodded. When she finally departed, my parents were crying too, and we looked up at the sky together. Jenny and her family were waving from the small plane window. I looked again at the sky. Who knew when we'd have another adventure?

# The Deadliest Desert

*Hong Kong International School Middle School, Melanie Chan, 11*

My feet dug into the hot, spiky sand as I hoed the ground. My scratchy pants made me itch and my baggy shirt flapped around in the wind. Within the acre of our farmland I could see my Ba and my sister Mei-Hua doing the same, digging around our farmland and planting trees. I paused to wipe my forehead and continued to dig a long wide ditch around our land. Once I had made the hole about a meter long, half a meter wide, and half a meter deep, Ba would run over and dump some jelly soil into the sandy, rocky, and dry ground. Jelly soil is Ba's great invention. It is a mixture that contains nutrients and water for plants. The nutrients and water are slowly released into the soil and will be gradually absorbed by the plant roots. He had also discovered that the sandy winds coming from the nearby Gobi Desert could be weakened by layers of trees surrounding our farm and town. Now the whole town was planting trees, to prevent our homes from the damage that had destroyed the Beijing capital.

Beijing has been eaten up by the desert, but I still love hearing Ma and Ba tell tales of the Forbidden City, the Great Wall of China that had blocked enemies from attacks, and the amazing scenery. China was beginning to lose its population and land along with many other countries as glaciers melted and the sea levels rose higher. This is a problem, but we are lucky that our town is up on a mountain.

I wish I wasn't a girl, and that I wasn't just 12, so then people wouldn't say that I didn't need to help out so much because it could be dangerous. But I am determined to help my town from becoming a part of the Gobi desert, and I already started secretly researching so that I can help Ba. Ba is an environmental scientist and an inventor. But I don't want to just be an inventor, I want to really help.

I dug the hole while Ba lugged the big sacks and wheelbarrows of jelly soil to my ditch. It was hard work all right, but I had one of the lightest tasks. The easier task of planting trees was reserved for the little kids. All they had to do was stick a little sapling into the soil while one of the adults followed behind to fill in some more jelly soil. I did this until around lunch time.

Ma clanged the triangle instrument that meant “Dinner time!”, and Mei-Hua and I raced to the house.

“Beat you Chichi!” Mei-Hua called. “I get the iPad mini-air 13G first!”

I groaned. She always got the gamer first. I took my place at the dinner table. Ma had set the table with porcelain plates and bowls, and utensils. She carried out a dish of curry and a big steaming pot of rice. I gobbled up my lunch and plopped down on the sofa. Ba came in and ate as quick as a hungry wolf. He stood and walked to his workroom. I thought, ‘Hey, I wonder what my friends are doing now. Maybe we could study together.’ I washed my face and hurried out the door. I jumped onto my best friend Po-Ming’s porch and rang the doorbell. I peeked in through the window. Po was sitting at the table stuffing himself with food. Ba could eat quickly, but Po-Ming ate like a Tasmanian devil. He opened the door and I went with him back to the kitchen.

“Will you join me during study time?” I asked him.

“Why? I would rather stay here and eat than go and work.” Po-Ming remarked, but grabbed his bag and followed me out the door.

We passed by some of the other houses, where all the older kids were planting rows of trees. Everyone was glad that finally there might be a chance that we could reverse desertification, and nobody minded working to save our town. Even the kids helped because we needed all the manpower we could get. It was burning and dry, like always. This was the reason why we always studied in the afternoon and worked in the cool morning air. We hurried on to my house.

I ran upstairs to get my books. Study time was the best time of the day. Once I asked my Ba if he thought SmartSchool was hard, and he said that he had gone to a school building when he was a kid. He said they didn’t have SmartSchool tablets yet. I wonder how they learned by sitting in a building. I took out my SmartSchool and reviewed with Po-Ming what we had learned yesterday. Air pollution, global warming, algebra, and an essay on the history of the ancient Beijing. The topic that interested me most was global warming. When my Ba was a child he had lived in a big city called Hong Kong or something. The city was now underwater because of the rising sea levels, so he had moved to this little town of HaiDian, which was very near Beijing. Here there were lots of things that he could invent to help reverse desertification, and he also was here to show how his jelly soil worked.

We studied hard and read interesting facts. We submitted our homework electronically to the grading centre, answered questions on our electronic SmartSchool textbook. I read an interesting article on my SmartSchool social studies textbook:

June 20, 2040

#### DESERT GETS CLOSER TO HAIDIAN AND MORE ON POLLUTION

The Gobi desert spreads more and more by the day, leaving wrecked cities and homeless people behind. But fortunately, HaiDian is already getting prepared. The desert was originally believed to be coming from the northwest, hitting HaiDian before the Beijing capital, but the route swerved and took Beijing first. The inventor WuSu Ngai says, ‘I am glad that my jelly soil is in good use, but one day there will be something better.’ Ngai is quite right. Back in 2014 somebody from Belgium invented walls that could turn pollution into CO<sub>2</sub> and H<sub>2</sub>O. By 2017, the most polluted cities had these

walls. In 2029, scientists found a way to clear the radiation from the water and soil in Japan. In 2032, there was a way to make acid water clean. Soon there will be a way to completely reverse desertification.

Since my Ba was an inventor, his name popped up in the HaiDian papers a lot. We finished our essay, learned more arithmetic and history, and wrapped up our pollution unit. I finished my research about desertification and solutions and was ready to show my Ba. When I finished studying and Po-Ming had left, Ba was working on expanding his jelly soil invention. He had worked out a plan and wanted to share it with other places that were being taken over by desert. I proudly presented my research about jelly soil to him. He thanked me and continued to work. I opened my SmartSchool again and read another article. This one was about how bacteria could help reverse desertification, but it wasn't tested yet.

I waited with Mei-Hua for a few days until finally Ba came out of his workshop. He proudly told us that in a town near the silk road people were willing to pay high prices for lots of jelly soil, and there they could help him trade his jelly soil for very valuable things. Ma was proud too, because finally, after about a couple years of work on this project, Ba had successfully created something that proved himself as a great inventor.

There was great celebration in the house. The news reporters came, friends came, and Ma baked a cake. Po-Ming came over, and we had fun testing the jelly soil in the yard while others studied it. It was the best thing that had ever happened to me and my family, to go down in history. I've changed my mind about inventors, one day I will be an inventor too.

“To invent, you need a good imagination and a pile of junk.” Thomas A. Edison

# A Week in the Gobi Desert

*Hong Kong International School Middle School, Rachana Hegde, 14*

Opening the notebook, I quietly read the familiar messy script detailing my experiences in third-person. Ignoring the thunderous helicopter blades, I skim-read my journal entries.

## DAY 0

“You want me to fund an expedition into the Gobi Desert?” Mr. Mehra stared at Sanya incredulously. “Why?”

“I’ve been working as a photographer for National Geographic for a year now; their next issue is coming out in a month and it’ll be containing an exclusive feature about the Gobi Desert.”

Sighing, Mr. Mehra said, “Okay, I’ll fund the expedition.”

“Thank you!” Gaspd Sanya. Setting down a sheaf of papers on his desk, she said, “I’ve planned a one-week trip to the Gobi Lakes Valley Steppe.”

“Who is your team made up of?”

“My team includes Sam and John Goodwin and Tara White.” Half-turning away, Sanya continued. “Thank you. I need to go now but I’ll email you a list of the expenses.”

\* \* \*

## DAY 1

Perusing through a notebook crammed with “vital information” for their trip, Sanya read out an excerpt.

“The Gobi Lakes Valley is a narrow nearly flat valley dotted with lakes, depressions and salt pans. The plain is nearly treeless, though the valley is interspersed with sand dunes and salt marshes. It is situated between the Khangai range and the Gobi-Altai and

Mongol-Altai ranges. The valley contains lakes such as the Orog, Boontsagaan, Ulaan nuur, etc. in the center.

“And the weather?” asked Tara.

“In rare instances snowfall occurs in the Gobi Desert and the minimum temperature can be lower than negative forty degrees Fahrenheit in winter.” Casually, Sanya added. “Please note that as we have made this trip in January, the coldest month of the year, freezing weather is expected.”

This information was met with a chorus of loud groans. “That’s...” John shook his head unable to put a positive spin on the barrage of facts. “Thanks for selecting us to go on this expedition,” John said finally.

“Thanks for coming. There is no one I’d rather have with myself than my best friends and-” The pilot’s voice blaring over the speakers interrupted the beginnings of a passionate speech.

“Ten minutes to landing!”

\* \* \*

#### DAY 4

“Isn’t it beautiful?” whispered Tara. Reverently watching the black-tailed gazelle, she looked away only to hastily scribble down observations. Zooming in, Sanya angled the camera to get a good view of the gazelle.

“Such gorgeous antlers,” murmured Tara. “So sleek, yet fast.” The black-tailed gazelle paused majestically and Sanya snapped a slew of pictures, quickly capturing its magnificent features on the screen of her camera. Suddenly it bounded away and all traces of its existence vanished.

Smiling, Tara gestured for John and Sam to begin setting up the tents. Night had arrived in the Gobi Desert, bringing with it a multitude of gleaming stars, twinkling helpfully above them.

Restricted slightly by their bulky clothing, they quickly and efficiently set up the tents. Immediately, everyone found an excuse to retire into their tent until dinner.

When Sanya finally abandoned her romance novel to prepare dinner outside, she saw and photographed not only a Mongolian gazelle but also a Siberian ibex. Regretfully ducking back inside to grab another steel plate, she began preparing dinner.

During dinner, snow began falling again. Swiftly finishing their meal, the team began clearing away the dishes and utensils. Carefully utilizing the fresh snow to clean the containers, Sanya stood up abruptly when she heard John exclaim: “A snow leopard!” Staring raptly through his binoculars, John stood motionless until Tara ran over and wrestled the binoculars from him. Looking through them, Tara’s face contorted in confusion. “There’s nothing there,” she muttered finally in a voice tinged with disappointment.

“But-” began John. However a second glance through his binoculars confirmed Tara’s conclusion.

\* \* \*

## DAY 5

Emerging from the tent, Sanya did a double-take. Overnight the temperature had dropped further. She estimated it was definitely below -40°F. Trekking through sand dunes and salt marshes while skirting lakes was beginning to take its toll on their team. Sighing, she reluctantly went to interrupt her friends' sleep.

Coming out of Tara's tent she noted the lake nearby, glistening from the thin sheet of ice covering it. Without warning, Sam and John, identical twins, emerged wearing thick ski jackets and gloves.

"Tara?" called Sanya. She had agreed to handle the cooking and everyone was anxious to eat breakfast.

Coming out of her tent, Tara began saying, "We're out of water but-" Slipping on a patch of frozen grass, Tara's ankle turned as she landed with a hard crunch on the tightly packed ground, wincing in pain.

"Are you okay?" John kneeled by her side, helping her sit up. "Your-"

"Ankle - it's twisted," gasped Tara.

Taking charge, Sanya spoke up. "I have a first-aid kit in my tent so I can fix up your ankle. John, make Tara comfortable in her tent while I go get the kit. Sam, I want you to fill your backpack with flasks and go fill them by the lake." Sanya finished giving orders and turned away.

Sam strode off for the lake after grabbing several metal flasks. A chilly wind buffeted him as he made his way across the sand and dirt. Finally arriving at the lake he stared breathlessly at the intimidating expanse of frozen water. Placing his backpack by the lake, he turned away to catch his breath. When he whirled around, his backpack was sliding downward toward the lake.

Leaping forward, his fingertips skimmed the edges of the straps as the backpack hurtled forward, landing on and then sliding across the ice.

Standing at the edge of the lake, Sam shifted uncertainly. The backpack contained supplies and various important implements. Half-closing his eyes, he tentatively placed one foot on the ice.

"Easy," he murmured. "Easy now." Moving forward gracefully, he promptly scooped up the backpack and tried to ignore the web of cracks that were snaking out from his every footfall. Pivoting on one foot, he turned toward the banks of the lake.

Gently putting his right foot down on the ice, he almost didn't process the sound of ice shattering...and he fell.

Water rushed up around him, swallowing his strangled yell. The lake seemed to intentionally thwart all his attempts to tread water. Floundering around, Sam choked on the mixture of water and air he gulped down. Darkness was beginning to claim him when he heard Sanya's scream: "SAM!" Redoubling his efforts to stay alive but still resolutely clutching his hefty backpack, Sam was slowly drowning.

Suddenly he was pulled out, retching lake water as he convulsed violently.

Watching Sam shivering in his soaked clothes, Sanya shook her head and left the tent. Sounds of struggling promptly ensued as John tried to help his brother change out of his wet clothes.

"Now what?" Tara watched their leader. "We only have a day left until we're leaving - my ankle's twisted and Sam nearly drowned."

“Your ankle will have to wait until the plane comes and Sam will live. Before we left, I checked the weather forecast. There was a disclaimer telling people that the forecasts are pretty generic and not always accurate because the weather changes here can be sudden. But the forecast did mention a snowstorm tomorrow....”

\* \* \*

## DAY 6

When they came out of their tents the next morning, a flurry of snow welcomed them. They appeared to be in some kind of snowstorm that had transpired over night. Zipping her coat up even tighter around her, Sanya peered into the distance. “Are those - are they - nomadic herders?” whispered Sanya incredulously, staring into the distance. She could just make out hazy figures swaying on unidentifiable creatures. Snow started falling harder, obscuring the vague shapes completely from view.

In the ensuing snowstorm, the nomadic herders stumbled upon their camp. The herders were warmly dressed in thick coats and trousers, caps half-obscuring their faces. Ten or more goat-like creatures stumbled around, wandering dangerously near to the flimsy tents. Penning the goats neatly, the nomads were assisted in setting up camp by Sam and John.

Using the excuse of brewing tea, Sanya faded into the background, venturing out at irregular intervals to snap photos of the scene.

\* \* \*

## DAY 7

Time had flown and their week in the Gobi Desert was over. Climbing the ladder and handing up their things, the team slowly made their way up to the helicopter.

Hanging onto the ladder and looking back once at the sands shifting below them, Sanya smiled and took one last photo of the aerial view. Her experiences had rivaled what many experienced in a lifetime and she was definitely satisfied. Still smiling, Sanya continued up the swaying ladder.

Shutting the notebook, I put it away safely. Recording our experiences as a team had been fun and writing it in 3rd-person had helped me think beyond myself and see events from a different perspective.

# City of Kuma

*International College Hong Kong, Jennifer Cheung, 13*

## Chapter 1

Our story begins on a Friday. Friday's a day where you can relax and take a break. It's a day everyone looks forward to. Well..everyone except Alex and Nicole. It's the day their parents leave to some arid desert for an archeology expedition. It's usually to find something dinosaur related, like bones or eggs.

The day would usually start with lots of hustling and bustling, the sound of telephones shrieking and the rustling of paper echoing throughout the house. But that Friday was different. They've looked forward to that Friday for years. They've wanted to go on an archeology expedition for years! They begged and pleaded, but they knew they could only go when they turn 13.

So you could imagine how excited Alex and Nicole were to go on the expedition. And to the Gobi Desert as well!

"Why won't this suitcase close?!" Alex exclaimed as she jumped on top of her suitcase. Nicole raised her eyebrow.

"Well.. have you considered taking some things out? Like your shovel? And bucket?"

"But you never know when they might come in handy! Maybe we'll get in a sand trap and we'll need to dig ourselves out! You never know!"

Nicole rolled her eyes and sighed.

"Girls! Hurry up! We can't be late!" Their mother, Nancy, hollered at them from downstairs.

"Coming!" Nicole called back down. Exasperated, she threw some of Alex's stuff onto the bed and zipped it up.

## Chapter 2

When the girls and the whole team arrived at the desert, they were in no mood to go digging in the hot, blood red sun. But they did. After hours of digging, the team stopped to have a rest. Just then Nicole noticed a red box with gold engraved patterns half covered in sand. She motioned for Alex to come over and knelt down beside it.

The girls opened the box. In the box, there was.....

Nothing.

Disappointed, the girls returned to the box itself and studied the engravings on it. On the box was a symbol of a crown, a sword, and a Chinese character that read 'moon'. They wanted to explore more, but had to keep digging since break was over.

“Hey! Look at this!” Someone yelled. The whole team hurried over to where the man was pointing. What they saw was a priceless, jewel encrusted crown. The girls stared at each other.

“It looks exactly like the one on the box!” Whispered Alex.

“I know,” replied Nicole, “but we should probably keep quiet until we’re sure they’re linked together.” The man put the crown in the van and the team kept on digging. Their mother frowned.

“Where’d that come from?” Nancy narrowed her eyes at the sight of the two girls whispering. “Do you girls have something to do with this?” The girls shook their heads innocently.

“Alright. We’ll keep digging for another 30 minutes before we leave, okay?”

Not long after that, another shout came.

“I found a sword!” The girls were shocked.

Drew scratched his head and sighed. “Let’s go back to the hotel and figure this all out.” The team packed up and the sisters secretly brought the box with them.

### Chapter 3

The next day, the team went to the desert again. The two girls slinked off with the box. It was just too bad they were quite far from the rest of the group because a mysterious man and woman approached them. The woman had tangled, unruly hair full of sand, and had ruined clothes and long dirty fingernails. Yet her voice was as smooth as honey, making the girls tempted to believe every word the woman said. The man was dressed immaculately, not a wrinkle in his suit, his aging hair gelled and brushed, and teeth blindingly white. The only thing the pair had in common was the greedy glint in their eyes and smooth voice.

“I’m Dr. Murray and this is-”

“A.K.,” the woman interrupted.

“I’m going to make this quick. We. Need. The. Box.”

Alex clutched the box protectively, and Nicole shook her head.

“You don’t understand. That box has great power. Give. It,” Dr. Murray said threateningly.

Nicole started to tug on her sister’s arm, slowly backing away.

“Trust me. If you won’t give it to me, I’ll find you. I’ll get it,” replied A.K menacingly before they left.

That day the girls did some research on the desert. They found that thousands of years ago, an ancient Chinese civilization was built on those grounds. Not much was known about it, but they found that the Chinese believed Summer and Spring was the time of good, whilst the Autumn and Winter was a time of ghosts and evil.

Alex gasped. “Wait. Isn’t it going to be Autumn tonight?” Nicole nodded.

“I want to study the sword and the crown.” So the girls silently took out the crown and sword. There wasn’t really anything special about them. But when turned against the light, you could see little words. On the sword read “strength”, and on the crown was the word, “loyalty”.

Nicole and Alex were lying in bed, and the clock read exactly 12:01 AM, indicating that it was Autumn. Reflected on the moonlight, the girls saw the words on the sword and crown change. The sword’s word no longer said ‘strength’, it said ‘death’. The crown no longer read ‘loyalty’, it read ‘power’. The engravings on the box weren’t gold; they

were black.

Nicole sat up and turned on the light. Alex immediately got up to study the strange objects once more. But there was nothing on the table.

"The crown, sword and box are gone!" Alex gasped.

"And I bet A.K and Dr. Murray took it!" Exclaimed Nicole.

Quickly, the girls gathered the box, dropped it into Alex's backpack and quietly slipped out.

In the distance, on an Altai mountain, they saw thousands of torches lit by fire, placed around a crowd. On a platform were two shadows knelt down, holding two objects in their hands, as if offering it to the moon. It was obvious who they were. The girls hurried towards the mountain, and as they got closer they heard loud chants.

*"Demons of the Moon, Death of the Sword, Power of the Crown..."*

Dr. Murray addressed the crowd. There was an air of nobility around him as he spoke.

"On this ground, our ancestors, the Demons, built a city here and ruled it. The City of Kuma was a city full of mystery. We were the most powerful empire in the world! Until the day of the Sand Storm. But tonight, at the Moon's Shadow, it shall rise again and we will be the legendary Demons!"

The crowd cheered and A.K stepped forward.

"May the ancient city bless us all with its strength, knowledge, and power!" A beam of light coming from the moon shone on the ground, and the moon's shadow made a perfect circle inside the beam of light that surrounded the crowd.

On the outer ring of the circle, the ground started to crumble. Cracked pieces began to fall apart, like a jigsaw puzzle. First you could see the tops of small buildings and houses, but as the City began to rise more prominently, you could see the small architectural designs, still engraved on the walls after centuries of being buried. The designs were of moons, swords, crowns and demons. With the smoke curling from the cracked ground, Nicole and Alex ran toward the villains. Alex grabbed the sword and crown, and when it no longer reflected the light of the moon, everything seemed to stop at once.

"Get them!" Screamed Dr. Murray, livid, his dark eyes glowing. He pointed a gnarled finger at them. His voice was no longer sweet or smooth. It was raspy, hoarse and fueled by anger. The crowd circled in on the girls, their eyes glinting with the reflection from the fire on the torches.

"That's it!" Cried Nicole. She knocked over one of the torches so that it leaned on the next torch, which leaned on the next. This kept going until there was a ring of intense fire that circled the crowd.

Alex pulled a smug face at the stunned crowd and smiled heroically. But Nicole was too busy finding two specific faces among the crowd. She turned around hastily.

"Where's A.K and Dr. Murray?" Alex's facial expression contorted to a face of dismay. But A.K and Dr. Murray were no where to be found. Nicole quickly grabbed the box, sword, crown, and hurled it towards the ring of fire where it swallowed the precious objects.

Dawn was coming, and Nicole and Alex watched as the large gold disk rose slowly into the dull morning sky, casting sunbeams that illuminated the whole desert. They stood there for a moment, bathed in the gold droplets and stared at the message written on the burnt ground: *We'll meet again.*

# The Shot that Changed Everything

*Kellett School, Florence Clifford, 11*

I wasn't allowed out on the lake. Neither of us were. I remember that before the war, my brother and I swam in the ultramarine waters and kayaked in the odd, round, bumpy wooden boats he so proudly made for us. They leaked constantly and instead of sailing normally they spun around, so it was quite hopeless for us to attempt races in them. But we did, and I remember many a day spent out on the beautiful, clear water, hunting for shells in the sand on the sides of the lake, swimming races - I always won - and boating. We practically lived out on the lake; my brother even built a wooden hut on the shore for us to stay in; but Mother never let us sleep there. Like all of his wooden creations, it was very bad quality, but he was so eager to help me that I couldn't bring myself to tell him my honest opinion. Even thinking of his bright, smiling, puppy-dog-eyed face brings tears to my eyes, and I have to look away, and try to think of something else. But I never can.

Everybody loved my brother. When weary travellers, crossing the vast, bleak, hopeless Gobi desert, came upon the valley of sand where we lived, and saw our beautiful Oriental palace lying at the bottom, and the crescent of tantalizing turquoise water arcing around our home, each and every one of them would cry out in joy. And when my mother, famed for her hospitality, allowed them to stay with us, they would be similarly overjoyed. But when they saw my brother, it was weeks before they even considered leaving. And then they wanted to take my brother with them.

He wasn't particularly handsome, and he wasn't very talented. But he inspired hope in everyone, optimism in even the most miserable soul, and love and joy in the hearts of many. Whenever he wasn't there, everything was dull and boring. My brother was the light of our lives.

Even in the miserable, heart-wrenchingly sad days of war, when scarcely a day went past without soldiers bombarding our palace with bullets, or bombs wrecking Mother's prize turnips, my brother cheered everyone up, and made it seem like life was worth living, despite all the hardships.

Now he was gone.

\* \* \*

Everything was different before the war.

It was three years ago when the war started, but it seems like centuries ago. I lived a blessed life in our beautiful palace with my younger brother, mother and father. Every day was filled with excitement; discovering new nooks and crannies in the never-ending corridors, getting lost in the great hall, playing on the lake, and secretly going exploring in the desert above, despite Mother's firm injunctions to never leave the valley. I never understood why we were forbidden to climb up the sand slopes of our valley, or go beyond them, and quite frankly I still don't. But all of that came to an end when the war began.

As soon as the war began, we were never let out of the house. Going to the lake was prohibited. Watering Mother's prize turnips was prohibited. (This had been prohibited in the first place, as Mother was very protective of these turnips and unsurprisingly didn't trust us with them. Which was perfectly reasonable - it was very unwise to trust us with anything. The only difference was that this time, she answered to our pleas of 'Can we water the turnips?' with a 'NO!' instead of a 'No.')

Playing in the sand of the valley was prohibited. Even going out on the many balconies jutting off from the Great Hall was prohibited.

I don't really remember the day the war began. It all seems blurry and far away. I can remember the afternoons spent on the lake with my brother with astonishing clarity, but not the dark days at the beginning of the war. I was not a very observant child and chose not to listen to the barrage of political talk in which my parents indulged, but even I could not fail to notice the agitation, the worry, the anxiety in the air, and the danger we were in.

Every morning, Father read the newspaper to us over breakfast, and although I generally chose not to listen and instead snatch pieces of toast from my brother's plate when he wasn't looking, I remember Mother and Father having heated discussions about strange words: 'aristocrats', 'siege', 'peasants' revolt', 'civil unrest' - words I did not understand but haunted me for the rest of my life. I looked up every word he mentioned in the dictionary, but I was not perhaps the most intelligent child in the world and its long, complicated words proved too much for me.

Suddenly we were under siege. Suddenly, soldiers and guards appeared from out of nowhere. Suddenly, the palace was filled with burly men brandishing weapons. Mother told us we had nothing to fear from them and that they were here to protect us, but the sight of them was enough to send my brother and I scurrying into the shadows. There were hundreds of them, striding around everywhere and firing at our attackers from the safety of the balconies.

By this time, we were all terrified.

I never understood why we were under fire. There were a lot of things I didn't understand about the war. I never understood why there was a war in the first place. There are many things even today I still don't understand.

But after three years of imprisonment in what was no longer a beautiful palace, but rather a burning, smoking pile of collapsed stones with half-destroyed minarets poking bravely out of the wreckage, I had had enough.

I went to the window. It was the only window remaining of our original 903 in the Great Hall (my brother, who liked to spend his time in a productive manner, rather than staring at the ceiling sulking, as I often did, had decided to count them). The rest of them were destroyed.

I wasn't allowed out on the lake. Neither of us were. But gazing at the tempting, alluring, enticing azure water, calm and peaceful, on a beautiful sunny day, was too much for me. I beckoned to my brother.

I pointed out the window.

My brother had not looked out of the window since the first bomb fell. He was petrified that he would be seen at a window by the enemy and would be shot. So for three years, he had not allowed himself to look out of our magnificent stained-glass windows.

But he looked now. And he was, like me minutes before him, completely and utterly blown away by the beautiful lake below us. I saw tears start in his eyes as he remembered all we had done out there. The sight of the scene of so many happy memories convinced him.

He knew exactly what I meant.

"Yes."

\* \* \*

I cry when I remember what happened next. We slipped out into the corridor that led to the Great Entrance. We ran down the stone steps and into the fresh air. We laughed with glee and danced in the bed of Mother's prize turnips. We jumped down the steps that led down the hill to the lake. And then we charged into it, laughing and singing and crying with joy and pretending that there was no war, that everything was fine, that we were happy. We swam races - I won every time, as I always had before - we hunted for shells, and we kayaked in the same bumpy wooden tubs he had built for us so many years ago. And then we saw the wooden hut and we ran out of the water, dripping wet and exhilarated, and climbed up the sandy bank to -

And then the shots rang out.

And in the chaos that happened next all I remember is me bursting into tears and my brother desperately clinging on to me, even though he knew, and I knew, that it was too late.

\* \* \*

The days, weeks, and months that followed that fateful day were grim.

I was still never allowed out onto the lake. But one day - one wet, wild, cold day - I slipped out of the palace and ran down the great steps to the scene of so many happy moments and one overpoweringly sad one.

I hunted for shells.

I kayaked in the wooden boats.

I swam races with myself - I still won.

And I tried to forget my brother, tried to think of something cheerful, tried to pretend that there was no war, that I was happy, that everything was fine.

But I couldn't.

# Shady Dealings

*Maryknoll Convent School (Secondary Section), Joelle Chow, 13*

There was something... off about the man before me. It wasn't the worn looking, sun-bleached clothes, nor was it the way he towered over me, fingers tap-tapping on the counter. It wasn't his crooked nose or the leering mouth. No, it was his eyes, dark and menacing, flicking coldly around the store too often, narrowing when they came to rest on the final item between us- they were unsettling and I wished the exchange over.

"Thiz (This). Thiz iz (is) the last item of my collection," he hissed, nudging the thick silver bangle with the honey red jewel embedded into it across the counter using a long bony digit. I barely spared a glance towards the papers that verified everything in the box authentic, focusing on the jewellery instead. The bangle was a simple band, with runes swirling across the large carnelian adorning the bracelet. The carnelian itself, like the man, was strangely haunting.

"There iz a story behind thiz one, do you want to 'ear (hear) it?" the seller smirked, but there was now uncertainty hidden in his stare. Uncertainty? What was there to be uncertain about? I nodded in response, and he seemed to hesitate for a moment before his husky voiced swelled up, over and around the small space of  нэт эдлэл ба урлагийн эртний б тээл- Gems and Antiques. The words were sporadic, broken; but they soon formed an odd rhythmic melody- a song, almost.

*Cold, frozen in the land of three continents.  
A small quartet of weary travellers trekked  
unaware of dangers ahead. The sky  
filled with glowing embers and a storm iz coming.  
Loose blankets of sand drifted on the breeze, a warning.*

*Ahead, newlyweds in a ger, with new jewels adorning  
the Gundbekhs' arms, nomads 'appily (happily) living  
in the rocky, scarcely humid Gobi. A deathtrap,*

*where your death could be at the hands  
of fate. They truly were perilous lands.*

*Relieved the travellers were when they saw the ger,  
begged to stay, protection from the storm.  
Generous were the Gundbekhs,  
shelter, sustainment offered and requests were met.  
But they had no clue of the 'arbourd (harbourd) secret.*

*For the travellers weren't idle travellers, no  
good men were they.  
Bandits, thieves, robbers-they took with greed.  
They only saw flashes the golden trinkets made.  
No thankfulness for the tempest they'd escaped.*

*The dust devil died. Strong wind ceased to howl.  
The bandits had overstayed  
their welcome. Pausing for thought, a final band  
of silver and carnelian caught the leader's eye.  
Deciding, he gave a battle cry.*

*Following was a shameful brawl. The  
newlyweds were outmatched in skill  
and weapon. Although they fought with vigour,  
each twirling a sword,  
soon along with two others the couple was no more.*

*The final remaining pirates took what they can,  
one with a missing eye, another cut. 'arsh (Harsh) weather  
took the third man, and the fourth carried on.  
His neck was slit but he survived,  
To eventually tell the tale of the Gundbekh man and wife.*

The seller-turned-storyteller stopped here, but I still felt stunned and disoriented. All while he was speaking, I'd seen it all. The sand storm which then led to the robbers staying with the nomadic couple; the hungry glint in the pirates' eyes when they saw the jewellery (which was supposedly sitting on the counter in front of me!) and the bloodshed afterwards.

"And that, iz the tale of the Gundbekhs and this piece. I 'eard (heard) it from the man who gave me this..." he snarled, "but could we speed this up? I have places to go."

In a daze, I handed the prepared amount of money, watching detachedly as he counted it out and placed his box full of Gobi treasures down next to me, the bracelet with the eerie stone still on the counter. Even with the certificates of authenticity I knew better than to question where he got them. Shady dealings were ultimately his shady dealings, and part of my brain felt ashamed that my shop was selling potentially hot items, but alas business was business.

He- how had I managed to forget his name, I do not know- filled in the last of the

forms then took his leave. His queer orbs bore into mine one last time, then he swept out the door. Stray rays of afternoon sunlight filtered in through the swinging door, and for the briefest of moments the light bounced off the reflective silver bangle and on to a thick, rosy scar on the back of the seller's neck, puckered but white with age. It almost looked as if a heavy weapon, like a sword, had cut his neck shallowly.

*.....His neck was slit but he survived,*

*To eventually tell the tale of the Gundbekh man and wife.....*

# The Gobi Desert Quest

*Po Leung Kuk Choi Kai Yau School, Ada Kam, 12*

“Welcome everyone, to the ceremony of the Gobi Desert Quest. I am the judge of this competition and I am Happy Hong Hamilton. Mr. H will do.”

People in the hall clapped their hands. It was as noisy as a party for the whole world. People cheered.

“Thank you. Let me start by introducing you to the contest. This is a quest, to find a rare golden bar hidden in the sands. Only five teams are allowed to join. First come, first serve. Teams are chosen already. The winners of the game will be able to get ten billion Tugrik!”

“Wow, that was so exciting,” exclaimed one of the audience. There was a long cheer.

Mr. H continued, “The competition will start next month and will last until someone wins. For more information, please contact me, Mr. H at 1999 391300, the one and only handsome living creature in the Gobi Desert! Thank you!”

There was a moment of silence after the cheer. Then, without communication, everyone in the enormous hall rushed out to check out the teams. Through the speaker, Mr. H announced, “Ladies and gentlemen, pets and pests, the participating teams are Team CHINA, Team SOUTH AFRICA, Team AUSTRALIA, Team FRANCE and last but not the least, Team UNITED STATES!” There was shouting and applauding for each team. Not long after, people from different regions began insulting each other.

Team leader Xi from China walked into their preparation room. He wandered around and started thinking about who he should choose for his team. “Aha, I will choose the hard workers, the clever ones and the rich ones.” He called his teammates and not long after, everyone arrived. “Our goal is to win the race and beat Americans. We need to pack our survival kit for the desert. The only way to win is by technology. Let’s bring all the machines that are useful in the desert.” After hundreds of checks of the survival kit list and training, they were ready to go.

“Team South Africa, we are here to show the world that we can win. We don’t care about our impression on others as many teams are worse than us.” Leader Mandela said

spiritually. He chose the fast workers and runners. They believed in their own flesh and muscle, no technology should be included, and were ready to go.

The French team leader Hollande and his teammates were training harshly. All of them had sun tanned skin. Their dripping beads of sweat showed their hard effort. "Time's up. Remember, guys, we need to win. We will win because god is helping us. For Mona Lisa, for Jesus, we will compete until the end." Team France was ready to go.

"Come on. For heaven's sake, let's get started. What do we need to win? Ok, we've got finger polisher, creams, make-up kit." said their leader Hogan. "We better watch out for our enemies. We must win for the money. I am sure that souls of the creatures in the Great Barrier Reef will protect us and our belongings. Remember to work as a team, Australia, here we go!" Team Australia was ready to go.

United States' team leader Obama gazed at his team members, proudly. He drank his cup of hot chocolate and smiled. "Team, we are determined to win this game. All we need is money. We can buy things from other places so we can reduce our spending amount. We will beat the Chinese and others and grab hold of victory." He encouraged his team members. Team U.S.A. is ready to go.

After a month of preparations...

"A round of applause for the Quest to the Gobi Desert. I am the host Mr. H. Are all teams ready to compete?" There were a few "yes" and people started to scream for their teams. "Thank you for your support. Without delay, let the race begin!" The teams ran for their lives through the crowd and into the Gobi Desert.

Different teams headed to their destination. Some went to a land with giant rocks so they could build a settlement. Some instead went to find food first. Some chose to explore the environment first. Some tried to spy on others. Team China tried to avoid running into the Americans. The Americans meanwhile were still planning where to settle down and hunt for food. They built a small home with the plants near the saxual tree forest and started hunting in the woods. It was burning hot. The temperature was scorching, but they never gave up.

On the other hand, the Africans were about to dig for the treasure. They had built a simple home already. They worked quite fast compared to the others. The French couldn't be contacted because of weak signals. Maybe they were finding a way to their destiny. The Australians should be on their way, building a comfortable house to live in the middle of the desert. Everyone is very busy on their own work. This race was very exciting as every team already started their journey and put in a lot of effort. Aside from France, all teams were progressing quickly.

A week passed. No one was missing and every team had their own style of cooking method and houses. Every team was still healthy. Until one day, a giant sand storm approached with a camel attack. The wind whistled and whipped around the desert. The storm was wild and furious, sweeping up stormy sand all the way. The camels were running crazily like possessed idiots. They were out of control, attacking whatever they saw. First the Chinese, then South Africans and then one by one, every team was in danger. The Chinese used their machines to protect them. The South Africans quickly dug giant holes to live in with the desert creatures. The Americans threw their money towards the wind hoping to stop it and the Australians and French prayed to god and hoped for help and rescue. Their homes were poorly damaged. Their food was scattered. Their possessions were either blown away or destroyed. Every team seemed to face a challenging problem. However, none of them tried to give up!

Luckily, the sand storm lasted only half a day.

Right after the sandstorm, a helicopter flew across the sky with a bright red banner with the words "BREAKING NEWS. THE RARE GOLDEN BAR IS LOCATED IN THE MIDDLE OF THE DESERT. GOOD LUCK! Mr. H." All the teams saw the large words and rushed towards the center of the desert. They began using their own way to dig for the treasure.

"Hey! I've found something!" Everyone shouted together. They all dug and reached the huge treasure box. Every team tried to pull the box up. Unfortunately, it was too heavy. No one managed to bring it up. "Maybe, we can work together," a member of the Chinese team said uneasily. The others only nodded and agreed with his point. Each team chose a corner and lifted the treasure box up. They placed it on the sand and then like crazy wild monkeys, grabbed the gold and checked out which was the rare one. Nothing was left in the box. But no one got the rare gold. Where could it be?

The helicopter flew by with another hint again. This time, "SHARE" was written. The teams gathered together but far enough from each other as if they were monsters.

"Well..... I think we should give one gold..... to another team..... and yeah ... wait for hints....." An African said scarily. Other teams stared at him for a moment, and then exchanged the cheapest gold to each other. They tried to avoid eye contact with the others.

Suddenly, there was a round of applause. "It's a coincidence that all the teams got the grand final prize. I want everyone in the world to know that, the rare gold is not money. It is how people from a region care about different people from another region. Racism should not exist. All contestants found rare gold there: a piece of gold that is found by another person. Thank you all for joining the competition. Once again, I am Mr. H the host of the famous Quest to the Gobi Desert. See you next year!"

The participating teams shed their tears and shook each other's hands with a hug.

# Hey that's Mine

*Singapore International School, Cheung Hoi Yu, 12*

“Where is everybody?” cried Bob.

Dylan wiped beads of perspiration from his forehead and stared at Bob, waiting for a suggestion. They were lost and were separated from their group of paleontologists, and now they were wandering around in the middle of this desolate corner of the vast Gobi Desert.

Suddenly, a flash of red zoomed across their eyes. Dylan reeled back instinctively, gasping, utterly terrified, and hid behind Bob who stood rooted to the ground, eyes bulging. They were both extremely petrified by the sight. A small and hideous looking animal, about the size of a kitten, swayed its bullet shaped head and sniffed the air. It was standing on its hind legs, revealing a blood red underbelly. It stopped, and took a few steps towards them. Dylan held his breath. It brought its head down slowly and narrowed its eyes, staring at them with its big golden pupils. Its tail swayed from left to right, and then it dropped its body down to the ground, revealing a crusty yellow back, perfectly blending into the gritty ground. Then, like a crocodile, it scuttled away rapidly, dissolving into the sandy ground. Shaking like a leaf, Dylan fell down to his knees, breathing heavily.

“Oh my gosh, DYLAN!! COME!!” Bob shouted across, staring at the prints that the animal had left behind. Dylan immediately went over, peered down and examined the marks closely, exclaiming that it was the footprint of a chicken. Bob nodded excitedly in agreement.

“THINK... SOME DINOSAUR FOOTPRINTS LOOK LIKE CHICKEN FOOTPRINTS... because birds ARE evolved from dinosaurs! Maybe we have discovered a living dinosaur!” Bob cried, thrilled and exhilarated, shaking Dylan vigorously. They hugged each other merrily, thrilled with their discovery.

After they calmed down, they took measurements and pictures, gathering as much data and proof as they could. They now had to find their group. “I’m starving!” Bob exclaimed. He rummaged in his bag, and took out a tube of Smarties, and started popping them into his mouth, gobbling them up in no time.

“I can’t believe it! This must be the twentieth tube of Smarties you’ve had. Don’t you have anything else?” Dylan said in disgust, shuddering.

“Nope! I still have twenty more tubes in my backpack!” Bob said, while putting another handful into his mouth, devouring them. Dylan rolled his eyes. Then suddenly, Bob’s foot hit on a rock, and he fell forward, tripping, spilling all his precious Smarties.

“My Smarties!!!” Bob shrieked loudly, on the verge of sobbing.

“Seriously, is that all you care about?” Dylan asked, shaking his head in dismay, as he helped Bob to his feet.

“Bob! Dylan! Is that you?” familiar voices rang out of the blue. Excited, they turned around and saw figures waving at them furiously.

“Pete! Alex!!!” Dylan shouted back to their teammates. Relieved and overcome with joy, both of them surged towards the figures, hugging them tightly.

“Hey, guys, you will not believe what we saw!!!” Bob told Pete and Alex,

enthusiastically. He started talking about how they met the dinosaur-like animal and showed them the photos and measurements, they took, of the footprints.

"But we booked the plane back to London for tomorrow... such a pity." Pete said sadly. There was a moment of silence.

"Why is there a bruise on your arm Bob?" Alex asked worriedly.

"I spilled some Smarties and fell on the ground!" Bob replied.

"Well you should go back and clean it up. We have to preserve this place you know. If everyone litters here, the Gobi desert will be like a rubbish tip in no time," Pete commented.

Bob sighed deeply. He went back grudgingly, dragging his feet. When he got to the spot, he found nothing! He scratched his head, wondering, looking further and around, but there was nothing to be seen besides rocks and sand. Bob shrugged his shoulders. He could not be bothered to look for the Smarties, and walked back.

"All the Smarties are gone! I couldn't find anything! It's so weird!" Bob told everyone.

Pete shook his head in disgust. "Excuses again..." he muttered.

The next day, they arrived at the airport to catch their flight. As they put their bags through the X-ray machine, a loud beeping noise started to ring. The officers came over to Bob. "Sir, we have spotted an unidentified object in your bag. Can you please open it to let us check?" asked an officer.

"I always get this. They're only Smarties!" Bob protested.

"I don't think so. Please open your bag," the officer ordered.

Bob hesitated, and then opened his bag. To everyone's surprise, a strange looking animal was inside the bag busily munching on Smarties! Everyone around stood rooted to the ground, staring at it speechless. "Hey! Those are my Smarties!!!" Bob complained, almost reaching out his hand to snatch them back.

The animal stopped munching and lifted its head up. Dylan leaned over immediately and zipped up the backpack, leaving a part of it open.

"What was that?" the officer screamed in disgust, backing away.

"Dylan, that's the dinosaur thing we saw yesterday!!!" Bob whispered.

Dylan nodded in shock. Then they explained, to the officer, what had happened in the desert. After hearing the explanation, the officer called his boss.

"Very sorry, but I'm afraid that we cannot allow you to bring this animal or whatever it is, on board," the boss informed the group, and left.

Bob thought for a while and then turned to his teammates. "I guess we should stay in the airport then... we can examine it closely over the next few days and if we have solid proof that this animal is indeed a dinosaur, we can call for a press conference!" he suggested.

"Great idea!" Alex commented. The others nodded.

So for the next few days, everybody was busy examining all aspects of the animal - skin, teeth, eyes, etc. Bob was in charge of taking care of it. He fed it different bits of food, but to everybody's surprise, it loved Smarties! Especially the red coloured ones! Hence, its appearance in the Smarties container. It must have eaten the Smarties Bob spilled, then followed them, and somehow crept into Bob's bag for more! Then through the DNA testing, they found out that this animal was indeed very ancient. In fact, the DNA was so old, that it dated back to the Triassic period. The other characteristics about the animal also matched dinosaurs. So it was a Triassic herbivore, because it had a lot of smooth molars and lack of sharp teeth plus the fact that when Bob tried feeding it some

beef jerky, it refused to eat it.

They also discovered that the reason this dinosaur had never been found, was because it was an expert at camouflaging itself. An even more interesting thing they discovered, was that this dinosaur was a pregnant female! That meant that there could be more of this species in the Gobi desert! On the fifth day, after gathering sufficient information about the creature, they called a press conference. By the afternoon, almost every single reporter, journalist and cameraman had arrived. The men announced their world-shattering discovery to all those present.

“We have decided to name this dinosaur, Plateosaurus Smarties, because Plateosaurus means flat lizards and Smarties because it likes to eat Smarties; especially the red ones, like me!” Bob announced to the laughter of the journalists. As he uncovered the cage, revealing the dinosaur, camera lights flashed from every direction as everyone tried to capture that perfect shot of the rare and fascinating discovery.

# New Tales of the Gobi Desert

*St. Margaret's Co-Educational English Secondary and Primary School,  
Gillian Sero Del Mundo, 13*

It was the year 2025, and I remembered being stuck in a terribly boring Geography lesson. There was nothing interesting to look forward to. I kept staring at the clock, waiting for the bell to ring.

“Okay, class!” the teacher said. “For your holiday homework, I would like you all to work on a project relating to the deserts of the world! You can only choose one and I will put you in groups of three.”

She called out some names, and later on, she called out my name along with my two other classmates.

“Johnny, Matthew and Elisa, please move to the table over there.” The teacher said. The three of us gathered together, and started discussing.

“Okay, so any ideas?” Matthew asked.

“Gobi Desert.” Elisa said. “I want to focus on the Gobi Desert.”

She put her encyclopedia on the table and showed us a photo of the desert. The text at the bottom said: ‘The Gobi Desert is actually cold, with frost and occasionally snows on its dunes. It is known as the world’s fifth largest desert, and Asia’s largest. It covers part of northern and northwestern China, and the south of Mongolia.’

Since Matthew and I didn’t come up with any ideas, we just agreed to go along with it.

“Now, I have a plan on how we could ace this project,” Matthew said, taking out his notebook. He opened it to a page with sketches and mind maps. “I propose a plan where we go back in time.” He pointed to one of his sketches, which seems to be a time machine. Elisa and I exchanged looks.

“Does it work?” we both asked, and he nodded with a smile on his face.

“I tested it multiple times. And here’s the good thing. Once we travel back in time, the time in the present will stop!”

“Why don’t we just keep it safe, and research on the computer?” I groaned.

“Oh come on! Why don’t we have some adventure? Please?” Matthew said desperately. I looked at Elisa who looked pretty convinced.

“Fine.” I said nonchalantly. Matthew clapped in delight.

“Okay then! Let’s go to my house after school!”

After four more tedious lessons we were on our way to Matthew’s house. He lives pretty near the school, so it didn’t take that long.

“Wait for me in the garage.” he said, running up to the front door.

We went to the garage where we found a gigantic portal-like machine. A few minutes later, Matthew came in and gave each of us a hiking bag. Then he opened up the laptop connected to the machine.

“Elisa, may I take a look at the encyclopedia?” he said, and she handed it over.

He flipped to a page, and typed in codes and other data to the laptop. The machine flickered and then lit up luminously. Matthew smiled and gestured us to jump in. Elisa and I looked at each other nervously, but then Matthew pushed us all into the machine. And at a blink of an eye, we found ourselves in the desert.

“This is the Gobi Desert!” Elisa said, her eyes widening.

“It’s freezing!” I said.

“Open your bags, there are coats packed in there.” Matthew said. “I also packed in some food, water, a camping bag, a compass and a walkie-talkie.”

“How will we get back?” I asked.

Matthew took out a device, which looked like a miniature bazooka gun.

“This is a time gun,” he said. “It could only function at the same time we jumped into the time machine.” He looked at his watch. “So we could only use it at 4:30pm.”

Elisa took out her compass and encyclopedia. “We’re in the southwestern part of the desert.” She said, while flipping her encyclopedia. “This means that we’re in the Alashan Plateau semi-desert.”

She showed us the page, where it said: “The Alashan Plateau semi-desert is the southwestern part of the Gobi desert, which is also known as the Little Gobi. It fills in the north loop of the Yellow River on the east, the Ejin River on the west, and the Qilian Mountains and narrow rocky chain of Longshou on the southwest.”

“Okay, so here’s our plan.” Matthew said. “Our aim is to go back at 4:30pm tomorrow, so we have to complete our research quickly. Johnny, you’re in charge of the photos. Elisa, I want you to lead the way. I will take notes on our observations.”

Matthew took out his camera from his hiking bag and handed it to me.

“Now let’s get going!” he shouted.

Elisa led the way, concentrating on the map in her encyclopedia, and her compass.

“Where are we going?” I asked.

“We could find some plant specimen if we keep moving straight.” She said. “We could put them in our project.”

We soon arrived at a vegetation field and started working. We took pictures and notes of plants like astragalus, a type of herb belonging to the Legume family and acacia, also known as the whistling thorn, from the Fabaceae family. After an hour, the sun started to set, and flurries of snow started to fall.

“It’s getting late,” I said. “We should camp out for the night.”

Matthew and Elisa prepared the camping bags, and our snacks, while I went out to find more food. I kept on searching, until I found some gigantic eggs. I took one of them and headed back to our camping site.

“Hey guys,” I said, showing them the egg. “Don’t you find this egg unusually big?”

Matthew looked stunned, and started taking notes, but Elisa’s face looked anxious. She flipped through her encyclopedia and then her face turned pale.

“Johnny,” she said. “Those are dinosaur eggs.”

She showed me the page, where it showed photos exactly the same as the one I took. It said: ‘The first dinosaur eggs were discovered at the Gobi Desert in 1923 by Roy Chapman Andrews.’

“You better put it back.” Elisa said. Then we heard a loud roar. We ran away together with our hiking bags, and left the egg.

The next day, we travelled through heavy rain to see the fauna. As soon as the rain stopped, we realized we already arrived. We all were amazed by how many animals were roaming in the desert.

“The animals of the desert include: antelopes, wolves, foxes, hares, hedgehogs, lizards, and birds, such as sparrows and cranes.” Elisa read out loud. “Quick, Johnny, take photos!”

I took out the camera and captured photos of all the animals I could see.

Soon after, we heard a loud thud. The ground started shaking, and the animals scurried away in fear. I noticed the ground being pierced through, from underground. Then a humungous, disgusting creature popped up. It was one of the most horrifying things I have ever seen, with no eyes, nostrils, or even a mouth, and its skin as red as blood. I stammered, while taking a picture of it.

“What is that thing?”

“Impossible,” she said, dumbfounded. “I thought this was a legend! The Mongolian death worm is known to be extremely poisonous. If you’re in physical contact with any part of its body, it results to instant death.”

“Does it have any information in your encyclopedia?” I asked, and she shook her head.

“Matthew,” I said. “What time is it?”

“4:25pm,” he said, looking at his watch. “Why?”

“The time gun!” I said quickly.

Then he remembered, and took it out of his hiking bag, as we started to run away.

“Hurry, Matthew, it’s heading this way!” I said.

“1 more minute!” he replied, looking at his watch.

I looked behind us, and saw the worm not too far away.

We ran as fast as we could for quite a while, until the time gun started glowing.

“It’s working!” he said, but the machine started malfunctioning.

“Oh no,” he said. “It got damaged from the rain!”

“What?” Elisa and I yelled in outrage.

“Calm down! It can still work, but you guys have to jump in the portal as fast as you can. With its damage, it would only function for a second. Are you ready?”

We looked at each other, and nodded nervously.

“1...2...3!” the gun shot out the portal, and at the same time, the three of us jumped in.

We landed hard onto the floor of Matthew’s garage.

“We made it!” the three of us cheered.

“That was really close,” I sighed in relief. “We almost got eaten up by a giant worm!”

“But didn’t you guys had fun?” Matthew asked.

“I have to admit,” Elisa said. “It’s one of the best projects I have ever done in my life.”

Matthew, Elisa and I became close friends, and planned more places we could visit together after we repair Matthew’s machine. We also got an ‘A-’ in our project, since the teacher said the death worm ‘doesn’t exist’. That’s okay, though. It’s the fun and adventure that matters the most.

# The Journey of Acceptance

*The ISF Academy, Secondary Division, Sasha Chua, 13*

The sun's rays plunged through the sky, bathing the God of the Gobi Desert in daylight. The mighty God sat on the seventeenth floor of the sky, his legs crossed and brows furrowed in concentration. His arms moved in a circular motion as water from the seas evaporated when it sensed his touch. The water vapor rose upwards, tracing swirls in the sky. It curled and uncurled itself like a flower going through the seasons. Then, brown fur started to seep through his thin, nimble fingers and his creation slowly took form.

There stood the most hideous creature on earth. His face was like a human's but he had chestnut brown hair sticking out of his skin. He had enormous stormy grey eyes and his head was covered in a huge blob of fizzy brown fur. His slightly arched back had two humps. His peculiar looking feet that were shaped like hooves.

"AGGHHH!" the God bellowed in frustration, "You are the most repulsive creature I have ever created! Even worse than my other mistakes! Half human, half camel! Hamel! Be gone! I cannot bear to look at you!"

With a commanding wave of the God's hand, Hamel tumbled down the clouds... faster and faster... Everything was a blur. He felt pain of rejection, abandonment and humiliation at the God's words. Immense pressure crushed him and he began to feel delirious.

When Hamel finally slammed on the ground, he slowly opened one eye, then the other. He first felt woozy and groggy as all the colors and objects appeared as a kaleidoscope. He felt as if his spine was twisted in half and his forehead was throbbing in uncontrollable pain. He felt he was sitting on an endless brown carpet that had some withered grass bond to it. Above him were clear skies as far as the eye could see, and he was trapped in a landscape of suffocating air and blistering heat. He had landed in the middle of the Gobi Desert.

Looming above him was a boy with hollow cheekbones and beady eyes. He was bent over, observing Hamel's features with a mixture of terror and fascination. Next to him was an even younger girl with almond-shaped eyes and a heart shaped face.

As soon as the boy realized Hamel was awake, he yelled.

"Help! It is a monster!"

Hamel felt the rejection in the word 'monster' and was buried again in the hatred of the God. He felt like the most worthless living being in the universe. His eyes filled with tears and he felt nauseous.

The boy bolted around his family's ger, a Mongolian nomads tent. Then, he reappeared with a bow and arrows. Hamel shrieked in alarm and clumsily tried to get up, but than instantly registered that his ankles were badly twisted so he helplessly attempted to drag himself across the sand that felt like a bed of needles but with no avail.

"Yeke no!" The girl squealed, stepping forward to block the small boy's path. Hamel's features first frightened her but felt the need to protect it from her brother's impulsive, cowardly nature. She felt empathy towards Hamel, knowing what its like to be the target and the eccentric one.

Yeke ignored her and shot an arrow above her head, landing a few centimeters from

Hamel's head. Yeke cursed in annoyance. Hamel cowered and he quivered unceasingly. His heart raced; this was it. He had only lived for such a short period of time and it was about to end. Well perhaps death would relieve his misery. His fate was in the hands of these children.

The girl gasped and her eyes flared up with rage. She stalked towards Yeke and snatched the bow and arrow from his grasp.

"Hey, give that back Oyunbileg!"

"Stop tormenting this poor creature! Look at the state he is in! Do you really think he can hurt us?" The girl, called Oyunbileg, retorted.

"Um..." The boy's brows knitted together in contemplation. Then, he flushed and he lowered his gaze. "I guess not, but if it is a demon..."

Oyunbileg threw a stern stare at Yeke and let out a loud sigh. "Stop being so impulsive! I'm going to get Mom and Dad."

She trudged into the ger, her ponytail swinging.

Oyunbileg came back with her parents momentarily. The man's face turned deathly pale when he caught sight of Hamel and the women gawked in disbelief.

Hamel bit his lip and hanged his head low. Was he going to be stared at for the rest of his life? Always the rejected misfit? The freak?

After they got over their initial shock, they covered their mouths with their hands, murmuring. Then the man seemed to have made his decision and nodded at whatever the women was saying.

"Bring the visitor in."

Hamel felt a wave of relief but also felt as if foreboding things were inevitable.

After Yeke and Oyunbileg helped Hamel into the ger, the family offered Hamel a cup of camel milk, cheese and oats, the diet of nomads in the Gobi Desert. They gently cleansed and applied an ointment on Hamel's wounds.

Hamel wrapped his hooves like hands around the cup then bent over it, savoring the warm and mildly salty taste of camel milk; it left a lingering sharp taste on Hamel's tongue.

There was a worn out stove in the middle of the ger, with coal stacked upon it. The flames glowed and looked like little fingers, bending, twirling and waving. Hamel was mesmerized at the sight before him, scooted closer towards it, and placed his hooves like hands near the fire. He felt a warm feeling within, at first it was only a flicker but it swelled more and more. For a moment all the feelings of sorrow slowly disappeared.

However, Yeke eyed him warily so he grunted, limped away from the fire, and eventually dozed off into a restless sleep.

"Perhaps I was right about him," Oyunbileg thought to herself, "He just seems like a poor, misunderstood creature that is intimidated by this inhumane world. He is spellbound by the fire just like me, maybe I'm not that odd after all."

As the sun rose above the horizon, Hamel's eyes snapped open when he heard footsteps. He glanced to his right as he saw Oyunbileg leaving the ger with a metal bowl. She turned as if sensing Hamel was awake. She made a beckoning gesture and left.

Oyunbileg was outside milking a camel. Even from afar, Hamel could sense the confidence of the magnificent creature. When Oyunbileg saw Hamel, her eyes glistened like the flames Hamel saw last night.

"Did you sleep well?" She enquired tenderly. "I'm truly sorry for our behavior yesterday. I hope we can be good friends."

Hamel looked at her, incredulous. There was something so genuine about her smile that Hamel decided to believe her.

Warily, Hamel nodded.

Oyunbileg grinned and followed Hamel's gaze as it shifted toward the camel she was milking.

"Do you like her? She's my favorite Camel."

Hamel cocked his head to the side.

"Mm-hm."

Oyubileg chuckled. From that moment on, a special, unbreakable friendship began to bud and bloom.

The next few days flew by, as the family continued with their ordinary lives but not quite... Hamel helped out with the cleaning, and taking care of the animals.

At first he was always fumbling with small, delicate things because of his awkward hands but Oyunbileg and her parents comforted and encouraged him and his confidence grew.

Yeke was apprehensive about Hamel but as he watched the rest of the family accept him, he realized that Hamel was not a threat, so he started to include Hamel in his daily activities as well.

Hamel began to see a beam of light through the dark tunnel and he could sense a future of peace and hope. He finally found a place that he belonged. Perhaps in the future, he might finally forget all the feelings of abandonment that still continued to haunt him. He was prepared to face whatever was waiting for him at the end of the tunnel.



# Fiction

Group 4

# Where the Stars Move Once More

*Canadian International School of Hong Kong, Nina Mueller, 16*

It is interesting how easily Heaven and Earth intertwine in a world where time stands still. The sun, plaything of the gods, is tossed every morning above the taut horizon to sketch its path across the pale sky, before being pulled beyond the realm of the living when the day is over. The desert is a parchment to this never-ending game. As the deities toss the sun up and down from beyond the edge of this Earth, the sand reflects its yellow and white flames, which paint ever longer lines across the vast sheet until, as night invades the landscape, the entire paper is dyed a rich black, dotted here and there with bright imperfections. There is nothing else to indicate aging, nothing but this continual flow of sunrise to sunset to prove that time even exists. The only face I have seen in days is the one carved into my memory.

As I stare out across the glittering sand, I bear witness to the next stage of the game. As the sun dips out of sight, and the desert is cast in shadow, a heavenly hand throws up the moon in its place. As the cold blue rays wash across the plain, draping a glistening veil across the region, it seems the gods cannot stand to see a world without light. Grains of sand mimic the constellations above. The white grains glittering on the surface of the dark dunes are so like the stars in the Heavens that it is no longer easy to distinguish between the two. When I hold my torch closer to the star chart in my left hand, I have to think for a moment about whether to look up or down to find the constellation I seek.

It takes me a moment to locate the seven constellations that make up the Black Tortoise; I double-check the chart before remounting my horse and proceeding towards the Ox. I tuck the scroll into the pocket of my deel and remember how lucky I was that the guards were drunk the night I stole it; otherwise, they would have seen me sneak into the monastery, and I would be back where I started.

Lost in these thoughts, I almost miss the series of yellow flames that surface as I reach the crest of a sand dune. The torches littered across the area illuminate a series of tents, the stretched, distorted shadows of which cast unnatural patches of darkness across the otherwise moonlit sand. There are people around a large fire in the center of the encampment. *People*. I urge my horse down the slope and dismount when I reach the fringe of the camp. A sentry wearing a deerskin vest over a tattered deel approaches me,

his hand on the hilt of his scimitar. The metal blade reflects the moonlight so completely it looks as though the weapon were crafted directly from a bright sliver of the Heavens.

"Please," I say, realizing for the first time how parched my voice is. I haven't spoken in days. "May I have lodgings for the night? I have come a long way."

The sentry raises his eyebrows. "Alone?" he asks, suspicious.

"Yes," I answer. He gives me a strange look suddenly, like he wants to ask me something else, but he tips his chin towards the center of the camp instead.

"You must ask our leader. He is wary of visitors, especially after the recent attacks from the North." He leads me towards the center of the camp. The firelight that erupts as we emerge from behind a tent is blinding, and it takes a minute before I realize the sentry has brought a tall man to meet me. His eyes scrutinize my old deel and emaciated horse before meeting my gaze.

"We don't lodge convicts," he says curtly.

"I am not a convict," I respond. "All I need are some supplies and a place to spend the night, then I'll be out of your way."

The chief laughs. "You are an optimistic young woman if you think I will just give you supplies. Meat and water are hard to come by in this desert. You don't look like you have much to trade, so I'm afraid you'll be disappointed with what I have to offer."

I glance around desperately, and notice the sentry's eyes fixed intently on me. There is a long silence, punctuated by the rhythmic drone of voices from the direction of the fire. The chief turns.

"Wait!" I shout, suddenly panicked. I pull the star chart from my pocket, holding it out to the chief. "This is valuable." I watch silently as he unrolls it and squints at the markings in the dim light.

He looks up at me. "Where did you get this?"

"I took it," I say quietly, "from a monastery near Ningxia. I was using it to find my way across the desert."

"Where are you heading?"

The question unnerves me. A child's face flashes across my vision, but I force it away. "If you please, I would like some supplies now."

The chief grins unpleasantly. "Of course. Bataar here will give them to you. You can share a tent with his daughters tonight."

As we approach the edge of the camp and start towards a small tent, Bataar leans in and whispers, "Where *are* you heading, Odval?"

I stop so suddenly I almost topple forward into the sand. Moonlight suddenly sparse, I rip the torch from the sentry's hands and hold it close to his face, gaping at his features, searching for some familiarity in the creased skin.

"I never said my name," I say. Bataar is silent. "I never told anyone my name," I insist.

"Do you really not recognize me?"

I scour my memory, searching for his face among the blurred crowds of Ningxia, among the now ghostly figures of the drunken city guard and the few monks in their long robes who slept peacefully while I stepped across their still forms to snatch the chart. But none of them knew me, at least not by name, and certainly not by *that* name. In Ningxia they called me Kushi. I haven't been to Odval for sixteen years.

"You're from my tribe," I whisper.

"Don't you remember your own uncle?"

His words slice into me more deeply than if he'd drawn his moonlit scimitar and used

it to slash open my skin. My uncle is here. The desert seems suddenly to have shrunk, as though the gods pulled back infinite handfuls of sand and scattered the specks of earthly light across the Heavens before closing the gap. The moon reemerges as Bataar embraces me, and I remember him. Inside the supply tent, I tell him everything that happened since the army took me. I tell him how I was forced to skin animals and cook with the other children, and how we were made to help restring bows after each battle. I tell him how I was traded for some jade after they took Ningxia, how I lived as a slave for years before deciding to run. I tell him how I escaped when the men were intoxicated, how I broke into the monastery and stole a horse from the edge of the city.

"You still haven't answered my earlier question," Bataar says when I finish, "about where you are going."

I smile. "I want to find my parents."

My uncle wrinkles his forehead. The torchlight accentuates the shadow of each crease, and I notice for the first time how old he now looks.

"Odval, nothing will change if you do," he says quietly. "What happened can't be reversed."

"I know that."

"Then why do you insist on returning to them? They didn't fight when the army took you. They just stood there and let it happen! They virtually abandoned you!"

"It's because they didn't know," I say softly, staring at my uncle's feet.

"What didn't they know?" he asks me.

"It didn't happen the way they say it did. I tried to stop him, but he wouldn't listen to me!" Guilt starts to rise in my stomach. Bataar lays a hand on my shoulder.

"I know, Odval," he says. "Believe me, I know. But I *also* know it was wrong of them to blame you because they favored Chuluun."

The tent is silent. "I couldn't stop him," I say eventually, hot tears dripping down my cheeks. "But they have to know that I tried to. I *need* them to know."

"I understand," Bataar says, his own eyes suddenly glistening. "I'm sorry I couldn't stop the army from taking you," he whispers, and I remember how much he cared about me. The prospect of leaving so soon after our reunion suddenly disheartens me, but at the same time, I know Chuluun's face will never leave me unless I do.

"How will you find your parents?" Bataar asks after composing himself.

"I plan to ride north until I reach the Altay Mountains. The tribe will have moved since I last saw them, but I can search for them once I'm there."

"That's an awfully large area to be searching blind."

"It needs to be done," I say stubbornly.

Bataar nods dolefully. "When will you leave?"

"Tomorrow morning."

"Take this with you," he says, drawing his scimitar. He passes it to me, and I wrap my fingers slowly around the hilt. Balancing the sword carefully against my palm, I watch the firelight dance across the blade like the ball of the desert sun.

The image of that fire fills my mind as I set out the next day, the real desert sun rising to my right. Bataar told me I should reach the mountains in two days. I reach down and lay my hand on the hilt of his sword, drawing some comfort from its coolness. My neck starts to burn and I look up at the sky; the angle of the sun has shifted since I left camp. So the gods are playing their game again.

Gradually, the sand dunes begin to flatten. The grains solidify into a harsher ground, and I begin to hear the thud of my horse's hooves against the earth. The light rhythm punctuates the whistle of wind across the plain. A herd of wild horses emerges just ahead, and I watch them dig into the ground with their hooves and teeth, trying desperately to break through the thin permafrost to get at the moss beneath. The earth is the color of mould. Phantom shapes loom up in the distance, breaking the unity of Earth and sky, and soon I am among them, ascending their rocky slopes and venturing into their spectral heart.

I am alone here. There is no life, nothing but grey rock and permafrost around me. It is strange to think I once called this area home. I ride on until the jagged slopes to my left and right begin to level. Around the next bend, the breeze that was channeled through the valley becomes suddenly still. The only remaining movement is the slow trot of my horse's legs, the sharp clicking of hooves against slate the only sound. My heartbeat begins to resonate throughout my body, and as we move deeper into the mountains, I have the strangest sensation that the rhythmic footfalls are actually the heavy treading of my own heart bounding across the slopes, free of my weighted and infinitesimal soul. As I ride on, images flickering across my mind, I feel the weight of the rocks and know I can never truly be free. The ghosts of cooking fires materialize before me, and the tents from my memory have suddenly erected themselves on all sides. I dismount and make my way between them, stretching my hand out to caress the lofty material with my fingertips.

I hear laughter. The light, shrill voices of children echo from all around me. I hear their parents scolding them, telling them to sit still so they can be dressed. I round one of the tents, but find no one. I peer inside the nearest tent, but it is empty. The next tent, the one that used to belong to my family, is empty as well. A cloth doll sits on a rug near the edge of the tent, awaiting the return of its owner.

"Odval!" someone calls, and I can't help but grin at the small voice.

"Chuluun!" I shout, glancing between the bright tents.

"Odval! Have you seen my doll, Odval?"

"It's right here, brother," I call. "Where are you?"

"I'm here! Can't you see me?"

I make my way around the tent. It takes me an awfully long time to reach the other side; the lofty white fabric is suddenly billowing more than before. I stop when I reach the opposite end. The tents have vanished; white sunlight pours, unobstructed, across the top of the slope and streams down to meet me.

"Odval!" my brother calls again. His little voice resonates in the still air. "Come with me! I want to go exploring."

"You can't," I say. "It's dangerous Chuluun, please listen to me!"

"I don't have to listen to you," my brother's voice yells back, and then I see his little body for the first time, rushing away from me towards the cliffs on my right.

"Come with me or stay here alone!" he shouts.

I scramble up the slope after him, pieces of slate clattering against each other as I move. By the time I reach the cliff base, Chuluun has already started climbing. He stands precariously on a ledge high in the rock face.

"Chuluun! Please come down, you'll hurt yourself!" I yell desperately, gripping a protrusion. I begin to pull myself up, and I climb higher and higher, until I am just below him. He turns to face me, grinning with childish innocence.

"Isn't this fun?" he asks cheerfully.

"This is not *fun*. I order you to come down!" I snap.

Chuluun frowns. "Since when did you become so awful?" He waves one arm wildly about, teetering for a moment on his ledge, and I shriek, reaching upward to grip his leg.

"Stop it!" I beg. Chuluun kicks my hand away.

"What's the matter? You're not afraid are you?" he taunts. Chuluun takes his other hand off the rock face and balances there, glaring down at me. "See! There's nothing to worry about!"

"Chuluun, please!" I yell, panic rising in my stomach.

"No!" he yells, turning quickly to face me. He lurches forward. Chuluun's eyes widen and I scream, reaching for his leg, reaching up to the sky, bits of dislodged shale hitting my face as I try desperately to stop what I could see coming, what I saw coming ever since Chuluun first called out to me from the cliff. I slam my cheek against the rock, and tears cascade down my face, falling to the earth like my baby brother. More and more of my weight presses against the cliff until it feels horizontal, and I open my eyes to find myself lying on the slope.

There are no tents, no cooking fires. No laughing children. The cliff is far away to my right. The gods have started to pull the sun down behind the ridge, and the air is tinged a deep blue. My horse is nowhere to be seen. I am alone.

And yet his face was so real. My brother's face, the face from my memory, the face that drifted through my mind for sixteen years. I push back my matted hair and tilt my head up towards the Heavens. The sky is a rich blue, much as it was every night in the desert right before the gods drew a black veil across the ether and flecked it with stars. Only here, black shapes pierce the night on all sides, and I am trapped in this netherworld, between my memories and my guilt.

When the army attacked our tribe several weeks after Chuluun's death, when they dragged me down the slope, my parents stood silently and watched. They never knew I tried to stop him. They had screamed at me, shouted that I was his big sister and that I had failed him. In a way I did fail, for though I tried to stop him from climbing, I couldn't.

I hear voices, and I look behind me and see lights moving around the bend. I can just make out people on horseback moving towards me in the growing darkness, drawing loaded carts behind them. I sit up, staring at the approaching procession, scrutinizing them. The tribe coming up the slope towards me – my tribe – is real, and I can hear their voices.

It is interesting how easily Heaven and Earth intertwine in a world where time stands still. Out in the desert I was suspended between Ningxia and the mountains, between two of my pasts. But here, with the rock faces towering above me, shattering the eternity of the sky, time is forced to flow once more. If only it could flow backwards, if only the gods could toss the sun from west to east and erase the last sixteen years. If only they could wipe my brother's death from the stars.

As the blurred flames of my tribe move ever closer, it seems a thousand scimitars are waving in a distant torchlight. The burning orbs reach towards the sky like they would rather be floating stars, and I know deep in my heart that they are not reaching for me, but for my brother, grinning at us from the Heavens. Waiting for the torches to find me, I lean against the shattered slope and whisper the words I hope will be carried over the mountains, across the desert and into the sky.

*"I tried."*

# The Ice Palace of the Desert

*French International School (Secondary), Jean-Baptiste Rioual, 15*

“**A**nd remember: eyes alight, chins forward, and smiles gleaming. I cannot stress this enough; this is the most important gala of your entire, meaningless, frivolous lives. You can and will be taken care of if you do mediocrely, and you, well, might upgrade social castes if you do extraordinarily.” Savannah knew the last few words her superintendent asserted semi-joyfully were mere lies that, after fifteen years of being pronounced, had never come to existence. No one had, and no one would ever, leave the Peasantry; one’s caste was inherited, and forever inalterable. But, like every other apprentice in the assembly, she knew that any one of them who behaved inadequately would indeed be executed, or “taken care of”, a euphemism the Oligarchy commonly used for the rather harsh punishment.

Bianca, the lavishly dressed superintendent, paced the hoverjet’s plush carpet, silently rummaging in her mind for information she hadn’t yet told the new recruits. Defeated, she sat back down on her leather seat and started scribbling her thoughts on her electronic clipboard, before announcing, a few minutes later, that “We are about to descend. Get ready to be dazzled! You have been blessed with the privilege of being the first to see this marvel of modern architecture. Of course, as one of the major event planners, I got to see it before anyone did. However, do remember that you have been chosen from the best, and that your presence means dearly to our great hosts, Sir David Lancy and his wife, Valencia. This is the opportunity of a lifetime for you, and...” The recruits watched amusedly as their boss rambled on and on, not realizing that her voice had long since been covered by the roaring engines.

The scorching heat made Savannah feel nauseous. Whoever had come up with the idea of hosting a ball in the middle of the desert was a complete idiot. Geography at school had taught her that desert weather was fickle. Guests would, two hours later, regret arriving in skimpy beachwear and wish they had brought their stately chinchilla coats instead. The eccentric spoilt Oligarch organizer obviously hadn’t been listening in class, not that her education would ever equate his private prep school one. Bianca

stumbled around fake-smilingly, her stilettos sinking further into the sand at each of her melodramatic steps. Savannah watched her amusingly, wondering how such a pretending snob could have such a seemingly confident posture whilst feeling totally out of place. Gusts of feverish wind twirled around her flowing fuchsia dress, lifting it up where she couldn't prevent it from doing so. She batted her excessively long eyelashes thrice, before obliquely skimming the notes of her electronic clipboard.

“Right,” she said, as she recollected her thoughts. “Obviously, our guests won't be socializing under that,” she said pointing at white canopies on a distant sand dune; “You are currently above the venue itself. It will be roused at sunset, when this abominable heat will have died down. The delicacies that you will serve will also be arriving at the very last minute. Basically, all that we're asking is that you look good whilst obliging. Now everyone go get dressed; this is going to be a long, memorable night.”

Savannah followed the troop to the aggregation of white teepees, and was directed to a cabana lined with dozens of racks on which hung garments, each epitomes of elegance meticulously wrapped in a transparent pouch. “And you are?” asked a smartly dressed man in white.

“Savannah Duncan. D-U-N-C-A-N,” she answered, admiring the dozens of white costumes hung up on the walls.

The natty gentleman riffled effortlessly through the hangers, to at last take out an incredulously tight white tulle dress. “And voila!”, he said excitedly, visibly enamored with his own creation. Shocked by the size of the garment, Savannah let out a muffled gasp. “What's wrong?” he asked, not delighted that she didn't share the same views as he did on the garment.

“Are you sure this is mine? It looks a tad small and honestly, quite revealing,” she said coyly. He shook his head in denial and looked at her in awe.

“This is what you will be wearing,” he said ponderously, stressing each syllable and pausing between each word as if he were lecturing a child. And just like that, he sent her away, moving his head from side to side with great dismay, as if she had deeply disappointed him with her act of insolence.

The ground trembled for a few seconds, shaking the white teepees and their inhabitants. Savannah, together with the mentor Bianca had assigned her, Tessa, emerged out of her tent. The venue, or ice palace, was being raised, its snowy towers resplendent in the sinking sun. It looked as it had been taken from an ancient fairytale. The Oligarchy was living in a complete fairytale.

\* \* \*

“Aisha Sine,” announced a tan beauty, before clearing her group of equally graceful followers: “and those six are with me.” She opened her jeweled clutch and absent-mindedly handed Savannah nine invitations, jokingly conversing in what seemed to be Turkish or Arabic with her friends. “Oh, and dispose of the two other cards; their recipients couldn't make it.” Simultaneously, all seven girls burst into laughter, revealing their identically irreproachable pearly whites.

“Have a nice evening,” muttered Tessa for the thousandth time, as the clique proceeded through the doorway lined with crystal icicles.

A sun yellow sports-car careened around the corner, stopping abruptly in front of the ice colonnade marking the entrance of the palace. A brown-haired gentleman

swaggered up to the reception desk, turning his car keys round one finger. “Ladies, Sir Adam Worth. My name is on the list,” he said in a heavy, contemptuous British accent.

“I’m afraid we need to see your invitation, Sir,” Tessa requested politely, determined not to let the man in without first having seen the document.

“My name is on the list. I don’t know what else you need,” the man replied rudely, crossing his hands to establish the authority he supposedly exerted.

“Your invitation, Sir,” insisted Tessa.

“This is ludicrous! If you did as I asked and checked the guest list, you would know that I am indeed a guest. Get me your manager,” he ordered fiercely.

Having noticed the interruption in the normally constant flow of guests, Bianca was at present walking towards the two girls and the troublemaker. “What is going on?! I said no scenes,” she whispered angrily between her teeth, whilst smiling reassuringly to the other guests.

“These misses won’t let me enter,” he said in frustration. “I am Sir Adam Worth, which you would know if you checked the guest list, as I instructed you to,” he said directing his voice towards Tessa.

“Do you have an invitation?” Bianca asked, visibly annoyed by the delay the man had caused. His rolling of eyes revealed that he didn’t. “Then I am afraid we cannot help you. We may only allow in guests with their respective invitations, regardless of their presence on the guest list.” Outraged, the man turned on his heels, pestering audibly as he climbed down the front steps, and vaulted into his convertible. The crowd looked in fearful awe as the vehicle lurched forward, screeching as its tires crushed the steps of ice leading to the grand entrance. Its driver, blinded by rage, charged into a pillar, before going in reverse to make a U-turn and disappear into the sandy dunes.

“You!” Bianca cried, pointing accusingly at Tessa, obviously blaming her for the carnage. She needn’t do more for the six guards by the doorway to grab the horrified girl and escort her away from the guests’ field of view, never to be seen again. Bianca cast Savannah an accusatory look before leaving her at the reception, barking orders in her earpiece.

Savannah had had enough. This story of caste, this whole system, was messed up. “Born a Peasant, forever a Peasant. Born a Bourgeois, forever a Bourgeois. Born an Oligarch, forever an Oligarch.” Those were the words that resonated silently through society, amplified only by the looks of horror the population shared under this reign of terror.

“Excuse me,” inquired a young man dispassionately. “I’m the driver of your guest, Laura of Aragon, and I’d really appreciate it if you did me this one favor: The car’s tank is already three-quarters-empty; would you happen to have any in reserve in the palace?”

“Let me check that for you,” Savannah said, before dialing an extension on her smart-watch. “Yes, Bianca? A guest is asking for fuel for his car. Do we have any in reserve?” she paused, patiently waiting for her boss’ answer. “In the hangar underground?” Can you please send someone to cover me? Yep, I’ll be there in a sec.” She hung up, taking up that fearful smile all the apprentices had adopted after hearing of Tessa’s disposal. With a simple nod of the head, Savannah instructed him to follow her to a masked trapdoor leading to the labyrinth of corridors sprawling below the ice castle and all its majesty. A reddening glow vacillated between his teeth, and she wondered how people could still smoke after it had been discovered years ago that tobacco was permanently damaging. But something else had already sparked in her mind.

She entered a room and flicked on the light switch. “There should be fuel here,” she said, pointing at a shelf on which rested a dozen of plastic tanks. The man nodded affirmatively and started unloading, slowly lowering every gallon one by one.

“This should be enough,” he said, as he put down the third one into the metal trolley she had found in a corner of the room. “What should we do next?” Without warning, as if the sweet 16-year-old girl had suddenly become possessed, Savannah twisted the man’s arm and threw him into a metal rack, causing its contents of priceless champagne bottles to come crashing down on him. There was no going back. She felt his pockets for the bronze lighter she had seen him use four minutes ago, taking the sports-car’s keys as well. Adrenaline-filled, she could only hear the thumping of her heart and the monotonous sound of the cart’s wheels rolling over the steel floor. She knew exactly what she had to do.

Savannah liked how the humming engine of Italian sports-cars sounded. She also knew this was the first, and probably the last, she would ever hear purr. She was ready. She had flung her smart-watch, and hence the GPS that enabled her bosses to track her, into one of the entrances’ ice fountains, and had slipped into less conspicuous clothing she had found in an unlocked locker. It was her duty to avenge Tessa, and it was her duty to put an end to this sovereign rule. She started the car. Whilst her right hand operated the steering wheel, she poured out the fuel on the sand with the other, assuring that she formed a long train around the ice palace. She had to be accurate; a mere slip of hand would deviate her trajectory and possibly encircle her in the ring of fire. At last, she was done. Savannah contemplated the beautiful ice palace and its engraved stalagmites piercing the sky, as well as the orange lights disposed around bringing warmth to the celebration. She lit the lighter and dropped it onto the ground, setting ablaze a complete circle of sand around the palace. She vaulted back into the convertible, just as the man who had killed her friend had, and pushed the acceleration pedal down. It would indeed be a long and memorable night.

## Sands and Stars

*Heep Yunn School, Leung Yik Wan, Gigi, 16*

“**S**woosh” An arrow broke the serenity of dawn, cutting through the well-blended paintbrush on the horizon—sapphire blue, silky violet, rosy pink, lemon yellow... The gust it brought stirred up the eternal sand. The ochre danced under the first light of this November day.

The arrow flew truly towards the golden eagle, whose smooth feathers glistened under the young sun.

“Don’t!” Shouted a clear, silvery voice. But the golden eagle shoved off the arrow with its wings almost effortlessly, and emitted an eagle whistle as if in wrath.

The girl who had just shouted sighed in relief, but then she gazed at where the arrow came from. She glared at the young man, who was muttering a curse lowering his bow.

“Why did you do that?” The music in her voice could not cover the accusation.

The young man was of but early twenties, carrying not a burden but his bow and quiver. He twitched uncomfortably at the girl’s pointed finger, mumbled something under his breath with a red face and fumbled nervously with his ragged clothes, but then his face hardened, thinking better of it than to answer to the girl’s questioning.

“Why did you shoot Golden Eagle?” Just then, the girl asked again, putting more pressure this time, “why?” She took a step forward, and despite her smallness, she managed to seem intimidating enough to compel the youth to step back, his forced cold demeanour threatened to start crumbling. He parted his lips as if to say something, but what came out of his mouth was a snap instead, “who are you anyway? My business is my own!”

The golden eagle half-whistled, half-cried once more, circling lower and lower above their confrontation; the first daylight hid behind and filtered through its flying figure alternately, like a bright golden eye blinking. Until, at last, it landed securely on the girl’s left shoulder. It pecked the girl’s cheek playfully while she stroked its head, lulling it to a nap.

“What...? It...is it your pet?” The dumbfounded young man burst out, the awe on his

face made him look like a boy again.

“Pet? No! The eagles here have no masters!” The short moment of tenderness (directed towards Golden Eagle) on her face was replaced by scarlet indignation once again upon the young man’s innocent question.

“But then...” he tentatively neared the girl and the lightly sleeping golden eagle as curiosity got the better of him, “but then... why is it, why is he so...fond of you?” He tried to touch the eagle’s head with his forefinger, but the eagle sensed the foreigner and bit him. And not so playfully. “Ow! That’s hard!” He cowered back while watching a thin line of blood trickled down his finger.

The girl chuckled, the mirth dispensed all the shadow on her face. “You deserve this, you should be glad that he did not bite your entire finger off!”

“He is my friend, if you must know. That’s why he likes me enough to sleep on my shoulder.” She wore a beaming smile glancing at the pile of feathers, her gaze softening, “he has always been.” Upturning her face, she looked at the distant mountains across the vast sand somewhat wistfully.

“You still haven’t told me why you tried to shoot my friend,” she feigned fury, but a mischievous grin lit up her face again, “but never mind, you have thrown down his arrow, haven’t you?” She seemed to be directing her enquiring eyebrows towards the dozing golden eagle, but secretly gazed sideway at the young man’s red embarrassed face, who was obviously shameful about his miss, but also relieved that the girl’s friend lived. In fact, living strong enough to wound him.

“No matter. You can tell me when I patch you up, come!” The girl gripped his wrist and turned towards her home. The man seemed hesitant, as if going to decline the favour—out of etiquette, out of customs in the modern world, out of unspoken taboo... But no, all these cares flew away just as the golden eagle took flight again, into the whitening sky. After all, when he decided to stride into the wilderness, he had already left all behind. Except his bow and arrows. Oh, and that. Yes, that.

They watched the eagle’s silhouette fade further and further away in front of the girl’s wooden shed. “Perhaps he is searching for the greener land again, the climate here is too harsh, even for a golden eagle sometimes—the wind howls too fiercely, the sands slap too hard on your face and the icy snow bites too deep into your bone...” The girl squinted her eyes against the rising sun and looked hard into the far end of the sky, “oh...a snowstorm may be coming in several days.”

The girl then led the youth into her home, gesturing him to sit down beside the hearth, which was nothing more than a cold, palely glowing fire amongst a pile of firewood and pine needles.

“So...who are you?” She asked cleansing the youth’s wound with steaming water and preparing the ‘bandage’ torn off from some hessian cloth, “what brings you to such desolate lands?”

The young man beheld the girl’s mien, pondering and weighing matters. “They call me Wanderer. I have come here after the call of a legend. Legend merely.”

“What kind of a legend?” Fire of excitement danced in the girl’s clear eyes, “and ‘Wanderer’ is no name! I am Astari, and I tell you so. I am who I am, you are who you are. Why do you hide yourself?” Astari’s eyes spoke of the pure starlight, conceiving none of the vast void and darkness not warmed by stars.

Wanderer seemed to be at a loss in the face of Astari’s untainted belief. Either out of surprise or frustration he let out more than he intended, “My house has long forgotten

our last name, we are a people with no name.”

Astari’s eyes sent even wider at this outburst, her eyebrows arched like rainbows over the deep, blue oceans. “When? Why?”

Wanderer nearly rolled his eyes at the girl’s unceasing curiosity and naivety, but caught himself before doing so for he couldn’t help but fall into the trap of those hypnotising eyes and came to adore her a little bit.

“It is a legend of my lineage, or so am I told since memories found me. It speaks of a lost heirloom somewhere deep in the wilderness... And with it buried ourselves and our fate too.

It tells the story of my ancestor, Elro, meeting a mysterious girl named Sarangerel in one of his travels back in those nomad days. In those days, the fields were greener and the air was sweeter with fragrance of herbage. They rolled in the long grass, chased their silhouettes under the moon, perched on treetops counting stars... All was good until storms and tides forced them apart.

Apart in two worlds they might be, but they had buried the one powerful token of their promise before the tragic end. It is rumoured that finding this heirloom means recovering the missing part of my house and myself. Long have my forefathers been in search for this, long have they strode unfriendly lands of strangers... And finally, this duty now comes to me, as a treasure and a burden all at once. So I’ve come.”

Silence gently flooded the shed at the face of the great confession, all was still but for the slight pattering of dying fire. This was when Wanderer started to hum bits and pieces of the myth:

*The lost again shall be found  
To find it one boy is bound  
Who shoot Golden Eagle as a token  
His footsteps shall be taken  
To the destined place  
Within the maze  
The fate of all  
Will unfurl in the Emerald Hall.*

“That’s why I shot at your friend... But the arrow went astray anyway...” He spoke gravely.

“Well... I don’t think you’ve failed your quest so soon. It says ‘shoot’ only, not ‘shoot down’; and after all, he did fly towards where the maze is...”

“What? You mean you know where the maze is?” Wanderer nearly bounced up in excitement.

“Everyone here knows about the maze,” Astari began to whisper in hushed tone, “it’s actually a set of giant, grotesque rocks that looks like a maze, whether it is human’s or nature’s doing is unknown to us, and it’s said that...a great secret lies in its heart. Then, travellers and explorers started venturing there...they never came back.” Her voice became even smaller, “Father and Mother were in there too. So now I’ve only got Golden Eagle.” Hints of tears glistened in her eyes.

But the melancholy was always brief on her countenance. She got up and went around the shed, stuffing water bags, dried fruits and meat, fur clothes...all into a huge hessian pack while Wanderer watched her confusedly. “We should follow Golden Eagle

at all speed, I think he's still flying south."

"...We?" Wanderer asked wide-eyed, "I'm not letting you go in this peril, you're only... what? Twelve?"

"Seventeen!" She exclaimed outrageously, "And it's perilous for you if you didn't have a local around, I know the way. And I won't let this chance slip away, I've always wished I could go out there..." She gazed at the horizon under the early morning light, where the eagle had gone.

So they went.

Went out to the wilderness of the wilderness, for both of them had turned their back to home. There was no shelter for them now, not even the little shed at the mercy of the sands.

The snowstorm did come. The wind did howl. The sands did slap. The icy snow did bite. But they were not turning back. They had no turning back.

The snow and hail blinded their eyes, they could not see anymore. No light, no hope. Only darkness and doubts.

Astari's feet gave way and she fell. Her hands tried to hold on, to clutch something. Anything.

She did.

She fumbled with it. It was something furry... A feather. She willed her eyes open. At first there was only painful snow and sand, but she caught a glimpse of what she was holding through her squinted eyes. A light brown feather, almost having a golden sheen.

"Wanderer! Hey! Look here!" She shouted desperately not being able to discern the young man against the blinding white around her. "We're on the right track! Golden Eagle left a feather for us not one day before, he's leading us there!"

They quickened their pace.

The snowstorm passed. And when they could see clearly again, they saw Golden Eagle perching on an unbowed saxaul tree. Half-whistling, he threw them some wild onions. And they rested.

Hardships did not fade along with the snowstorm. At night it was still freezing; but in daytime, the weather sweated in unbearable heat. Each gust of wind was a heat wave, evaporating every drop of moisture in them, chapping and bleeding their lips. The great eye in the sky was ever watchful, cunningly plotting the murder of the duo.

Still they walked on, with Golden Eagle as their guide. Golden Eagle would throw them wild onions now and again, and would bore holes in the saxaul tree's bark to release a gush of water flowing out for them.

They were kept alive.

They had been on feet for what seemed like some thousand days. They had passed through the greener lands refreshed, and headed further south once more. Where their destiny lay.

"The maze is out there." Astari pointed at the distance, "The Singing Sand Dunes." Wanderer wanted to ask what that was, but a shiver made the question slide back down his throat.

Golden Eagle's high-pitched voice called at them, they were obviously idling for too long.

"Time to get going." Wanderer forced out the words, but he could force away his nervousness no more.

Wanderer and Astari had been here for more than a month, but they always felt like

it was longer. Food and water were next to extinct, even wild onions and saxaul trees were rare. Only Golden Eagle seemed to be unaffected.

They began to see not only those huge rocks were the maze, The Singing Sand Dunes was already a maze in itself. They began to see why no one came out again, those who succeeded to make their way into the actual maze were natural survivors already. For there were nothing. Nothing but the stinking yellowish brown everywhere—ahead, behind, left and right.

The nothing was everything.

They had long lost any sense of direction. And they would have collapsed but for Golden Eagle's time-and-again nudges and warning whistles. Their heads swam all day. Once Astari swore she saw Father and Mother running to her with open arms once more, but when she dashed forward expecting a bruising but warm embrace, all she touched was the burning wind and sand fading away.

"Can you see that?" Wanderer patted urgently on Astari's back, "Is that the maze?"

She tried to refocus her bleary eyes, "It seems so...Oh yes! It looked exactly like what our tales tell. Wolf's jaw."

"And what's that...light green glow? It's almost like a mirage of oasis..."

"They say that's the treasure, that's what they are behind."

They rushed the remaining miles like they were racing with Golden Eagle. As they neared, the rough rocks stood ever more enormous and ominous above them, while the glow brightened.

"So...That's it." Somehow, when they finally reached the maze through so many toils, they wished they had never set off.

It was no hyperbole that it was called wolf's jaw. It was actually more similar to a henge, but of more obscure structure, and looked even more magnificent. If not intimidating. The sun still pierced spicily outside, but when they staggered on, shadow and murk engulfed them.

Golden Eagle's sharp eyes saw more clearly in the sky, and he led them on. They left the opening of the maze behind now, nearing its heart. All was well. Until they felt. They felt the walls closing in on them agonisingly slowly, sometimes not moving at all, but sometimes it seemed to be falling upon them suffocating them. The air became grey and opaque. Opaque enough to form a shadow of a cold, grey hand wringing their necks.

Wanderer saw grey, like a layer of mist veiling his eyes, pushing him to the brink of consciousness. There were distant cries.

*No! Fight them!*

*They are mere illusions to trick you into killing yourself!*

*They are not here!*

*Not here... It's just your mind...*

"...Fight them!" Oh, that is Astari, Wanderer managed to recognise, I must go back to the light...He pulled himself up from the bottomless abyss just in time to hear a howl that froze his blood.

"Aarrhh! Wolves! He-" Astari screamed. He ran towards the circle of wolves and miraculously, the wolves gave way as they saw him. He took the place beside Astari, taking her smaller hand, perhaps to ensure her.

"Away with your foul breathes." A sense of calmness and authority flowed through his veins as he ordered, "I'm the rightful heir to what you guard." He took out his one

possession beside his bow and quiver—a sheet of vellum bearing the prophetic song he had hummed and a seal, the mark of his house. The head wolf sniffed the vellum, bowed its head and turned away.

The maze suddenly cleared. Shadow and mist dispersed and the bright green glow filled the air. The source of light was just ahead of them.

“The Emerald Hall.” Wanderer breathed, “Why? They’re trees...”

The barks formed the great columns of the hall, and their crowns formed the arches, all glowing a transparent and glittering green light. The marble walls were adorned by mosaics illustrating the tale of Elro and Sarangerel, the ceiling is millions of stars, the floor is sand. All were unworn even by time.

Everlasting between sky and earth.

A box sat solemnly in the middle of the hall. They tentatively opened the heavy lid.

Two necklaces. Two halves of a circle: one half is the starry sky, the other the endless sand. A volume of book lay underneath, at the bottom of the box, narrating the full legend.

*“...there are nothing like the bond between us, except the sky and the earth who forever behold each other. So though now we have to part, like the sky and the earth, we pray the land keeps our promise undimmed, for this has no end although our flesh has.*

*By Elro Eldar and Sarangerel Naransetseg”*

“The rock maze was of nature’s making after all...” Wanderer thought aloud. He turned around to see Astari’s face full of shock.

“Naransetseg...” Astari stared at the last page as if in trance, “but that’s my last name...”

She looked up at Wanderer, and saw the reflection of the warm sand in his eyes.

She did not know, Wanderer saw countless stars in her eyes.

They sat in silence for eternity, they did not remember what happened afterwards. But somehow, Golden Eagle must have led them out with the heirloom.

“I...err...I need to go back, to my homeland, you know...To carry this back...” He carried the heirloom, bow and quiver at his back, ragged clothes still draping over him.

“I know. I’ve been wondering when you’re leaving actually.” Astari Naransetseg forced a smile.

“So...Before I go, my name is Estel Eldar, if you still want to know...” And away he went.

“Estel Eldar...” Astari watched as his silhouette disappeared in the misty dusk.

\* \* \*

Astari sat at the door watching the distance until dusk came again.

“Call me if you see him,” she told Golden Eagle once again.

She was in the Emerald Hall again in her sleep when she heard Golden Eagle call.

Dawn came.

\* \* \*

“I’ve brought the necklaces. One for you, one for me.”

# New Tales of the Gobi Desert

*Island School, Tamara Cohas, 15*

All was still in the flatland, with nothing so much as a Camel's restless snort to awaken anyone. A calm breeze - which was, here, a rarity - cooled the air and gently pushed sand grains over one another. The handful of people inhabiting the dune-filled desert was long asleep, but from inside a miniscule yurt, one boy stirred. Bataar lifted his head slowly, blinked sand out of his eyes - a common hazard that the Gobi brought - and silently rose to his blistered feet. The treacherously long hours that loomed ahead should have sent him to sleep, but Bataar's churning mind refused to settle. Pushing himself out of the flat bed he shared with his infant sister, Tuya, he cautiously crept across the yurt to the door. Cursing as a low whistle of breeze entered the home, he delicately placed the door back into place while stepping toe by toe, as to not wake so much as an insect.

The first step out of the yurt let his feet graze against sand-filled grass blades. The ground felt uncomfortably withered and thirsty to the pads of his feet, and he reminisced on the moist squelching that would often swallow up his toes. Too long it had been since those days. Having abandoned the grassy territory that the yurt was made upon, Bataar's feet now submerged into shallow sand pits with each heavy step. He clamped his eyes together. A miracle, he thought, perhaps we've been lucky. Sure, his alternate persona jeered, we'll definitely get that one. But maybe - his mind's conversation was abruptly cut off. His eyes jerked open, watering from the suddenness. Bataar's heart sank to his stomach. A foot down in the sand was where the water had been, and no wishes could bring that water back.

The water there had been their only hope - summer in the flatlands turned ripe lips into leathery strips of sandpaper. The year prior had been prosperous, with enough water that the pit had even flowed over and tickled the toes of Nugai, the family's Camel. But the weather had taken a turn for disastrous the past month. Thirsts had barely been quenched, with small rations of Nugai's milk, so that it wouldn't run out. The water that once gushed in the pit had all but dried up, until the previous week. Father had declared it time to walk once more; to travel for days, possibly weeks, to find water. As if that had been the final farewell, the pit had been reduced to a hollow as dry as a withered skeleton.

Bataar stumbled, as if in surprise, backwards, and fell against the wall of the yurt. It rustled loudly, and he silently cursed himself for possibly rousing his family from

sleep. It was fine for them, he thought. Nugai's supportive back and broad back could carry Father, Mother and baby Tuya, but would surely be hindered under the weight of Bataar's nineteen years. He would lead Nugai; his feet blistering and immensely painful.

This was home, and had been for all Bataar's years, and baby Tuya's one and a half. Both children had been born in their yurt; their home. Bataar had taken his first, clumsy steps in the sand just outside the door - and had subsequently fallen face-first into sun-bathed sand. They couldn't leave. They would leave behind the memories and the stories and even if they couldn't find water anywhere else, they would never find their way back to home.

His weak knees gave way underneath him, and Bataar steadied himself down on the ground. His head felt weighty, and dropped into his hands. Despite the sand being rubbed into his eyes, he couldn't bare to look up at the empty pit. Time passed, and Bataar realized he needed to begin preparing breakfast for Mother, Father and Tuya. Nugai's milk would have to be good enough to keep energy going until the blazing sun signaled mid-day. As he prepared to heave his weight forward and stand, a sharp tickle passed down the back of Bataar's neck, under his shirt and trailed down his spine. Something small hit his ear, but as he went to swat it away, Bataar realized there was no insect there - or anywhere to be seen, for that matter. He wrenched his face away from his clammy palms and felt another trickle run along the bridge of his hooked nose. Slowly, suspiciously, Bataar pulled himself up. What was this? He stared up at the darkening sky, and felt another drop pelt itself at his chest. Jerking his head to his torso in investigation, Bataar discovered his top was patterned with small little dots. Suddenly, it hit him. Rain.

Bataar refused to believe it - it hadn't rained for forty-two nights, and it was impossible it was raining now. But the droplets were persistent, and now they started falling rapidly, all directing themselves at Bataar as if to say 'We listened to you, we know you were hoping for us.' The corners of Bataar's chapped lips began to push themselves upwards, and there was no stopping the small smile that lit up not only his face, but the gloomy morning's landscape. He uncurled his sweaty palm and within a matter of seconds, it was drenched. Others would have run for shelter or hid from the rain, but Bataar couldn't bear to leave, for fear that this could all be a mirage. His broad face quickly became fluid with not only the raindrops, but his tears. Tears of ecstatic joy and relief. They could stay. They could stay. They could-. His thoughts were cut off, his happiness jolted, as he realized the pit was the key to their survival here. Unless it was replenished with the water to last 30 nights, they would be forced to find better living elsewhere.

Bracing himself for the disappointment that would surely follow, Bataar turned around, inching his feet as sluggishly as he could bear. But when the foot-deep dip met his eyes, he couldn't believe his eyes. Truly a miracle, the pit had slowly been rising, and now several inches had been filled with rain. Without taking his eyes off of the pit, gradually he lowered himself to the ground. And there Bataar sat, for seconds, minutes, possibly hours, until the pit was on the verge of overflowing once more. And there Bataar stayed, basking in the glory and miracle that was a rain shower in the desert. He stayed until his eyes burned from staring for so long. The sound of the raindrops created a dull tune against the flat roof of the yurt, and Bataar willed it to continue. He longed for the reaction of Father, waking to the sound of nature's good fortune.

# Coming Home

*Maryknoll Convent School (Secondary Section), Sharon Yuen, 15*

Come hither and listen. Stand still and listen. Listen as the wind calls your name.  
Listen as it beckons you forward. Listen as it lures you in.  
Stand still and listen...

\* \* \*

Shang shaded his eyes as he studied the sky. The midday sun gleamed, shining burning rays relentlessly onto the ground. It was going to be a long day.

Moving to his camel, he rearranged the hand-knotted Baotou carpets. The Bactrian camel raised his head from his grazing and bleated, annoyed.

Shang glanced at the boy standing by his camel. The boy had his eyes trained on the camel's every movement.

Shang picked up the small pack he had prepared for the boy, and weighed it in his hand. It was light, but was it good enough for the kid? Eyeing the boy's knobby knees, Shang quickly removed a few items from the bag and stuffed them into his own.

"Don't lose it," Shang said, tossing the bag at the kid,

"Yes, sir," the boy answered, hiking the bag onto his back.

Shang sighed. "Ling, I told you. It's Shang, not sir."

"Yes, sir."

\* \* \*

Ling looked up as the traders began to move out of town.

"Keep up, Ling!"

"Yes, Shang!" Ling jogged to match Shang's footsteps.

The villagers cheered as the traders passed by, the camel bells ringing.

Ling looked up at the silent house at the end of the street. He knew his uncle

wouldn't come out. The windows were shut tight. The doors were locked. The message was clear – he wouldn't be welcomed back, and he wouldn't be missed.

That didn't matter. Ling wouldn't miss his uncle either.

He passed through the town gates with Shang. The cheering of the villagers still echoed in his ears. Turning back, he surveyed his home for the last time.

Walk on. He would walk on, head held high, never turning back. Walking away from the place he had once called home.

"Ready?" Shang asked.

Ling placed his foot outside the stone pavement, and onto the sand of the Gobi Desert.

"Ready."

\* \* \*

Shang wiped his brow, flinging the beads of sweat onto the dry sand. He glanced at the kid, worried. Shang had gone through the Gobi Desert before, and he was accustomed to the heat and cold, but the kid wouldn't be.

Once again, Shang slowed down. He could hear the boy's laboured breaths come out in short huffs.

One of Shang's travelling companions waved an arm to catch Shang's attention, gesturing in front of him. His words were muffled by the cloth tied over his mouth.

"What?" Shang shouted. The man gave him an exasperated look, and beckoned for him to catch up. Squinting, he could make out the traders leading their camels a good few leagues away.

"We'll catch up later," he called back. From the distance, he could see his partner shrug at another trader. They couldn't understand why Shang had to bring Ling along. Ling would be a burden, a risk they should not take.

But they would never understand. They could never understand.

\* \* \*

Ling tried his best to even the loud pounding of his heart. He knew Shang could hear him huffing. He didn't want to appear weak. He wouldn't complain, no matter how tired he was.

Placing one foot after the other, Ling tried to ignore the burning sand underneath him. He thought of the pattering of raindrops to ward off the suffocating heat.

There was something about the heat that made his mind wander into the clouds. Ling felt his mind drift away as his feet got used to the steady rhythm.

His thoughts brought him back to the time when he was just a little child, when he was still a boy without fears and worries, when his mother was still with him.

His mother was a gust of warm, spring wind in the mist of a freezing winter. When she talked, it was like the song of a nightingale. When she smiled, the world was rid of darkness.

The memories had become blurry throughout the years, yet there were moments that seemed so vivid, it could have been yesterday. Ling never had a father. He never knew who he was, but that didn't matter. He had his mother, and that was enough.

He remembered how his mother would ruffle his hair every morning, calling for him to wake up softly.

He remembered the way his mother would soothe his scraped knees with tender kisses, telling him everything would be alright. He remembered her twinkling eyes as his sobs subsided into quiet hiccups. "Ling, I'm here. Dry your tears, child. I'm here."

He remembered the nights when he would climb onto his mother's bed because of nightmares. His mother never sent him back to bed alone. Sitting him on her lap, his mother would sing soft, calming folk songs and rock him back and forth until his eyes grew heavier, and heavier. Then she would carry him to his bed, and tuck him in.

His mother... what he wouldn't give for his mother to be with him now.

Ling could remember the last time he saw his mother, laying on a kang, sleeping so peacefully. That picture was immediately ruined when his uncle marched him out of the house.

\* \* \*

Ling was suddenly jolted awake. A shadow was looming over him from above.

"Wha'z'appening?"

"You fainted," Shang answered. Ling could feel a rough hand test his forehead.

Gasping, Ling tried to sit up, but his head felt too heavy. He looked around him. A tent surrounded them, blocking them from the sun that sizzled above.

"We've stopped for the day," Shang explained.

Startled, Ling opened his mouth to apologize.

Shang interrupted, "Stay here, and don't move." With that, Shang opened the flap of the tent and stepped out.

Closing his eyes, Ling pursed his lips. Shang had to hate him. Not only did Ling slow Shang down, he also slowed the whole company down. Ling would bet anything that Shang was going to talk to the other traders about bringing him back to Baotou to his uncle.

He'd bet anything.

\* \* \*

Shang made his way to his camel.

Ling would need some water, Shang thought, as he untied the water skin from the back of his camel. His camel was grazing contentedly beside a patch of desert onions.

Desert onions. Shaking his head, Shang moved back to his tent. He was positive that Ling had had enough desert onions for the rest of his life.

But if it weren't for the onions, Shang would never have met Ling at all. Thinking back, the corner of Shang's mouth lifted up into a wistful smile.

\* \* \*

It began with bandits. Shang and his company were attacked during their journey to Baotou. Thankfully, the traders managed to fight off the bandits. Unfortunately, Shang's camel had taken to a hard fall when the robbers slashed the skin of its knee open.

A sandstorm was bearing down on everyone, and they had to get to Baotou before it hit.

The injury slowed Shang down, and it wasn't long before there was a noticeable distance between Shang and the other traders.

By the time Shang and his camel arrived at the town gates of Baotou, the town was completely empty. All the people had taken shelter in the comfort of their homes, and the traders were nowhere in sight.

With the sandstorm close at hand, Shang began banging on the doors of the houses, asking for a place to stay. No one opened the door for him.

Shang had given up upon the futile search and had soon begun preparing for the sandstorm to arrive. Until the sound of desperate footfalls reached his ears.

Spinning around, Shang watched as a small, forlorn young boy, no older than eight, ran down the dirt road.

In his arms, the kid held a bucket filled with desert onions. His whole body was covered in sand, and he was wheezing loudly as he ran. The onions jotted in the basket.

Shang remembered himself watching as the kid stumbled on a rock and pitched forward onto the ground. The basket of desert onions flew forward, scattering across the road.

Shang hurried forward to help him. “Bad, this is bad, really bad,” the kid was muttering when Shang drew close. Bending down to pick up one of the onions, he handed it to the kid. The kid jumped, as if he just realized Shang’s existence.

After hesitating, the kid reached forward and snatched the desert onion from Shang’s hand. Scrambling to his feet, the kid started gathering the fallen onions frantically, muttering “bad, bad, really bad” over and over again.

Handing the kid the basket, Shang had watched when the kid rearranged the onions carefully, as if they were as precious as jewels.

Shang remembered how Ling had gasped out, “You shouldn’t stay out. The sandstorm is coming.” before rushing into a house nearby.

By then the sandstorm was fast approaching, Shang settled down beside his camel, ready for a hard night.

Shang was dozing when someone poked him awake. Peeking one eye open, Shang was immediately blinded by the sand that whipped around in the wind.

Someone had grabbed him by a patch of his tunic and was dragging him up. “Come,” the boy’s small voice drifted in the wind. Snatching the reins of his camel, Shang allowed the little hand to guide him.

After a few minutes of struggling in the storm, Shang was led into a shed. The boy was panting by the door. Shang thanked him, brushing the sand from his skin.

Handing a tattered rucksack to Shang, the boy continued, “This is for you. I’ve put in a few desert onions. We don’t have much at home. Food is hard to come by.”

Shang had studied the boy as he spoke. The boy’s bones seemed to stick out from his skin. His legs were unbelievably thin.

And there were lash marks all over them.

Someone had taken a whip to the boy. The fresh red, boiling marks weren’t over the old bruised whip marks when Shang first saw him. Someone had beaten the boy in that short period of time.

\* \* \*

Ling tossed in his dreams.

Come here...

A voice echoed softly in the wind. Woken up by the sound, Ling turned in his

blankets, willing for sleep to return.

Come here...

I'm here...

Come here...

Ling looked up. The gentle, sing-song voice washed over him. The voice reminded him of something... someone. He closed his eyes and smiled as the sound filled the air.

Come here...

I'm here...

Come here...

Ling...

Ling bolted up. What was that?

That voice... reminded him of a dream that seemed so long ago. A dream so tender, so real, so alive.

Then Ling remembered. That voice that once reached out to him every morning.

That voice that once belonged to...

"Mother?"

Ling, come here. I am here.

"Mother!" Scrambling up, Ling untied the blankets that formed knots around him.

"Mother!"

Ling, come here. I am here. It's me. Ling...

Ling's fingers fumbled with the tent as he bolted out into the sand. It was his mother. Ling knew it deep in his heart. "Mother! Mother, wait for me!"

\* \* \*

Shang was still fuming at the memory of Ling's lash marks. Marching towards the tent, he relived the night they spent at the shed together, remembering how Ling slipped away before dawn to go back to his uncle.

The next morning, Shang met up with the other traders to load up the Baotou carpets. Shang was stacking them on his camel, when he saw a lanky man walking past them. In his hands, he held the scruff of a boy's shirt. It was Ling.

Shang sneaked after the pair, curious to know what the man was up to. He followed them through an alley, and saw the man shove Ling towards the slave market.

Shang immediately leapt forward to purchase Ling. It didn't take long for the two men to reach an agreement. With a bag of jiggling coins given away, Shang brought Ling back with him to his camel.

Shang wondered how Ling was feeling. Hopefully the boy would be sound asleep and resting. He needed it.

Opening up the flag of the tent, he tip-toed inside.

"Ling?"

\* \* \*

Scrambling up the sand dunes, Ling forged forward. It had to be his mother. Only one voice would say his name so lovingly.

Ling, come here.

It was a lie. It always has been. His mom wasn't dead. His mother was always here.

Here in the Gobi Desert, waiting for him to return.

Who said his mother had moved on to another world? Ling fought against the wind and the sand, ignoring the heat that burned from heaven. He was going home.

Ling, come here. It's me....

"Mother, you're back! Mom, do you know what they said? They said you'd been taken away by some... god. I didn't believe them, Mom! You would always come back for me." Ling chirped.

Ling, come here. It's me. Ling, come...

Ling smiled. He could taste blood as his lips cracked with the effort. But that didn't matter. Home was just beyond him right there, in his mother's arms. Straining his eyes, Ling squinted in the sand.

There, standing in the middle of the sand dunes, was his mother.

"I'm coming, Mom!" Ling hollered, picking up his pace. He was going to see his mother! Reaching out his hands, he rushed forward, sliding down another sand dune towards his mother's open arms.

Ling... Ling... come here... Ling...

Ling bounded forward. His arms opened wide. There she was! Only a few more steps away. He could feel the excitement bubble up in his chest. He was on his way home...

Ling... come... Ling...

His face split into a wide smile. He made his final leap forward. His mother was smiling at him, beckoning him to step forward. The sweet dimples flashing at him. Ling...come...

He flung himself into the air, preparing himself for the warmth of his mother's embrace.

And Ling landed on the hard, hot sand.

He spat out the gritty sand in his mouth. He could hear his mother laughing at him. Blushing, he grinned up sheepishly at his mother.

"Mother, I... Mother?" Ling scrambled up to his feet. Where was his mother? She was just here!

Rubbing his eyes, he peered forward again. She had to be here! She had to!

Ling... Lin... Ling... Lin...

The voice faded. Ling searched desperately around him. His breath came out in uneven, short huffs. No!

Maybe Shang saw his mother. His spirits lifted up again. He bellowed, "Shang! Shang! Shang, did you see...?" He stopped in mid-sentence.

The laughing wind echoed around him, mocking him as he stood there. Alone.

That's when it hit. Forcing the panic down, Ling groped his way up the sand dune, and looked onwards.

It was empty. The sand dunes were completely empty. In his headlong course, Ling had lost sign of Shang's camp. Searching for his footsteps, he found none. The wind had wiped the sand clean.

Ling was completely alone.

That was when he remembered Shang's reminder. "Remember, boy, stay close to me. The winds will beckon you forward. The sands will try to lure you in. Do not go astray. If you become lost, we will never be able to find you. We cannot risk the lives of the company for one person. Remember, boy, stay close to me!"

Ling could feel his heart freeze. Hysteria building up, he screamed, “Shang! Shang! Shang!” His voice echoed and died in the empty field.

There came no answer. He was completely alone.

He was going to die out here. No one would save him. His mother was gone. She had died. She wasn’t coming back. His uncle was gone. He had probably forgotten all about him already. He wasn’t going to care.

Shang was gone. Shang had moved on. He had gone. He wasn’t going to return for him.

He landed in a heap on the sand as his knees buckled. Facing the sun, he screamed silently at it, tears streaming down his face. Why? He asked. Why?

And with that, he allowed himself to go slack, and he laid on the sand.

\* \* \*

“Ling...

“Go away,” Ling thought.

“Ling...

The desert was merciless. It had already taunted him with his mother’s voice, was that not enough? Why, then, did it insist upon teasing him with Shang’s voice?

“Ling... Ling? Ling!”

“Away. Go away.” Cracking up one eye, he raised his head an inch higher. He could make out the blurry lines of a man running towards him. Letting his head drop down with a thump, Ling willed the image to go away. He had no wish to see an illusion of Shang rushing towards him. “Go away!”

“Ling? Ling, wake up. Ling!”

Even in death, the sound of Shang’s voice filled his head. Ling could even sense Shang’s presence. He welcomed death... if death meant seeing Shang again.

\* \* \*

And in that moment, nothing else mattered. The world could collapse around him and Shang still wouldn’t have noticed. All that mattered was that little boy in his arms. He was all that mattered.

“Ling? Ling, wake up.” He shook the boy hard. Ling did not stir. Closing his eyes, Shang rocked the boy’s small body in his.

“Shang?”

Shang’s eyes flew open. The boy’s round, chestnut brown eyes stared back at him.

“I’m here, Ling. Everything’s going to be alright. I’ve got you.” He engulfed Ling into a bear embrace.

Ling could feel a sob bubbling up his throat. “Shang, you came back! You came back for me.”

“I’d always come back for you.”

“Why? Why did you come back?”

Shang looked at the boy sternly, “I think you know why.”

The boy hesitated then nodded slowly. “I’ve come home.”

# An Act of a Selfless Daughter

*St. Mary's Canossian College, Katie Ng, 15*

It was already my 192nd hour without water. I was standing in the middle of this desert. The blazing sun burnt my skin to extreme redness. It was like I was in a living hell and I just wanted to tear my skin off. My feet were full of blisters from the struggle earlier with the soldiers. I had walked for days and days and still couldn't find any presence of life. I stared straight into the sun, regardless of how the cruelty of that huge ball of flame would blind me. I could sense myself drifting away from my body and taking me to a peaceful place as memories flashed before my eyes.

"It's time," my mother sobbed, "I can hear their footsteps - "

"It's alright mother," I pressed my lips on my mother's forehead, "don't worry."

"Please Ah Qiu, forgive me! I wouldn't have done it if there hadn't been a drought. We have nothing left, no food, no water, no crops to sell..."

"I know, it's my responsibility as the eldest," I looked at my brothers and sisters. They were playing with sand bags - toys I had made for them. Their eyes sparkled and they had huge grins on their face. With so much satisfaction! I could never bring myself to take away their genuine innocence.

"I have never blamed you Mother."

Suddenly, the door suddenly burst open. The light seeped through from the door instantly. I could only make out the silhouette of the intruders. It was when they stepped into my house that I could see clearly that they were the servants of the Wong Family. "We're here to take her away." The death bell chimed along with the muttering of the man. The servants from the Wong family began to pull me away from my mom.

My mom shoved a jade pendent into my hand, "For you, my darling. Behave well in the Wong's Family. I will see you soon." They urged me forward and I took one last glance at my mother, saying goodbye. I silently prayed that my family would live a happy life forever.

Suddenly a loud piercing stream of sunlight landed on my face. I groaned and unwillingly opened my eyes. I realized I was somewhere unfamiliar to me. I searched

in the back of my mind. It finally clicked. I was in the barn of the Wong family – my master. They had offered a large sum of money to my family to ask me to become one of their maids. There had been rumors that the son of the Wong family was an abuser. Some say that the servants of the Wong family will carry the dead bodies of the maids who had suffered from extreme beatings and bury them at night. However because of how desperate the situation was, the only choice my mother had was to say yes.

“Wake up!” A man said with sternness and authority, “Go wash up and make yourself presentable. I have fetched some clothes for you, go get dressed. You have 10 minutes.”

It was exactly 10 minutes later when I was standing in the front yard with Mr. and Mrs. Wong standing beside me. I was now dressed in the most extravagant dress I could ever imagine wearing. Mr. and Mrs. Wong seemed very nervous, with their hands intertwined with each other repeatedly, and shifted uncomfortably. I was counting down the time when I would meet the young master and start my nightmare. I started preparing myself for the beatings and other dirty deed.

However, what I saw next completely caught me off guard. It was the reason why Mr. and Mrs. Wong were so nervous all morning. A marching band approached us – the same marching band that signified the emperor was coming. The degree of luxury was beyond anything I had ever seen. The sedan chair in the centre of the marching band was decorated with so much gold and pearls that its shininess pierced my eyes. The music was so festive and melodic as if it came down from heaven. It took me a while to recover from shock and notice the marching band had stopped in front of our doorstep.

The emperor walked down from the sedan chair with poise and assurance. Everyone quickly kneeled down and hailed, “May the king live millions and millions of years!” To my surprise, the emperor’s eyes which never made any eye contact with anyone bore into mine. I was so terrified that I swiftly lowered my head.

His lips twitched upwards and eyes filled with curiosity, “So you are the virgin?”

I peeked at Mr. and Mrs. Wong. They motioned that I should just go with it and obey him. I nodded at his question.

“Good. Ah! Your hair is so soft and shiny.” I cast a glance at the emperor and stunned by his comment, “Those eyes, with so much liveliness and boldness! Like the black pearls given by Jin. What a pity! You could totally become my concubine with your breath-taking beauty. I’m sure God of Rain will be pleased with us offering you as his wife.”

I was no longer able to stop myself from questioning all the nonsense. “I’m sorry my majesty. What do you mean by offering me as the God of Rain’s wife? I thought I was here to become a maid.”

A witch-like laughter burst from the emperor, “You, my dear, were chosen to be the offering to keep the God of Rain happy. You are well aware of the problem caused by the drought right? The land of us Qin will soon become a desert without your sacrifice.”

“And how does it work exactly? By using my blood?” I was startled by a horrible thought.

“No, my dear,” I felt a sense of relief, “You are sent off to a deserted place and will stay there forever!”

Immediately, some soldiers rushed out and grabbed me from behind. I kicked, I yelled and I screamed but no one was there to rescue me. I stare into the eyes of the passengers, secretly begging someone to step up. No one dared to. They all just looked at me sympathetically. My vision was blurry. And soon I was swept into darkness by

someone covering my mouth with a towel drenched with a chemical.

I tried my hardest to open my eyes. I was light-headed. Everything was a blur and spinning. It felt like all of the blood was rushing from my head all the way down to my feet. At that moment, I heard a warm voice whispering, "I'm so sorry. It was either you or my daughter. I didn't have a choice." And soon I fell back into sleep, a sweet yet sad lullaby fading away in the background.

And that was my last piece of memory.

When I woke up, I found myself already in this desert with absolutely no one within sight. I had fought my hardest to survive but the uneasiness started to suffocate me. I used the last of my strength to write this letter. I pressed my lips on the cold surface of my mother's jade pendant, inhaled my last breath and let go of everything.

\* \* \*

"As you can see here, it is the rock of sacrifice. It looks like a girl looking towards somewhere far away." Says the tourist guide, "It is believed that her selfless act and unfortunate fate touched the god's heart and he turned her into a rock to commemorate her. People touch the rock to get a good blessing for a blissful family life and luck..."

I walked away from the crowd. I observed the rock in detail, admiring its beauty. All of a sudden, I found a letter in a hole of the rock. I flipped it open. I started to read it aloud, trying to sense the girls' presence, "It was already my 192nd hour without water..."



# Fiction

Group 5

# The Desert's Cry

*Clearwater Bay School, Thomas Ginns, 10*

A speck of light appeared in the corner of my eye. Blurred faces looking at me. The shadowy sky up above. The sudden sound of a fearful shriek tormented my ears. I came into life as the people carried me to a broken cave. It was 1998 as the tale of Haadvar Menendez and his terrorist group petrified Ulan Bator and its people, for now he almost ruled the capital. The Republic of Mongolia fought for their country. Haadvar forcefully crowned himself leader of it. Soon enough he would be leader of Asia. We were overrun by the wicked group as the killing went on. Bombs went off every minute as my heart pounded. There were loud gun shots in the distance and horrible cries for people in need of help.

## 1 Year later

We were all treated in very harsh conditions. All of the people were slaves, working non-stop all day every day. They locked us up in old rooms every starless night, and whipped us till we bled. I, Gantulga Yemaun suffered exhaustion and infected cuts. Every day I carried huge heavy stones for building and I served the captains. We work the sweat of our bodies, and if we don't we suffer in pain. Everyone wailed desperately as we panted heavily. I was mad at how we were treated and how we were not important. Every night I thought of when I was a little kid who lived among the borderlands of the Gobi Desert. In the day the sun would always shine down on our little mud hut. Great big sand dunes. My heart was telling me to cross the desert while my mind was telling me the dangers. The next morning there was a frosty breeze that swayed around the camp. I had no blanket to keep me warm so I was constantly shivering. The dark clouds filled the sky as I bit my lip. Were we all going to die here? Panic stained me as I twitched my eyes at the thought. Dusk arrived and so did the moon. The wind howled loudly as I glared at it. Every breath I took was another second I lived. If I was going to

waste my time building and being whipped, I was crazy. So I thought to myself, if I was going to get out I would have to find a way out of this death trap.

The blistering, orange sun of dawn arose. What a beautiful free, world out there. I am going to make my life and all the worlds lives equal, because no one has the right to be superior among others. Nobody should be owned or accused. "The only day that is wasted is the day you did not laugh," is what my uncle used to say. So many unknown secrets that lie, but so many precious memories that live.

When I get out of here I am going to tell the world about human rights and that slavery should be abolished. I stroked the wall for freedom. The peaceful force of wind swayed around me. I slammed the wall in anger. As I cried in misery something fell on my head. I looked up to find a narrow small hole that led to the top of the wall.

This was a once in a lifetime chance. I grabbed the edge of the hole and kicked my legs at the wall, scattering to get up. I was desperate for freedom and equality because I have a dream that one day nobody will be slaves and nobody will be treated poorly. I pushed myself up with all my strength. I could see the sterile ground that led to freedom. As I gazed out to the view, a guard suddenly shouted "That slave is escaping, get him!" Everyone looked at me in amazement. There was a deep silence.

Suddenly one slave assaulted the guard with his fists and soon there was a huge fight. Another slave ran up the prison stairs and grabbed me and said "Kid, you have done well, go now and seek life and its gifts, good luck!"

I willingly jumped off the wall and landed in a bush. I scrambled out and ran down the path to a new life. When the prison was clear out of sight I took a while inspecting what was around me. The new green, shady trees towering over me, while the colourful flowers led me to a mission, a mission to raise awareness about human rights and how nobody should be a slave. But for that I would first have to go to China and there was only one way I knew, and that was across the Gobi! I will see the new tales and wonders of this extraordinary desert. This was going to be an extremely hard challenge, but it was for the fate of the future.

As I sauntered up the bleak hills I nervously scanned the landscape thinking the guards might be on to me. The bitter wind oscillated around me. The tall woodland trees shadowed me. I curiously ambled on as the musky smell of the unknown invaded my nostrils. The grim sky overlooked me. The light faded away as darkness rose. I chattered my teeth when the frigid air blew on me. The night was here, and I still didn't have a place to rest. I was feeling isolated, alone and afraid. No one was with me, and not a single sound was heard except for the quiet padding of my rubber shoes. A dirt ditch was parched near to a sturdy oak tree, "This will keep me hidden and safe, in the morning I will keep going towards the Gobi".

The morning was cool, and relaxing. The birds were singing and the sky was still blue. I set off following the dirt trail next to the gushing river. I was so hungry and if I was going to find food the river was the only way to get it. I thought fish was a good idea it's just how would I catch it? I thought to myself, maybe spear fishing how I used to when I was a child. I snapped a sharp twig off a weird looking tree. The sun was revealing the silver fish swimming swiftly in the river. I aimed and waited for the perfect chance to strike. My father was a master at spear fishing, he taught me and my older brother the best technique, to guess where the fish is going. So when a fish is swimming in a straight line, aim ahead of where the fish is going to swim and strike. As I waited patiently for a fish to swim by, I matched my breathing to the sway of the wind.

As a fish swam by I guessed where it would go and I hurled the twig forcefully at the fish. It pierced straight through the fish's flesh. After a while I bit off a chunk of meat and it tasted amazing. In no time the fish was finished and off I went.

As I walked on the trail that led up to a mountain, I lunged up the steep path panting heavily. I got to a height where I could see what was in front. There in my sight, a glimpse of the blurry border of the Gobi. A sense of excitement tingled down my spine. I was nearly there!

There in front of me, a start to the mystic desert. Great big sand dunes as far as I could see. The arid sand layered the desert. It was very bleak. This scorching desert lacked vegetation, and the thick stuffy air was hard to breathe in.

I began lumbering on the hot sand. The sun was almost directly in front of me. I stomped on, fascinated by the new land. I could see new animals like camels and surprisingly, deer. After a long, long drenched day, I came across a mud hut. I thought to myself "Why would anyone build a hut in the middle of nowhere?" Perhaps they would be kind enough to let me stay for the night. As I was staring at it the owner came out and looked at me suspiciously. After a long silence he said "Greetings young man, why you here?" I could see that his English was not that good.

"Uh I come from Mongolia. I want to go to China." The man looked at me puzzled.

"Are you... tired?"

"Yes."

"Come, come I prepare food."

"Thank you!"

"No problem," he said calmly. He led me inside his hut. It was very warm and cosy. The man showed me to my seat and gave me a steaming bowl of noodles. "Eat," he said. The man said "I Ming Da. You?" "I am Gantulga Yemaun." He stared at me looking confused. "You want to go China?" "Yes, I need to help Mongolia, many people are captured and are slaves," I replied in sadness.

"Where your Mother and Father?"

"They passed away when I was 17." Tears started rolling down my cheeks. There was a long silence. "I'm sorry," said Ming Da quietly. "Rest now, go tomorrow." "Thank you." I replied.

The next morning Ming prepared breakfast. When it was time to go Ming Da wished me luck and gave me a woolly fleece and I set off. Once again I was feeling determined to keep on going. I must say it was an amazing experience. The searing sun was blazing on in front of me. Lots of different animals like camels, Gobi bears, wolves, horses, eagles, and oxen live in the Gobi.

It was late morning and I was just passing over another sand dune, and in front of me the land turned hard. It was no longer soft sand, it was hard sand. As I went on I stared to the horizon. A panicky feeling chilled past me. I looked closer, as the sun shone in my eyes. I breathed heavily, what I was looking at was a towering sand storm that was slowly building its way towards me. Terror and fear filled me. I had never encountered a storm so terrifyingly massive. I knew what to do. I would wrap the fleece Ming Da gave to me around my face covering my eyes and nose. The space was wide open so not having to see was not that big of a problem.

I padded onwards facing the storm. It was getting closer every step I took. The sand was starting to whirl in the air. The wind was whipping my legs. As I took my last step, the storm towered me. I braced myself and wrapped my face in the fleece and jumped in...

I felt sheer excitement, as I kept running onward. I could hear the howling dust as it went over me. I peeked out of the fleece and saw nothing but brown dust and the flaming sun outlined over the shield of the roaring sand. The wind was blowing heavily at me. I was starting to think this was fine when I slammed into something really hard. I was in pain on the sand breathing heavily. My vision blurred and the sun was no longer to be seen.

I woke up feeling heavy. The sky was dark blue. It was night! I stood up. The cold blasted once I stood up. I couldn't think straight, what happened to me? It was so cold I fell right to the ground snuggling in my warm fleece. I flinched to the frosty air. I saw a cave that seemed to be carved out of rocks. No time to question, I ran over and held myself trying to lose the chilly feeling. It was better here. I gasped. Where was I? I looked out of the narrow hole. There was thousands of sparkling stars out tonight. The moon was the brightest. I started to feel lonely. The stars reminded me of Mongolia. I soon fell into a deep slumber.

Another morning arose. My bones ached from the blistering whips of the sand, and the walking. I crawled out of the small crack and tumbled forward. I looked behind me. There was a rocky cliff. I startled at the cliff. Its grazing height shocked me. There was another cliff right next to it except there was a narrow path that led straight down the middle. I said to myself "What amazing things nature has." I sauntered down the rugged passage, treading on the rocks. When the end was near it opened up into a huge area with a lake. Thank God! Water! I shouted in glory, as the feeling of glee spread within me. I haven't drunk for two days! I dived in the water. The fresh, refreshing, cool water washed over me. Desperately, I drank fanatically until I was all ready to go.

I packed up and padded to the desert. My head tilted up in alarm as I hear a loud snort. Panic shocked me. Just about 100 metres away, there was a bear. I've heard of these. My Uncle told me about what lurks in the desert. He mentioned a bear just like a grizzly but it was called a Gobi bear. A ferocious, 900 pound brute. The water must have washed off the dirty scent I was carrying. Sweating profusely, I nervously squirmed in the shadow of the rocks. I got closer and closer to the edge where I thought I was dead bait but luckily it galloped away before it noticed me just in time, leaving footprints of its huge paw and its sharp claws. I really thought I was going to die.

After that I ambled for the desert, but what I didn't know was that I was heading straight up a colossal cliff. It was about noon and the heat swayed up. I hiked all the way till dusk. Hundreds of stars appeared shimmering in the gloaming. I looked at the view, a truly appealing sky there was tonight. Beautiful purple clouds. I decided to go to sleep early for tomorrow.

For a few days I travelled on, seeing not only fantastic nature but also beautiful memories. Like the one time on the rocky cliffs I saw the ghost cat, a snow leopard in other words. I also saw wolves and horses. I admired weird landscape and terrific views of the desert. I found food by finding carcasses and lakes. It was almost like I belonged here, my home the Gobi. At night I could always hear a cry, the desert's cry.

One morning while I was hiking up on the cliffs I stopped to look at the view and in the distance I couldn't believe my eyes! I saw the majestic view of the Great Wall of China! I have almost completed my journey! I merrily darted towards the Great Wall.

I finally made it to Beijing, China! My mission was not over yet. I swore to save people and create human rights. That way everyone would live in peace and harmony. Well not only has the Gobi been a terrific journey, but it has also stored great memories. I certainly

saw the new tales of the Gobi Desert, and what nature has for us. This has been a journey, a journey that I will never forget.

A couple of months later Gantulga Yemaun raised awareness to the whole world about human rights, and soon helped create the human rights declaration. He became one of the world's most inspirational people. He died when he was 86 and forever went down in history for his courage and triumph. He will never be forgotten.

# The “Man-Eating” Figure of Gobi

*Korean International School, Springboard, Katana Longid, 12*

It was a very hot summer afternoon. A friend called Roger and I were in the southern part of the Gobi Desert, as part of an investigation into ghostly happenings in a small village. I remember many news reports about it, saying that it might be man-eating. Haru, a friend who lived there had witnessed many events – the figure would stand near people, and when they ran away, the figure vanished into thin air. The figure had also appeared in Haru’s home, and poltergeist activities had been present, but the main hot spot was only tens of metres from her house.

We decided to set up a tent, and were sure that we could go to Haru’s home if necessary, as it was very close to us. We also brought a pack of bread, three large bottles of water and some plastic cups. We brought a solar and wind charged battery, an LED light and a plastic 20” mini ceiling fan.

In Mainland China, Haru picked us up in a van, and it took about three whole minutes to load the back. We purposely put the most fragile things, like the solar panel, the wind turbine and the dismantled ceiling fan in it’s box on top, and the battery, water tanks and packed-up tent at the bottom. It was a very long ride. When we were pulling up to Haru’s house, I thought I saw the figure, about 12 feet away from the van, but nobody really saw it. I was looking out the other side, Roger was resting his eyes, and Haru was driving.

We got there, at around 5:00 pm, Roger was looking at the amazing, lonely landscape of Gobi. He was also watching Haru clean the windows of her isolated house and I think wondering what he had got himself into. He was sitting near the door, fascinated. I was setting up the battery, and hanging the light and fan. It took quite a while. I was about to bring the bread to the house when suddenly, Roger cried, ‘Martin! Come quick!’

Holy pigeon! Already!? I thought.

I went over to the door, and saw a grey figure standing there, but before I could take a picture of it, it vanished into thin air. It was the most amazing thing that I had ever witnessed in my entire life. First, we were looking at a grey figure, and next, the empty landscape of the Gobi.

That night was peaceful, and cool. I was relieved that the ceiling fan didn’t turn itself on, as Haru had once come home from a Christmas party, only to find two of the

three ceiling fans in her living room on at top speed – in the middle of winter! Her paperwork was a mess, as it has been on the dining table, right underneath one of the fans that were on. Also, in summer this year, when she came home once from shopping, her storage heaters were on and nearly burnt the house down it was so hot! It was our turn next, for something more dramatic – the tent shook badly, and when I went out to check what was shaking it, I saw the figure running away at full sprint, then disappearing into the darkness, maybe scared of me and Roger, or maybe the homemade light. I don't know.

The next day, after breakfast, we went a few meters from the tent, closer to where the ghost was said to be seen. I saw it, near Roger! 'SNAP' I finally got a photo of the thing. I was planning to scare him back at the tent with it, but I thought that he should see it while it was 16" away from him.

'Holy pigeon! Beside you! On your right!' I cried.

'OH MY GOODNESS!' he roared when he saw it.

'Did you take a picture of it!? It's gone!'

'I have', I replied.

Roger stared in fright at the photo that showed the ghost that was less than a meter away from him.

That was a close call, so we decided to go over to Haru's house.

'Martin, we could have slept here last night. Why didn't we?' asked Roger.

'I know, but the problem with that is, no one would have looked after the tent, in case of strong winds. We would have needed it anyway to shelter from the sunlight.'

Later we came to a conclusion that the ghost was not man-eating, as legend says. When we got to the house, I thought I felt a cold draft on my neck. I would have just dismissed it as the powerful ceiling fans, but I also felt a hand touch my shoulder.

'Do you know what happened about an hour ago?' I asked

'Yes,' replied Haru.

'I witnessed the whole thing from the balcony upstairs. The grey man was beside Roger, and he was scared to death, right?'

'That's exactly what happened,' sighed Roger, holding in his fear as he knew now that we weren't seeing things.

'Haru saw it too, and she didn't hear what we were saying.'

'It's been messing with me a lot.' Haru continued. 'I'm probably the one that it likes the most. The switches are its main toys, but sometimes, things go missing. Once, all the open doors slammed shut all at once. I also remember smelling eerie scents and hearing banging, tapping and sometimes moaning noises. The fridge has pencilled graffiti and dishes are mysteriously chipped. Sometimes it has the appearance of a ghostly figure, and sometimes I can just feel it here next to me. Then there were the incidents with the fans and the heaters I immediately knew that the ghost was playing with me when I went home to a luxurious sauna.'

Our time with Haru came to an end and we headed back home. I decided to submit the picture with captions to a local newspaper. Weeks later, I saw a story, saying 'Ordinary Men Save Region From Fear', but this wasn't the case. We were no heroes and the Gobi monster was not man-eating, I guess we were just a small part of this mysterious ghost story. Haru finally moved away from the house to busy Shenzhen, where we also live, but she brought with her souvenirs of her past life – her ceiling fans, her chipped dishes and her fridge.

# The Quest of the Prophecy of Destiny

*Ying Wa Primary School, Ocean Huang, 11*

## Prologue

Chilly, freezing wind was wailing in the air of the Gobi Desert. The sun was above the horizon and about to fall. Its remaining, dying glaze blazed out pale amber light, which turned the golden-brown sand to orange.

A camel caravan tribe of eight members was travelling slowly on the famous, long Silk Road on broad, endless Gobi Desert. The dying sun finally drowned under the horizon, leaving a long line of purple twilight. After a while, few stars emerged.

Galen Tuimer Baryon, the tribe leader of the camel caravan, was a muscular, tall, handsome, middle age Mongolian man. He had a short, black beard on his cheeks and chin. He raised his right hand to stop the tribe. Then he jumped down from his camel.

He announced, 'Let's stay here and rest until dawn.'

He sat down under a date palm with Sasha Aspen, his wife. Sasha is a young, beautiful, American woman. She was holding their baby on her arms tenderly. Galen hugged his wife and his son. Everything was peaceful and there was a long silence for a time of this couple and their children, staring at the night sky.

Suddenly, the wind came moaning through the trees, grass started to shatter, a quick galloping noise became louder and louder, and approached them.

The young tribe leader stood up with vigilance. He jumped onto the back of his camel and surveyed. Then he cried as loudly as he could, 'It's Bandits! Everyone, unsheathe your sabers from your scabbard! We have to defeat the bandits! Everyone follow me!'

He unsheathed his gleaming, long, sharp saber. In an instant, all the men of the tribe unsheathed their sabers and waved them high ready to fight the bandits.

Sasha was scared. She hugged her son tightly, as if he was going to disappear any second. But the baby boy was still sleeping quietly in her bosom. She hid under a massive tall date palm immediately.

Three men dressed in black rushed towards the tribe on the back of three strong and

powerful horses. One was very tall and thin; one was very short and fat; the last one, who was in the middle, was medium-sized and there was a long, deep scar across his face which made him look very dreadful. He unsheathed his huge, fearsome, long saber and pointed to the camel tribe.

‘Attack!’ He yelled. ‘And grab everything as you can from this caravan!’

The three bandits and the camel tribe had a tremendous fight. Galen was fighting with the bandit leader.

‘Run!’ yelled Galen. ‘Run Sasha!’

Sasha was terrified. She wailed at Galen, ‘What about you?’

‘I’m fine!’ said the tribe leader. ‘Just bring our little Tiglon as you leave...’

Just then, strong wind roared, which flung up the sand with its huge, gigantic paws and finally, sand was blown as high as a mountain; the sky was covered by the sand and storm roared. Everything vanished in the roars of the sandstorm. The Gobi Desert remained silent...

## Chapter 1 - The Complicated Prophecy

The pale white moon shone like a silver plate, spreading its sacred light onto a steep mountain of Gobi Desert. On the remote part of the mountain, there was a moonlit place where a flat, shimmering, pale blue-green stone was risen straight up from the middle of a round pool. On the mountain, there were three felines. One was lying on the stone with its nose touching onto the stone while the other two were sitting beside the pool. They had the same pelts which were pale silver-gray tabby coat with huge, dark, round spots. They were snow leopards. Their appearances were different although they had the same soft pelts.

The one on the stone was a tall, broad-shouldered, long-legged, lithe, slender, sturdy, sleek, well-muscled and muscular male leopard. He had wide, pale, bright, stormy, brilliant, clear ice-blue sapphire eyes, three rippling flame-coloured stripes running down from his head to tail and an unusually long, winding, sleek, striped, plummy, bushy, thick tail.

One of those beside the pool was the youngest. He was big, broad-shouldered and battle-scarred. He had one long, deep battle scar on his shoulder, dark, fierce amber eyes and long, curved, and hooked, thorn-sharp claws.

The other snow leopard beside the pool was the oldest and the largest. He was huge, fluffy, long-bodied, heavy and thick-furred with tufty ears, one of which is shredded, loyal, wise, warm dark blue eyes and a distinctive, bushy, snow-white tail.

The three snow leopards didn’t say anything and it left an eerie silence.

After a while, the snow leopard with amber eyes broke the silence and asked the snow leopard with a long tail, ‘Firestar,’ it said, ‘Did StarTribe send any omens to you?’

‘Yes, it did,’ the long-tailed snow leopard stood up from the place where he was lying and replied, ‘Indeed there is, Brambleclaw. But the prophecy is far too complicated.’

‘Can you read it out, Firestar?’ asked the largest snow leopard.

‘Yes,’ replied Firestar. ‘The omen says “The son of the flame on an aspen is destined to save the Gobi Desert.” Whitestorm, can you get what this prophecy meant?’ Firestar asked the largest one. His blue eyes were confused.

‘I don’t really get it either,’ said Whitestorm, ‘because fire is the main enemies to us, but at least one thing is sure that something can somehow save us from our hunters.’

## Chapter 2 - Tragedy

A beam of pale golden sunlight broke through the window of a shaggy, little cottage which lies near the foot of a mountain in Gobi Desert. The sunlight shone straight into a small, tidy room. In the room, there was a handsome boy who was about six years old, sleeping on his hard, small wooden bed with patchy bedclothes and was covered by a flimsy, tattered, wool blanket.

Then the bright sunlight woke the little boy up. He dressed in an old, tight Mongolian suit. Then he got water from a pool and went out for food with his mother. Life was peaceful until one day when he was nine years old. His mother was lying on her bed, with a very serious illness.

The boy's mother was a beautiful American woman. She was Sasha Aspen, once a great camel caravan tribe leader, Galen Tuimer Baryon's wife, and the boy was Tiglon Baryon, who was the baby that was sleeping in Sasha's arms on the night when the bandits attacked.

Tiglon Baryon stepped into a dark, gloomy room. 'Mum?' he said when he arrived at the entrance of the room.

'Come here, Tiglon,' said a weak, soft voice.

Tiglon came near the bed where his mother was lying. Now, his mother was skinny and fragile.

'Come closer to me, my dear,' Sasha spoke weakly.

Tiglon walked next to Sasha and knelt down.

'Tiglon, listen to my last words carefully,' she began, 'I am going to die.'

'No! Mum!' Tiglon sobbed loudly.

'No! Mum! You will be fine!' Tiglon continued as his eyes brimmed with tears.

'Calm down, my sweetheart,' Sasha comforted Tiglon while stroking his head and tidying his long hair.

'Did I tell you that your father was a great camel caravan tribe leader? And he had disappeared during a sandstorm and was not found when you asked about your father before?'

'Yes,' Tiglon nodded, a drop of piercing tear dropped from his dark amber eyes and trickled down his smooth, swarthy cheeks.

'Your father is a camel caravan tribe leader indeed. But he wasn't really lost in a sandstorm, he was killed in a fierce battle with bandits,' said Sasha.

'What?' squeaked Tiglon surprisingly, his amber eyes grew huge.

'Yes,' Sasha replied. 'I met your father while I was lost in Gobi Desert, and then I married him. At that battle, I was supposed to die with your father, but he told me to escape with you, so now, you survived and so do I.'

Tiglon nodded and wiped his tears away from his face with the sleeve of his clothes.

'This...is a knife your father gave me...' Sasha whispered with a few struggling coughs and handed Tiglon a knife.

The knife was well designed. A platinum made tiger was surrounded by three golden dragons. They were carved on the scabbard. Its hilt was inlaid by five precious stones: diamond, emerald, ruby, topaz and a sapphire in the middle. When Tiglon turned to the back of the knife, the five colours of stones and the carving of tiger and dragon all shone glaringly, which made Tiglon's eyes glow too.

'Cool!' he exclaimed. 'I feel real power coming from it.'

He read the words on the back of the knife in Mongolian language, 'Khutga Ni Khuvi Zayaa.' Then he murmured to oneself, 'Knife of Destiny!'

'Tiglon,' Sasha nodded quietly and said feebly, 'this is Baryon family's heirloom. The three bandits came for this knife on the night of the battle... all the bandits wanted to have was the material that made this knife.'

'Guide...your...steps... wisely and... follow your dreams...because this is your destiny... remember my words...'

Sasha panted heavily and said.

'Yes... mum,' whimpered Tiglon.

Sasha got up and hugged Tiglon, gave him a kiss on his forehead and glanced at him for the last time with her blue eyes sympathetically. Everything was quiet and peaceful. Tiglon closed his eyes to feel the last warmth of his mother's hug. While he was intoxicating in the warmth of his mother's loving hug, all the warmth gradually faded away, leaving Tiglon alone in the cold room where the wind roared outside. Tiglon opened his eyes, everything remained still, but the one difference was that Sasha could not soothe him evermore.

'Mum?' Tiglon cried out, looking at Sasha.

'Mum?' Tiglon repeated by pushing Sasha. He pushed several times again, but Sasha didn't show any response.

'Mum!' Tiglon wailed when he found that his beautiful mother had died by staring at her lying motionlessly without any breath. His blood went cold at once after this tragedy. He leaped onto his mother's bed, hugged his mother tightly and wailed. There were only wails of Tiglon and the roars of wind, making the scene more wretched.

Tiglon staggered out of his cottage and carried her mother's body to the foot of the mountain to bury her. Wind roared and roared which made it hard to walk. Tiglon walked and walked with unsteady steps. He didn't realize that he had already walked over the foot of the mountain and he was walking straight to the remote part of the mountain.

Suddenly, the white, fluffy clouds in the sky began to gather, and soon, it had become a huge leopard, roaring and thundering with its massive paws toward Tiglon. Tiglon was already overwhelmed by the tragedy of his mother's death so he didn't care about anything. The leopard banged to him with one paw. Tiglon felt as if thunder was roaring in his ears and he was unconscious at once...

### Chapter 3 - The Knife Of Destiny

When Tiglon Baryon woke up, he found that he was wrapped in a warm and cozy hammock. He sat up instantly and glanced around. He saw that he was sleeping in a massive, broad cave carved with ancient moss and it was so tall as if it was linking with the sky. Beside him, there sat a tall, pale silver-gray and spotted feline with three ginger stripes and an unusually long, bushy, thick tail.

'Ah!' screamed Tiglon when he saw this enormous creature beside him. The feline fixed its piercing blue gaze on his face thoughtfully. Tiglon was also a bit thoughtful about why this large creature didn't gulp him in one mouthful instead of staring at him?

Then, the feline got up and walked out of the cave. Tiglon was curious so he jumped out from the hammock and followed the feline out of the cave. When he walked out of the cave, he saw nothing scary, exciting or that made him feel happy, but Tiglon's heart felt stabbed with pain when he saw something lying on the clearing. That was his mother's corpse.

'Mum!' Tiglon cried out and then rushed to the clearing and hugged his mother's corpse tightly.

The large feline whispered to a small feline with a thin dappled tail, bright, spirited amber eyes and a bent whisker and a large feline with dark brown legs, but the strange thing is, the three felines had shared the same pelt colour, which was pale silver-gray tabby with huge dark round spots. After the first feline whispered to them, the two other felines walked to Sasha's corpse and started to pick her up.

'Never try to touch my mother, or I will shred you into rotten pieces of flesh!' Tiglon growled at the felines threateningly and bared his small white teeth with a snarl.

'Oh yes, shred us into pieces if you dare, you scrap of torn feather of a crow!' the feline with brown legs jeered and sneered at Tiglon with the language of human unexpectedly.

Tiglon was extremely furious of this insult, but he was more even shocked when he heard that the feline could speak human language.

'What did you say?' Tiglon asked the brown-legged feline furiously and surprisingly.

'You heard me, stinking fox dung, shred us if you dare!' the brown-legged feline jeered at Tiglon, with its cold yellow gaze glaring at him.

Although shocked about the incident, Tiglon couldn't bear his anger at last. He unsheathed the knife which Sasha gave him. When he unsheathed the knife, a piercing blue light shone which meant everyone couldn't open their eyelids.

When Tiglon opened his eyes, he saw that the light was shining through the whole clearing. The blade of the knife also carved the same picture on the blade on one side and on the other side carved the words 'Knife of Destiny.' The carving on the knife shone, Tiglon felt that his spirit was all connected with the knife and his eyes gleamed by the light of the knife, making his dark amber eyes turned to pale amber.

After a long while, the light of the knife faded and it sheathed into the scabbard automatically by itself.

'So you have already known the power of my knife, you big and stupid lump of fur!' Tiglon jeered at the brown-legged feline in return.

The brown-legged feline was too shocked to say anything.

'Leave him alone, Dustfoot,' the long-tailed feline said to the brown-legged feline.

But before Dustfoot could open his mouth to protest, Tiglon shouted to him,

'Did you hear what the long-tailed big guy told you to do? He told you to leave me and my mother alone!'

Dustfoot's neck fur bristled with anger and growled deeply in his throat.

'Dustfoot!' the long-tailed feline told him solemnly and the feline with a bent whisker gave Dustfoot a friendly nudge, which made him calm down a little bit. Suddenly, Tiglon fell down on his mother's body again and fainted.

'Onewhisker, Dustfoot, pull him back to my den at once!' said the long-tailed feline to the feline with a bent whisker and Dustfoot. Onewhisker obeyed and dipped his head respectfully to the long-tailed tom. However, Dustfoot showed a look of unwillingness in his pale yellow eyes, and the long-tailed feline gave Dustfoot a look of suspicion with his blue eyes narrowed.

Finally, Dustfoot gave a last hateful glance to Tiglon, and obeyed by dipping his head respectfully to the long-tailed feline and uttered a few words uneasily to the long-tailed feline, 'Yes, Firestar.'

## Chapter 4 – A New Home

When Tiglon woke up again, he saw the long-tailed feline sitting beside him, and he was in the same place where he first woke up. He sat up and glared at the long-tailed feline and said fiercely, ‘Where is my mother?’

The long-tailed feline replied, ‘She was just outside the camp, where all of us were waiting for you to bury her by yourself.’

The long-tailed feline went out of the cave and headed straight to an underground tunnel. Tiglon followed the feline. When he glanced around the whole clearing, he found that it is on the top of the mountain where he was living with his mother before. He could see the most beautiful scenery in Gobi Desert from here. But Tiglon had no mood to watch the sceneries. He just wanted to watch his generous mother and gave her his blessing for the last time. He squeezed himself into the underground tunnel. Magically, the interior of the tunnel was bright and broad as if it was a large room.

After they got out of the tunnel, everything suddenly turned dark. Tiglon followed the feline until he saw a large hole. They jumped out of the hole and saw that the hole was just a big tree hole from an ancient willow. Beside the willow, there were sitting ten felines. Tiglon could see Onewhisker and Dustfoot. He gave Dustfoot a hostile glance. Dustfoot shot him back an enmity glare.

Tiglon walked close to his mother’s body and said sorrowfully, ‘Mum, I hope you have a good time when you go to heaven.’

After saying, he watched his mother’s beautiful face for the last time and knelt with his head touched on the ground. After Firestar dipped his head, all the felines followed to do so, except Dustfoot. Finally, Sasha’s corpse was buried under a quiet and peaceful area.

After the funeral, Tiglon sat at the side of the edge of the clearing, which was surrounded by gorse and bramble bushes, watching the beautiful sceneries and the other mountains in Gobi Desert. The long-tailed feline approached Tiglon with Onewhisker, a friendly small feline with a bent whisker and another huge feline that Tiglon didn’t know which had an unusually, bushy, white tail.

‘Whitestorm,’ the long-tailed feline said to the huge feline with a bushy, white tail, ‘Can you tell me what had happened in the morning when you led the dawn patrol.’

Whitestorm dipped his head and said, ‘In the dawn patrol, I took Brambleclaw and Onewhisker. When we arrived at the foot of the mountain, we saw two humans, one was a male cub and one was a female adult, so Onewhisker, Brambleclaw and I brought them back to the camp.’

The long-tailed feline nodded in acknowledgement and asked Tiglon tenderly, ‘What’s your name, youngster?’

‘My name is Tiglon Baryon,’ Tiglon said quietly and asked. ‘Who are you?’

‘I am Firestar, the leader of ThunderTribe, tribe of the snow leopards,’ the long-tailed feline answered.

Tiglon remained silent and wooden, but when he heard the word ‘snow leopard’, he turned his face to Firestar and exclaimed, ‘Snow leopard! I have heard many stories about you guys from my mother and you are known to be swift, fierce, powerful and loyal! She also said that snow leopards are “the king of mountains”!’

‘Thank you for your mother’s appreciation. Now humans just know how to rip of snow

leopard's pelt instead of leaving them in peace.' Firestar said sadly and shook his head.

'Why do you say that?' asked Tiglon.

'It is because in these years, humans always take their guns and kill our tribe members for our pelt. Originally, snow leopards and humans are friends, but after humans started to hunt us, we became enemies. You cannot blame Dustfoot for being rude to you, because all his parents and siblings were killed by human hunters when he was a cub. So he has hated humans since he was a cub and was desperate for revenge.' Firestar explained to Tiglon.

All the feeling of hatred to Dustfoot in Tiglon's heart vanished without a trace and it all turned into sympathy for Dustfoot and he thought of his dead mother.

'But Firestar,' Tiglon asked, 'how could you speak our language?' Tiglon's amber eyes grew wide with curiosity.

'That's a very good question, Tiglon,' Firestar replied. 'When I was a cub, I heard the elders' story about the animals.'

Firestar began the story, 'In the Legend of the Tribes, the God of the Sky, Tenger and his brother, the God of the Sea, Dalain created five tribes, they are MoonTribe, ThunderTribe, StoneTribe, CloudTribe and the SkyTribe. MoonTribe is wolves, ThunderTribe is snow leopards, StoneTribe is bears, CloudTribe is eagles and SkyTribe is humans. The five tribes all shared the same language and lived peacefully together as they were created by the same ancestors. But one day, after some SkyTribe warriors lit up a fire, the humans disappeared the next day and had never appeared in our world, until one day, they appeared again and some of them carried guns to hunt us. Then we changed our language and hid this secret for thousands of years since Thunderstar, had founded ThunderTribe and changed the language into growls to scare off our enemy and most importantly, the humans.'

'There are also warriors to protect ThunderTribe.' Firestar continued after clearing his throat, 'Warriors need to follow the warrior code and protect the tribe when attacked by enemies. Our main enemies are humans and some wolves of MoonTribe, especially Saberfang, a huge, gigantic wolf with unusually long, deadly, sharp, yellow teeth that all the animals of Gobi Desert have fear of. All the other tribes lived in peace at first, but the peace was fading since the time that Saberfang had been born. But luckily, StarTribe lead our path, and we are still safe.'

'What is StarTribe?' asked Tiglon curiously.

'StarTribe is a tribe that noble warriors of each tribe go to when they have died. But if some warriors have made great crimes and are against the warrior code, they will go to another place called DarkTribe,' answered Firestar.

'So I am really a descendent of SkyTribe!' Tiglon said excitedly.

'Thank you for sharing these stories to me,' Tiglon said gratefully. 'I think it's time for me to go home.'

While Tiglon was heading to the underground tunnel, Firestar called him and walked to him.

'Tiglon,' he said, 'I know that now you are desperate for a home but your mother has passed away and you are too small to look after yourself. Besides, the world outside is too dangerous. Why don't you join ThunderTribe and live with us? Here is safe, and you have a home and family here!' suggested Firestar.

'Oh yes! Why haven't I thought about that?' Tiglon asked himself. 'Why don't I just join ThunderTribe? It is safe and once more, it seems a warm and joyful family!'

'Okay, Firestar. I will stay here,' after a deep thought, he told Firestar, 'That's great, Tiglon. I will hold your apprentice ceremony with Leafcub.' Firestar said cheerfully.

'What is an apprentice, Firestar?' Tiglon asked.

'Oh, apprentice is a snow leopard cub which will be apprenticed and trained by a warrior or deputy,' answered Firestar.

'But what is a deputy?' Tiglon asked nonstop.

'A deputy is the second-in-commander who is going to become the leader when the leader dies and receives nine-lives from StarTribe ancestors in Starpool. After receiving nine lives, their warrior names will be changed and given their leader name by StarTribe in honour of our wise ancestors, and now our deputy is Whitestorm,' said Firestar patiently.

'So you really have nine lives!' Tiglon's amber eyes grew wide with amazement.

'Oh yes. I did get my nine lives many years ago. My name was Firestorm until I became the ThunderTribe leader!' laughed the ThunderTribe leader.

'So...' Tiglon still wanted to ask, but was interrupt by Firestar.

'You will know everything after you have become an apprentice,' said Firestar, 'Follow me and let's go to the Highledge now!'

Although Tiglon still had many questions, he kept them in his mind and followed Firestar to the bottom of an enormous, tall stone which Tiglon recognized was where he had slept when he was fainted. At the bottom of the stone there sat a small, plump male snow leopard cub with a long, bushy, striped, sleek tail like Firestar's tail, but the cub's tail was even plumier than Firestar's.

Tiglon sat beside the cub quietly. The cub turned his tiny head to Tiglon and squeaked ardourly, 'Hello there! I am Leafcub, Firestar's son! Who are you?'

'I am Tiglon Baryon,' replied Tiglon. He liked this cub because he was cheerful and was the generous kind leader, Firestar's son.

'Nice to meet you!' said Leafcub and he put one of his paws in front of Tiglon.

'Nice to meet you too!' replied Tiglon and put his hand in front of Leafcub too.

They shook 'paws' together. Just then, Firestar leaped onto the Highledge and announced, 'Let the snow leopards old enough to catch their prey, come and join this meeting!' Immediately, snow leopard burst from stone caves and gathered around the Highledge.

Firestar began his speech, 'Leafcub, you have been with us for three years, and it is the time for you to start your warrior training.'

'Leafcub, come here.' said Firestar gently.

Leafcub climbed up to the Highledge bravely and settled himself beside Firestar.

'Leafcub,' Firestar said solemnly, 'from now on, you will be trained as a warrior apprentice and until you have earned your warrior name, you will be known Leafpaw. Brambleclaw will be your mentor! Brambleclaw, you are a new warrior of ThunderTribe, I hope you can pass the skills that I had taught you to your apprentice.'

A large, broad-shouldered snow leopard climbed onto the Highledge from another side and pride gleamed in the young warrior's amber eyes as he bent his head to touch noses with Leafcub. As Leafcub had finished his apprentice ceremony and jumped down from the Highledge, he whispered to Tiglon, 'Good luck.'

After a while, Firestar said again, 'A human cub has come to ThunderTribe and he have already showed his bravery when he unsheathed his knife and his loyalty to his

mother. StarTribe has already shown its approval - this newcomer is proper to become a great warrior and is free to join ThunderTribe as an apprentice.'

'Come here,' Firestar said gently to Tiglon.

Nervousness and excitement came to Tiglon when he climbed onto the Highledge and stood beside Firestar.

'Starting from today,' Firestar declared seriously, 'Until he has earned his warrior name, he will be trained as an warrior apprentice and he will be renamed as Flamepaw in honour of his blazing amber eyes while he unsheathed his knife. I, Firestar, the leader of ThunderTribe will be his mentor! I swear by StarTribe that I will pass every experience I have gained through these years to this young apprentice.'

After that, he bent down and touched noses with Tiglon. Yowls of surprise thundered around the stone.

After the ceremony, Firestar said to Tiglon, 'Tiglon, you will live in my den from now until you have become a warrior.'

'What an honor!' exclaimed Tiglon in his heart.

In the den under the Highledge, Tiglon looked at Firestar quietly. Firestar was sleeping. He wrapped around his long tail and curled himself into a tight ball.

Then Tiglon walked out of the den and stared at the cold, starry sky and prayed in his heart, 'Please, mum! Guide my steps wisely and light the path of my destiny!'

## Chapter 5 - The Quest of the Stone of Destiny

It was a tranquil night. Twelve-year-old Tiglon Flameheart Baryon dreamt that he was prowling above the sky with stars. Suddenly, he saw two blurred figures. They then grew larger and distinctly gradually came near to him. They were one man and one woman. The man looked like him, but was much older, taller and stronger; while the woman was not another person, it was whom he loved the most-Sasha, his beautiful mother.

'Mum,' Tiglon cried unbelievably and surprisingly. 'And... eh... Dad?'

The couple nodded and hugged him. Tiglon closed his eyes to experience the warmth of his mother and father. The warmth lasted for a long time.

Suddenly, something made his eyes open, and the thing he saw was not the starry sky or his mother or father. He just saw everything had changed - the moon was shining ghostly, making the sand of the desert silver. He heard the shrill cries of battle. He saw blood spilled over his whole sight.

Fantastically, Tiglon saw his father appear again. He was waving the Knife of Destiny and fighting three bandits. The three bandits were swaying their sabers to his father, which made a long cut on his back. He shouted and waved his knife more quickly. The knife blazed out blue light and connected to the sky, the sky immediately made thunder and lightning which banged to the three bandits.

'Sasha! Get this knife and flee!' Tiglon's father yelled.

Tiglon saw his mother got the knife and ran with a baby. He recognized that the baby was himself. Then, a sandstorm covered everything which made him blind, but the cries of battle still echoed in his mind, and then faded away...

Tiglon woke up. Cold sweat streamed from his forehead and spine when he recalled the cruel scene of the battle. Beside him sat the ThunderTribe leader, Firestar.

'Tiglon, are you okay?' He curled his tail up and asked.

'Yes, I am okay.'

'So why you were shouting and yelling just now?' asked Firestar.

'Uh...just a nightmare...' said Tiglon.

'Tell me about your nightmare,' asked Firestar.

Then Tiglon told him about his nightmare, about all that he saw and heard.

'Tiglon, can you describe the three bandits for me again?' Firestar asked.

'One was tall and thin, one was short and fat; and the last one was medium sized...'

Firestar interrupted him and suddenly slapped against the wall with one of his powerful paws. 'I will take my revenge if I find them.' He murmured.

'Who are they, Firestar?' Tiglon was cautious and amazed as he had never seen Firestar lose control of his temper on such an occasion.

'The thin one is called Bone Snake, the fat one is called Ice Hoot and the last one is called Blood Scourge.' Firestar replied.

'They kill my father. I am going to take my revenge!' said Tiglon furiously.

'What?' shouted Firestar suddenly, 'Galen was killed!'

'Yes,' Tiglon nodded. 'You know my father?'

'Yes, of course I know him,' replied Firestar, 'He was ThunderTribe's benefactor.

The three bandits are snow leopard hunters. Bone, Ice and Blood attacked our camp for our treasure, Stone of Destiny and they hunted for our pelts. Luckily your father saved us. Although the stone was stolen, no one was hurt. That time, our leader was Bluestar and he thanked your father for saving us. But unfortunately, after Galen left, the three bandits attacked the camp again and killed Dustfoot's parents and siblings, and also my father and my sister. I was a cub at that time, but I have never forgotten that bloody and horrible night.'

He cleared his throat and continued, 'StarTribe sent me an omen for the night you became a warrior. The omen is "An ice, a bone and a scourge was controlled by a precious stone. They were struck by fire, but it didn't break the stone. The stone made them go mad. Only a knife could break the stone and stop them from destroying the Gobi Desert." Let's go to Starpool immediately and get the hints that StarTribe sent us for the quest.'

When they arrived at Starpool, it was already evening. Firestar and Tiglon entered an ancient tunnel in the Highstones, and Firestar swam across the Moonpool and jumped onto a glimmering, blue-green stone while Tiglon stood beside the pool. The stone was called the Moonstone, where the leaders received their nine lives and tribe healers went to speak with the StarTribe. After a while, Firestar jumped down from Moonstone and led Tiglon to leave there.

That night, while Firestar was having dinner with Tiglon, he talked to him, 'Tiglon, StarTribe sent me the hints of the quest of finding the Stone of Destiny. He said, "Slip out of your den in a starry midnight. Leave your own kin in his den. Bring your apprentice and cross the Silk Road to find the cliff of flame. In a bright cave, you will have your battle of the stone." The cliff of flames means the Flaming Cliffs in Gobi Desert, and we must cross the Silk Road. We have to begin our journey this midnight.'

'Will we bring Leafstorm with us?' asked Tiglon.

'No, we won't. He has already shown his loyalty to his tribe for risking his life to fight an eagle with you, to protect Willowpelt's two cubs and he deserved to be a warrior with you. Also, the omen said that not to bring my own kin. Leafstorm was my own kin so I shouldn't bring him. Now, just have a full stomach to fight for the quest because you need power to finish the quest, and you are the one to save the whole Gobi

Desert.' Firestar said sincerely.

A heavy pressure suddenly landed on Tiglon's shoulders as he knew that he was the one in the prophecy that StarTribe sent to save the Gobi Desert. He had his dinner dully. While he was resting in his own den, he stared at a glittering star and prayed, 'Mum, please guide my step, bless and protect me to finish my quest safely!'

Tiglon and Firestar slipped out from the camp that midnight while every snow leopard was sleeping in their dens. While they were running down to the foot of the mountain, Tiglon glanced at the old cottage where he used to live with his mother. He felt a pang of sadness and loneliness, but when he thought of his important quest, he went on and followed Firestar to the Flaming Cliffs.

During the long journey, Firestar let Tiglon ride on his back to have a rest. Finally, they arrived at the Flaming Cliffs. They saw piles of tall red mountains that looked like they were just flamed by sun. Tiglon took out the Knife of Destiny and grasped its hilt tight, as if battle was going to start any second.

Then they found a cave on the cliffs. They stepped into the cave with exceptional caution and saw three men, who were the bandits they were looking for.

Bone Snake, Ice Hoot and Blood Scourge were kneeling beside a huge, colourful, glimmering diamond.

'Bone Snake, Ice Hoot and Blood Scourge! All you three roll out from your stall full of fleas!' Firestar let out a menacing deep growl.

'You think your guys are so powerful, huh? You are just rotten bones, melted ice and stinking blood.' Tiglon continued then.

The three men stood up arrogantly and bowed to the diamond.

'What should we do, master?' asked Blood Scourge.

'Kill'em all!' An eerie voice echoed.

The three bandits unsheathed their sabers and pointed to Tiglon and Firestar, 'Never try to stop us from destroying the world, or we will slice you into pieces!' Blood Scourge threatened them.

'Attack!' Firestar waved his long tail high and cried.

Tiglon unsheathed the Knife of Destiny and fought the three bandits with Firestar.

'Get the Stone of Destiny and destroy it!' Firestar cried.

Tiglon rushed to the front of the diamond. Suddenly, a ghostly snow leopard appeared. It was the largest creature that Tiglon had ever seen. It was gigantic with fearful white teeth, dreadful and deadly claws, massive and hefty paws, a ragged pelt criss-crossed with scars, and cunning pale yellow eyes.

'Tigerstar!' Firestar was shocked. 'You were the cruelest and most blood-thirsty leader I had ever met! But why are you there? You should be dead and was banished to the DarkTribe!'

Tigerstar swayed his frightful front claws and leaped at Firestar and Tiglon. Firestar slid away with a swift of his tail and Tiglon swung his knife to Tigerstar.

'Clang!' claws and knife crashed. Tiglon slashed one part of Tigerstar's claws away and began to give him another strike.

Just then, all the carvings on the knife shone, and the diamond has the carving also same as the knife. Meanwhile, blue light shone, Tiglon felt his eyes glowed. Then he felt he was soon lifted into the air, feeling that power was coming everywhere. He felt his power from his father and the warmth from his mother. He let all his power focus on the blade of the knife.

With a mighty strike, Tigerstar was sucked into the diamond and was locked in it. He cried crazily. It made the Stone of Destiny roll and roll.

## Chapter 6 - The Last Chance

When Tiglon wanted to destroy the Stone of Destiny, Blood Scourge said, 'Hey, you, don't destroy our master, or I will kill this snow leopard and make you to go to hell!'

Tiglon turned his head, he really saw Firestar lying on a stone and worse was that a long, silver saber was hanging on his neck.

'Don't care about me, young Baryon! Just save the Gobi Desert and finish your quest!' Firestar shouted seriously.

While Tiglon was floundering, Ice Hoot suddenly cried, 'Oh Jesus Christ! It was Galen Tuimer Baryon! No!'

Then, Bone Snake followed to yell, 'Blood! It's Galen Baryon! He has revived to take his revenge for us!'

When Blood turned his head and then he saw a handsome boy, holding the Knife of Destiny. He had long, sleek, black hair and glimmering, dark, piercing, round, justice amber eyes, which was the appearance of younger Galen Tuimer Baryon.

'What?' Blood said unbelievably.

'It's the time!' thought Tiglon.

He waved his knife and stabbed into the Stone of Destiny. Immediately, shrill cries of Tigerstar began to fade in piercing blue lights followed by the three men's fading cries. After the blue light died out, everything changed. Firestar and Tiglon saw Tiglon's parents, Galen Tuimer Baryon and Sasha Aspen, and a large, lithe and slender female snow leopard appeared. The snow leopard had clear, intense, brilliant, pale ice-blue eyes and unusually pale blue-gray spots on her coat.

'Bluestar!' Firestar said surprisingly and pleasantly.

Bluestar stepped forward and dipped her head to Tiglon and said, 'I am Bluestar from StarTribe. Thank you for saving the Gobi Desert.'

Bluestar took a step backward and Sasha and Galen took a pace forward.

'I am really proud of you, my son!' Galen said contentedly with a smile.

Tiglon turned to Sasha, she was looking at him with a proud and gentle smile. In the moment, Tiglon Flameheart Baryon really felt warmness and happiness for the very first time.

Galen Tuimer Baryon, Sasha Aspen and Bluestar vanished into the air after a while.

## Chapter 7 - The Path of Destiny

When Tiglon and Firestar returned to the camp, they were astounded to see a scene in horror. Whitestorm, the wise deputy just remained the broken blood-soaked body which was covered by a large pool of blood. On the other side, lay a huge, massive wolf's body, its unusually long teeth was stained with blood and his throat was torn and a small pool of dried blood was near it.

'Firestar!' said Brambleclaw surprisingly and stood up from the crowd surrounding the two corpses.

'What had happened while I was not here?' Firestar asked. His shocked blue eyes still stared at the corpses of Whitestorm and the wolf.

Brambleclaw told them the whole story of the calamity. He was sorrowful and heaved a deep sigh:

While Firestar and Tiglon were not here, a wolf, Saberfang from MoonTribe attacked the tribe with one patrol. Whitestorm ordered the camp members to resist. Brambleclaw defeated some wolves and they all fled, which left Saberfang fighting with Whitestorm. Brambleclaw immediately wanted to help Whitestorm to fight against Saberfang. When Brambleclaw was almost near them, blood had soaked Whitestorm's whole body at that time already. He told Brambleclaw to stay away. Brambleclaw wanted to get near, but they fought with each other fiercely thus Brambleclaw couldn't bear a hand to Whitestorm.

Just then, Saberfang leaped to Whitestorm, pouncing on Whitestorm and forced his twice larger body at Whitestorm. Whitestorm struggled, but Saberfang bared his long teeth and wanted to kill Whitestorm with one killing bite. Whitestorm reacted nimbly. He quickly stabbed his claws into Saberfang's throat. While Saberfang was falling down, struggling from pain, trying to stop streams of blood bursting out from his neck, Brambleclaw leaped over to him and tore his throat with his unsheathed claws immediately, which made Saberfang breathless at last. When Brambleclaw rushed to Whitestorm then, Whitestorm had already lay there and stared at the sky blankly.

Tiglon gazed at Whitestorm, the old deputy's blue eyes were shining under the sunlight. Tiglon could imagine how he fought bravely for his tribe. Firestar's expression was hard to read, but at least Tiglon knew that Firestar was sad for losing his loyal deputy for a very long time.

Tiglon was sad too because when he first came to the tribe, Whitestorm always encouraged him when he despaired. He mentored him sometimes when Firestar was sick or took his journey to Starpool.

Firestar walked to the Highledge slowly and jumped onto it. All the snow leopards under the stone stared at him.

'As you know, ThunderTribe had lost a loyal and brave deputy, Whitestorm,' Firestar began his speech, 'We will all cherish our memory of him, and hope that he will have his wonderful and magnificent life in StarTribe.'

Then he dipped his head, followed by all the snow leopards and Tiglon.

After a long silence, Firestar announced, 'The time has come to appoint the new deputy of ThunderTribe. I say these words before StarTribe, that the spirits of our ancestors may hear and approve my choice,' he paused and cleared his throat and declared, 'Tiglon Flameheart Baryon will be the new deputy of ThunderTribe!'

Yowls of shock rose around the stone.

Tiglon pondered long and deeply for a while. Then he stood up and walked to the foot of the stone. He said aloud, 'Firestar, snow leopards of ThunderTribe, it's my great honour to be the deputy of ThunderTribe, but I can't do it.'

Yowls of shock rose again and Firestar stared at him surprisingly too.

'Firestar, all the snow leopards of ThunderTribe, my mother had always told me to follow my destiny. I didn't really get it at first, but I get it now. I can't live forever and spent my life like a snow leopard. I am a human so I must do my duty as a human. My uncle, aunts and the entirely family members are all waiting in my home tribe far away from the Gobi Desert. Firestar, I am going to leave the ThunderTribe and look for my destiny as a human. Thank you for your mentoring and care for me. You have also provided a great home for me. I treat you as my dearest friend in my life. Also, thank

you to all the snow leopards in ThunderTribe, especially Leafstorm, for encouraging me always and helped me when I first came into the tribe.'

After his farewell, Tiglon gave Firestar and all the snow leopards a deep bow. As Tiglon left and disappeared in the underground tunnel, all the snow leopards sat at the same place expressionlessly and everything remained an eerie silence.

## Epilogue

The soft, warm wind sang its song softly in the Gobi Desert. The sun was above the horizon and about to fall. Tiglon unsheathed the Knife of Destiny, waved it to the pale orange sky and said, 'Lead the path to the place where my family live!'

Just then, the sky shot down a blue-green light and shot a straight long line to the ground.

'ThunderTribe had given me an endless mercy, especially Firestar, and he treated me as if I am his own son. I swear by StarTribe that I must bear a hand to them once they get into trouble to repay their kindness to me,' Tiglon promised himself.

The dying sun blazed out its dying pale amber gaze. It flamed up the dark orange sky and the pink clouds; it made Tiglon's dark brown hair and dark amber eyes glow; it also brightened the burning desire of the path of destiny in Tiglon's heart.

# New Tales of the Gobi Desert

*Ying Wa Primary School, Tang Cheuk Sang, Steve, 11*

## Prologue

“This is the morning news. A strange and occult phenomenon happened in the Gobi Desert. A 41-year-old archaeologist disappeared under an old Saxaul tree. His collaborator fainted at that moment.

This is what he recalled, “At that time, we were dripping all over and almost out of breath by the violent sun. Out of our expectation, we found a verdant tree, we wanted to sit beside it without hesitation. Then, I heard a big bang followed by a loud scream. The archeologist vanished into the thin air and I heard an eerie and cryptic voice which was spoken in an alien language.”

When the collaborator woke up in the hospital, his body kept trembling. Searching teams were sent to search for the archeologist all over the desert, but their effort was in vain. Instead, what they found were the archeologist’s clothes next to the lush green Saxaul tree...”

## Chapter One - Set off to the Gobi Desert

Dr Franklin, a keen explorer, was lying on a brown sofa with his hazel brown eyes glued onto the TV screen for quite a while. He was intrigued.

“How could this be happening?” he muttered with a frown.

He was astonished by the correlation between the missing people and the tree. He kept searching for information about the Saxaul Tree in the State Central Library all day long. He buried his head into heavy stacks of books. According to the “Mystical and Supernatural Phenomenon Encyclopedia”, all these just happened at night, only when it was full moon. Even animals had no chance to escape. There was once a man who tried to destroy this evil tree with a bomb on 8 September 1952. The bomb couldn’t explode; instead that crazy man vanished forever. The Chinese believed that this Saxaul Tree was the “God of Tree” that possessed powerful magic.

Dr Franklin was deeply fascinated by this mystic tree. In spite of the foreseeable danger, he was determined to plan an expedition to the Gobi Desert with his family at last. After collecting all the necessities and survival kits, they started off. It was winter and the freezing gusts, like stabbing knives, blew right onto their rough skins. The temperature was about minus 40°. Snowflakes fell from the sky and covered the

rough sand. Dr Franklin and his family slowly walked into the remote, borderless and arid desert. As they were walking in the desert, like shag on a rock, gales of laughter approached their ears from far away. They followed the sound and saw some traditional ger camps. The nomad families living inside the ger camps came out and welcomed them warmly. They were all wearing thick and colorful clothes embroidered with special patterns. Franklin's family was so delighted and decided to ask for a stay in their cozy house. Pots of hot mutton and salty tea were served to them. After chattering for a while, they all fell fast asleep. The dark night came and the cruel, ruthless and cold winter breeze blew with strong whistles. Dr Franklin was woken up by the whistles and he glanced out through the window. A full moon was hanging in the dark sky, without any companion. To his surprise, Dr Franklin saw a tiny green spot in the sky. He leapt up from his bed, let out a scream and shouted, "Wake up! Wake Up! I saw a mystic green spot far away. Let's go and see." The family, being lured by the green spot, grabbed a coat in their hands, ran out of the cozy ger camp without hesitation and went into the borderless desert.

They walked and walked. Out of the blue, Dr Franklin's son, Max exclaimed, "Mum, Dad, do you feel it? We're all standing on some grass!" Dr Franklin touched the ground and gasped, "Oh! We are all stepping on something like wet mud. We're walking inside a forest."

All at once, they saw a huge tree in front of their eyes. They slowly raised their heads and found a mighty tree with branches poking out of the clouds. It looked like the Saxaul Tree shown in the morning news before. It had hand-like branches with lush-green leaves pointing to the sky.

Next to the tree, there was a fierce-looking lion statue, with thick mosses wrapped all around its body and penetrated deep into its eyes, wearing the whole body entirely. Unexpectedly, the mosses dropped, showing two sorrowful eyes made of precious sapphire, shining alone. Dr Franklin dropped his jaw. He slightly patted the head of this wild beast. All of a sudden, a crystal bottle with delicate carving, rolled out of its mouth. Dr Franklin hesitated for a second, then grabbed the bottle with his rough hands, but it turned into dust and slipped through his fingers. Black smoke spewed out from the broken bottle and slowly formed into clusters of alphabets. The alphabets started to shuffle and formed a message in the musty air. It read.

*Danger lies ahead, step back or move ahead.  
Pluck up your courage, touch the Saxaul tree.*

## Chapter Two - The Land of Lomse

"What does that mean?" Franklin pondered. Coincidentally, the whole family stepped forward, touching the old Saxaul Tree without a second thought. Bang! The gigantic tree fell over. Web-like roots pointed towards the sky. A deep crack appeared down their feet. They tumbled head over heels down the crack. Their screams echoed all the way down. They reached out their hands to reach for something, but it was in vain. Crooked faces of fierce and horrible monsters flashed out in their eyes. Anyone who had ever seen those faces would be scared to faint. The fall was finally settled on the dusty floor of a room. It was so dark that it was hard to see their own fingers. Muggy air filled every corner of the room. They were all soaked with sweat. A chilling gust suddenly

blew into their skin that made them tremble all over. Instead, the candles on the two sides of the room lit up automatically. They heard an eerie laughing sound. Swaying spider webs were seen hanging all around the room. Ten creepy dark shadows were crawling painfully on the two sides of the walls. The ten shadows slowly rolled their eye balls and stared at the center of the room. Their bodies crouched as if they were having a spiritual ritual. A huge spooky shadow slowly emerged at the center of the room.

The huge shadow spoke slowly in a low voice, "Good morning, Dr Franklin. I am Ghost Mania. Welcome to the land of Lomse. I'm going to help you to finish your mission."

"What mission?" Dr Franklin shouted, followed by a long silence.

Ghost Mania wandered around the room. Then stopped, pulling out a toad from its ear. The toad spit out a cloud of purple mist and it turned into different kinds of magical tools. A small booklet dropped on Dr Franklin's hands and it turned open by itself, it read:

*Dear Dr Franklin,*

*The hints below can save your life. You should either read it or die.*

*First, look at the five tiny bottles. When you get lost, open the bottle, the mist inside will drift out and lead you to the right way.*

*Then remember to keep this shiny golden key. It can open any locks.*

*Lastly, this is not an ordinary mirror. This can show you who the evil is.*

*Caution! The most important and precious magical tool are these tiny green beans inside this glowing sack. They represent wishes and hopes of the whole world. Throw them to your enemy when you are in utmost danger. Remember to use them well!*

Franklin closed the small booklet. He grabbed the glowing sack and put it into his ruck sack. His wife, Sarah, grabbed the other tools and packed them up.

His son, Max, was astounded. "Wow! I haven't been to such a cryptic place before!" He exclaimed.

His sister, Nancy, with eyes widely open, whispered in a trembling voice, "I want to go back home now! I felt so scared. Please leave here. Dad, can you..."

"Bang!" A loud voice came from the left side like an explosion. They all turned their heads. Inside the room, a huge wall broke into pieces of fragments and collapsed.

Franklin bellowed with fear, "Ghost Mania! Are you still here? Please help us!"

But all the shadows left the room through the broken wall, leaving them alone. The candles went out in a flash. There was a long silence. The whole family decided to leave the room through the broken wall and walked into a corridor.

### Chapter Three - A Blanket or a Monster

"Let's go!" Franklin said, breaking the silence.

"Who's stepping on me? It really hurts!" said with a young lady's voice.

"Leave me at once or I will open my mouth and swallow you all!" The same screeching voice cried out.

Franklin asked, "Do you know who is talking? She sounds like you, Sarah!"

"What? No kidding please," his wife snapped, "the one who is talking is this nasty drain lid you're stepping on. Look at it, we are going to be swallowed up."

"Run!" Dr Franklin shouted, grabbing little Nancy with his arm. The others followed. They ran till the dead end of the corridor with the drain lid chasing behind.

“This metal door is the only exit,” said Max breathlessly, “but it is locked.”

“Try this golden key,” Sarah suggested.

Click! The door unlocked. They dashed in and locked themselves inside a spacious room. After a few powerful bangs, the drain lid was gone.

Being overly exhausted, they collapsed on the floor and took some rest.

“I feel so cold!” Nancy whispered with her body rolled up like a hedgehog.

“It’s ok.” Franklin said, with Nancy hugged tightly in his arms.

When they almost fell asleep, a thick, wooly blanket appeared.

“Hurray! That is what we need to keep warm. It should be a present from Ghost Mania,” said Franklin.

They all tucked themselves in and continued to sleep. Suddenly, they heard a loud and horrible roar. The blanket turned into a bloody scaly sheet of skin. It grew out four wizened skulls and each skull turned to face each of them. Everyone was shocked and Nancy screamed desperately. The monster snarled, “I’m the servant of the “God of Evil”. Hand over all your magic tools, or I will blow your heads.”

The whole family screamed and screeched. They felt hopeless.

“Should we hand out the magic tools?” Sarah asked.

“No...no, we shouldn’t. We shouldn’t. We must fight till the last second. I have the feeling that someone will come to help us,” Franklin answered.

In this critical moment, footsteps far away were approaching. A black shadow was seen far away. It was dashing towards them and it became bigger and bigger. Little Nancy was so scared that she closed her eyes tightly.

“Aar,” the horrible monster shrieked and writhed in agony. It jumped up and swirled and twirled in the room fiercely. Bluish blood poured out from its back and flooded all over the place. The monster started diminishing and it vanished at last.

#### Chapter Four - A New Teammate

Dr Franklin patted away the dust on his face and rubbed his eyes. He stood up slowly with his trembling feet. To his surprise, he found an ape-like man standing in front of his eyes. The man looked like a chimpanzee. Under his sooty face, what was seen was a cluster of messy mustache. His filthy clothes were torn and muddy.

Seeing him, all of them were frozen into ice.

“Who...who are you?” Dr Franklin asked with a trembling voice, breaking the silence.

The man grinned, “Nice to meet you. I’m Tirian, the archaeologist that vanished in the Saxaul Tree a month ago.”

Dr Franklin heaved a sigh of relief, he continued, “Nice to meet you too! I’m Dr Franklin, an explorer. We also came here through the mystic Saxaul Tree. This is my wife, Sarah. My son, Max. My daughter, little Nancy.”

“We’re so lucky that we have just beaten down that evil-monster,” said Franklin.

“Ha! Ha! The blanket monster won’t die by itself,” Tirian giggled, “When I was wandering around, I heard you screaming. I sensed the presence of evil spirits. Not far away, a scaly blanket monster seemed to be battling with you.”

Tirian sighed, “To defeat the blanket monster, you have to identify its weaknesses. Its scales, like the sutures of our skull, are extraordinarily hard except four weaknesses where the four heads protrude out.”

“Did you save us and kill the monster?” little Nancy interrupted with curiosity.

“Of course! I carefully dipped the tip of my dagger with poisonous magic potion, then I tip-toed next to the evil monster,” explained Tirian.

“What followed then?” asked Max.

“The monster didn’t notice me. So I used my full strength to jump on its back. I stabbed my dagger in one of its weaknesses. The poison circulated around its body and stopped its heart from pumping,” Tirian answered seriously.

Franklin was very pleased. He exclaimed, “Wow! You’re such a hero!”

“Why did you come here?” asked Tirian.

“One day, while I was watching the morning news, it said an archaeologist disappeared under an old Saxaul tree. I was fascinated, so I started my trip with my family. It was the same Saxaul tree which led us here,” Franklin answered.

“Oh! So I was on TV?”

“Yes, of course!”

The two chatted like good old friends while the others were sleeping soundly. Tirian fished out a small piece of stone from his ruck sack. It was blue like sapphire but extremely heavy. He got out a bottle of white powder and sprayed them over the stone. Carvings in ancient Egyptian were vaguely seen.

“After analyzing the carvings in detail, I am sure they were carved during the Cretaceous period when human beings did not exist,” Tirian was astonished.

“What do the carvings mean?” asked Franklin.

“They seem nonsense, or maybe I can’t decode them,” Tirian pondered for a while.

“Can I try it out?” Franklin stretched out his left hand and tried to grab it.

Once Franklin touched it, the stone cracked and burnt vigorously into ashes.

Nancy woke up and screamed, “Oh! Our room is on fire! Help me out, Dad.”

While they were searching for the way out, the flame died out.

“Amazing!” Franklin and Tirian uttered instantaneously, staring at the ashes on the floor, which seemed to have some meaning. But, Dr Franklin can’t resist stretching out his hand to touch them. Just then, a cold breeze touched their faces lightly. Some patterns seemed to trace out from the ashes.

Dr Franklin pondered, “It really looks like some kind of map!”

He studied it hard. At last, he found a tortuous path. At the end of it, there was a splendid but eerie castle. He examined it carefully and saw a mighty creature with a flat body and four heads.

“That creature looks so familiar,” Dr Franklin scratched his head, “Oh! It should be the blanket monster we’ve met before!”

“Dr Franklin, can you see that fearsome and vicious creature sitting next to the blanket monster?” asked Tirian.

Dr Franklin frowned, with his head full of questions. He thought, “What’s the creature beside the blanket monster? Why does the blanket monster look so humble to it?”

A bright idea suddenly flashed in his mind. “The terrible blanket monster could be the creature’s servant! It told us it was the servant of God of Evil before it died. God of Evil should have sensed our presence and sent blanket monster to kill us,” explained Dr Franklin.

After a long discussion, Dr Franklin and Tirian decided to find God of Evil to reveal the truth on the missing of people in front of the Saxaul tree. Then, they had a nice rest for a few hours.

## Chapter Five - Where Are You, Castle?

At early dawn, Dr Franklin was awakened by the shrieking sound of some crows. As he reached out his hand to turn off the alarm as usual, he realized that he was in the land of Lomse, where an arduous journey was waiting for them. As everybody was ready, they set off and left. Tirian and Dr Franklin's family walked and walked along the corridor. No matter how hard they tried, they found it hard to decide which way to go. They passed through long narrow tunnels and walked up flights of stairs, but all they could see were concrete walls. They seemed to be wandering around in a maze. While they were trying hard to find the exit, Dr Franklin's wife, Sarah came up with an idea, "Ah! Do you remember what Ghost Mania has given us?" She fished out a tiny, delicately carved bottle with black mist inside.

"That's right!" Dr Franklin exclaimed, "Let's open it now."

Sarah pulled the cork away from the bottle carefully. The mist inside drifted out and gathered on the wall on her left. They were all intrigued by seeing the black mist vanish into the concrete wall. Dr Franklin's son, Max was most fascinated by the mist. He couldn't stop himself from touching the wall where the mist vanished.

"A-A-A-Ah!" shouted Max. A loud scream echoed into their ears. Without a second thought, Dr Franklin grabbed little Nancy in his strong arm and touched the same wall, trying to follow Max. Meanwhile, all the others followed. All of them were being sucked into the wall. They tumbled inside a dark and gloomy tunnel. Clocks of all kinds with their thin hands were spinning backwards around them. At last, they bumped into a muddy ground with venomous and stinky scorpions crawling all over. Although the place was so nasty that anyone who had been there would vomit, they didn't care at all. All they wanted to know was where Max had gone. Out of the blue, mud splashed on everyone's faces. A creepy-crawly muddy monster appeared in the swamp beside them. Its hands and legs were struggling in the mud. When they decided to run for their lives, Sarah shouted suddenly, "Stop! The beast in the swamp is not a monster. It should be our dear son! Do you hear him screaming for help?"

At this critical moment, Sarah fished out a long and strong rope from her rucksack. She tossed one end of the rope to Max and held the other end tightly. Max grabbed the rope with all his strength. At last, they managed to pull him out. Everyone heaved a sigh of relief. Max spat all the thick and sticky mud from his mouth. Tirian got out the packet of first-aid tools and helped clean up his wounds. After Max tidied himself a bit, they started their journey again.

They looked around and found a rusty road sign. They followed the sign, heading to the eerie castle. Cold breeze blew leisurely while trees crackling. A few super-giant crows shrieked overhead.

Bang! Something hard hit on Tirian's head. It tumbled over his body and at last, dropped on the floor. Tirian looked closer and found it was a moldy skull. Some stinky bugs crawled out from its mouth while glaring lights were shining out from its eye sockets. With a sudden gust, the skull rolled and tumbled down a steep hill. Without hesitation, they followed the skull and rolled down the hill. They passed through two shabby shacks, five reddish rivers, two tunnels filled with the smell of rotten meat, six misty cemeteries with swaying spider webs, a garden full of painful-looking statues made of stone, a stream with hungry piranha... Lastly, they saw a splendid

castle right in front of their eyes. It was so high that it nearly poked into the clouds. To their surprise, the castle was made of precious gold. The skull didn't stop rolling until it bumped into the castle door which was made of verdant jade. The door opened automatically but the skull cracked into tiny pieces. With five pounding hearts, they all took their first step into the castle. The door slammed strongly behind them. Little Nancy was so worried by being shut. She tried to open the door with her little arms, but it was useless.

## Chapter Six - God of Evil

An enormous and golden statue in the appearance of a horrible evil creature was guarding the entrance. Inside the castle, there was a crystal chandelier hung from the ceiling. The floor was made of pieces of sapphire with delicate carvings. While they were intrigued by the beauty of the castle, a corridor appeared. They followed the corridor which led into a spacious room filled with piles of luxurious jewellery. The jewellery sparkled and shimmered. Tirian was intrigued. He knelt down at once, examining the treasure one by one. He couldn't help keeping some of his favorites in his pockets. As he touched them, the whole room rocked tremendously. The pile of jewellery started to collapse. They slid down like gliding down from a huge sand dune. Tirian was being buried by the jewellery. Unhesitatingly, Dr Franklin and Sarah pulled Tirian out with all their effort. But the harder they pull, the more jewellery collapsed. Seeing this, little Nancy's eyes welled up with tears. She stood at the back of the room, with her motionless body trembling.

All of a sudden, a huge explosion shocked the squad. They all lost their balance and fell on the floor. As the smoke cleared out, lumps of flesh thrashed around wildly in the air. The pieces of flesh gathered and formed an enormous and hideous creature. It fished out an eyeball from its tummy and plugged it back in one of its sockets. It glared at them and swirled around in the air. A few poisonous beetles crawled on its craggy face. Horned vipers slithered out from its nostrils.

The hideous creature hissed, "I'm God of Evil. I've been waiting for you all for a long time. Look at the treasure under your feet. I'm sure mankind like you would want them all."

God of Evil grabbed a handful of shiny diamonds, showing them in front of their eyes. Not long, the diamonds in its hands burned vigorously. It made a deafening roar and splashed some deadly yellowish fluid everywhere, making the room smell fishy. At that moment, the whole room burst into flame. The strong heat waves hit them directly. They turned around and had a mad dash for survival.

God of Evil snarled, "Ha! Ha! Ha! You'd better join us and be part of my body. Enjoy the immense power of being an evil."

God of Evil's coarse skin tore wide open. Its body was ablaze with flame. Pus and blood were dripping all over the place. Looking carefully, they found lots of crooked faces inside, and they were all people craving to be rescued. Their faces were full of blisters and their bodies were on fire.

A glaring light shone from the evil's tummy, floating Sarah, Tirian and Nancy up in the air. Flame burst out of its tummy and they were being sucked in. Dr Franklin and Max were in panic. They dashed away and hid behind a big pile of jewellery.

"There should be two more," bellowed God of Evil. It knelt down to search for them. It sniffed right at the place where they were hiding.

“You should be here,” muttered God of Evil, “I sense a strong smell of humans.”

Max was extremely horrified. He peeped out to see God of Evil. Unfortunately, his head bumped into some pieces of gold. The whole pile of treasure started to slide, revealing Dr Franklin and Max. God of Evil stretched its hand, grabbing Max easily. No matter how hard he kicked, he could not be released.

## Chapter Seven - Evil or Angel

God of Evil gazed at Dr Franklin, it bellowed, “Mankind is greedy and selfish. To enjoy luxurious life, they destroy the place where they live. They cut down tons of trees in the forest and kill millions of animals just for their own pleasure. Animals have to face extinction while the rainforest no longer exist. That is why Gobi Desert keeps expanding.”

God of Evil continued, “That’s why mankind should be penalized. You should fuse with my body and suffer from pain day till night. The more people I swallow, the stronger is my evil power.”

Dr Franklin gazed at God of Evil, seeing its flaming eyes, he replied, “You have misunderstood us. There is care, love and sharing in family. What you think is...”

“Nonsense! Mankind deserves extinction.” God of Evil yelled with his deepest voice. It turned to Max and said cruelly, “Max, your fate has no exception. Do join the others and be part of my body.”

It tore open its bloody skin, ready to toss Max in. Dr Franklin knelt in front of God of Evil. His hopeless eyes looked at it desperately. He begged sincerely, “Please don’t hurt my son. He is young and innocent. He hasn’t done anything bad to the world. I would be the one to be punished. Sarah and I would like to sacrifice our lives and be swallowed up in your body, suffering from pain. Should I make my last and only request to free Max and Nancy?”

Dr Franklin surrendered, dropped all his magical tools. Tears ran down his chin.

As Dr Franklin felt completely desperate, the green beans inside his rucksack started to glow. They floated up high in the air. Then they settled on Dr Franklin’s hand. Wise Dr Franklin caught them at once and tossed them towards God of Evil.

God of Evil came to a halt. Paralysed. The glow of love and care shone through its body. It was the sacrificial love from parents to their children. It was the power of love that moved God of Evil. His eyes were welling up with tears. His wounds started to heal up. Smooth skin regenerated, healing its bloody flesh. Silky feathers grew all over his body.

He put Max on the floor gently. Nancy, Sarah and Tirian were released. They cheered and hugged each other. God of Evil turned into God of Good. He said softly, “You all have changed me. I will go back to where angels belong and help people in need.”

God of Good hugged all of them and flew away merrily. At that moment, the whole castle vanished into the thin air. A flourishing forest appeared in front of their eyes. Not long, they heard footsteps running towards them from far away. A man wearing colorful and thick clothes embroidered with special patterns was approaching. He was one of the Nomad family members.

He was astonished. “Where have you been? I’ve found you for years! Do you know why an oasis would suddenly appear in the center of this remote Gobi Desert which is now so lively? It is really unbelievable!”

The five of them looked at each other and smiled. They all knew the reason in their hearts.