



# Fiction

Group 5

## Tea Throughout the Ages

*ESF King George V School, Yip, Andrea – 16*

My sister is tapping her acrylics on the counter again.

*Tap, tap, tap, taptaptaptap.* I poke my temple with two fingers, trying to drown the sound out. Sadly, the tapping cuts right through my effort to think about all the nice things Nancy has done for me, which is a short list.

I shoot a glare at her, dragging my gaze from the peeling green wallpaper I've been studying.

"Can you knock it off?"

She pauses, riffles through the money she's counting from the till. Her nails catch on the edge of a 5 dollar bill.

"Careful with the cash," I say, stepping up to her and grabbing the fiver out of her hands. "Mom will kill you if they get crumpled."

Nancy snatches it back, then something gives inside her and she gets up in a huff.

"You manage the shop then, if you know what you're doing!" And she goes up the stairs, banging the counter door loudly shut. I maintain my glare on her back until I can hear the stomp of her Converse on the second floor.

That's when Mom comes in. After serving customers for the whole afternoon, I was looking forward to having some time to myself, but Nancy.. well, you know Nancy.

Mom gives me a *whatcanyoudo* shrug, not looking sorry for me at all. She sits on one of the tables I'd just wiped. I can't help but grimace at the streak she leaves on the wet surface.

"Mom, can you not sit on that table?" I ask.

She dusts herself off in a hurry, exclaiming at how many dark spots now dot her skirt. I take a deep breath, preparing to ask a question I know she'll hate.

"Can I go meet Adrian at his house now?" I say, when she's finally stopped.

The obedient thing to do would have been to keep my mouth shut.

"No," she says, not even looking at me. "It's your responsibility to keep the shop in order. You're almost old enough to take over the business now, since you're turning seventeen in April."

"I have a responsibility to *what?*" I parrot.

She talks over my protests. "I know it was supposed to be Nancy's shift, but you always have to be prepared for every situation. How else are you going to deal with a sudden loss of stock, or suppliers bailing out on us?"

I sigh, letting a deep breath fill my lungs. There are bags under Mom's eyes, evidence of another night spent poring over bills. That tiredness always gets turned on the older son somehow. And by older son, I mean me.

"Mom, we've been over this already. I don't want to take over the tea shop. I still haven't decided what I'm doing yet, but I don't want to be stuck here forever."

I can visibly see Mom inflating like an incensed pufferfish. "Martin Cheong! You're saying that this shop is worthless? That *I*, someone who's had to raise you with the sweat off my own back, have to run this shop until I'm in the ground? After all I've done—"

It's definitely not a good idea, but I need some air. This conversation is not unfamiliar ground to us both. After Dad passed when I was ten, Mom's always had to hold the family together on her own. But doesn't my opinion matter too?

So I'm the one to cut her off this time.

"Sorry Mom, got to run. I promised Adrian I wouldn't be late." I push past her, accidentally knocking the mug of tea out of her hands. It shatters on the floor of the shop, sending droplets of green scattering all over the floor. I stare numbly at the growing puddle. Green like the jealousy I've felt as my friends get a bright future, green like the uniform I have to wear every day, green like the four walls of this shop I've been stuck in my whole life.

Not looking back, I run out of Cheong's Tea Emporium. I wander aimlessly in the neighbourhood for a while, trying to only focus on the impact of my shoes hitting the ground.

Even seeing green in the trees of the town square pisses me off, and I spend a bit of time spitefully pulling individual pine needles off their boughs. Finally, I decide that I'm getting thirsty and I need something to drink.

I'm walking down Carnarvon Road, looking out for any shops that I haven't seen before. I'm not expecting much— I've been here a thousand times, and nobody ever opens anything new. The buildings are all one monotonous shape, stretching in high and low cubes off into the distance.

I give up on finding anything of value and walk into a Starbucks.

After my initial anger, I'm starting to feel a bit bad. Maybe I was too quick to denounce the entire shop, and I broke my mom's favourite cup: she must be fuming mad by now.

I'm sure green tea isn't all it's cracked up to be, though. Just to make sure, I order a tall cup of *Emperor's Clouds And Mist*.

The Emperor's clouds turn out to be, well, more like peasant's condensation. I stir the strange green mixture in my plastic cup with a melting paper straw, refusing to drink another drop. It's made up of 90 percent water and 10 percent store bought green powder. I can even see the matcha collecting in piles at the bottom of the cup, looking like the saddest snowglobe in the history of the world.

There's a loud sniff from the table next to me. I turn in my armchair for the source of the sound.

An old Chinese man is slurping the same exact Starbucks drink, sucking up the mixture with a disgruntled look. He's wearing a long coat that's engraved with traditional flowers and roses, looking out of place in the modern design of the shop. His brow is furrowed, magnifying the lines that already exist on his face. There's not much left in his drink except the pile of matcha powder. Taking too big of a gulp, he chokes momentarily on the dry substance, spitting out flakes of green.

I act without thinking, darting over to the man's table and clapping him on the back. The old man manages to expel a final chunk, then collapses in his seat, heaving from exertion. Bending down next to him, I say in his ear, "Sir, are you alright?"

"Gah!" the old man says, avoiding my hovering with an agility that's uncommon for his frail stature. He bats me away with one palm while picking up the Starbucks drink in the other. "Don't get *that* close, kid. I can still hear you fine, you know."

"Sorry, sir." I say, straightening up and plopping into the chair across from the old man's. "You just looked like you were having a hard time there, and I wanted to help."

"It's all because of this drink. If I could even call it a drink." the old man says, scoffing at the cup that sits innocently on the table. "People never know how to make a decent cup of tea. It's disgraceful."

I suddenly feel a kinship with this old man. "My family owns a tea shop. I've grown up with the stuff all around me, but to be honest I'm getting sick of the atmosphere."

"Tell me more." he responds. His eyes are sharp, without the usual film you'd expect. Bright green, too.

I end up spilling my entire story to the old man, who listens with sympathy. I feel a weight on my chest loosening— nobody has ever listened to me with this little judgement.

“Sounds like you know a lot about tea, but you don’t like it very much.” he says finally.

“It just feels pointless to me,” I reply, shaking my head in annoyance. “There’s so much more in the world to do.”

The old man smiles at that. “Kid, there’s so much more about tea that you don’t understand...would you like me to show you?”

Here I am, sitting in a random Starbucks with a strange old man, getting ready to learn about green tea. I don’t think my day can get any weirder than this— maybe he’ll take me to an ancient Chinese museum or something.

“Sure,” I say, “but I need to be back home by fouuuuuuuuu—”

The old man taps my forehead with one single finger.

Suddenly, I feel a jerk behind my navel, and everything goes white.

The first thing I feel under me is the scratchy feeling of a stone floor. Maybe the old man knocked me out.. though I don’t know if that guy could have been a kidnapper. I sit up groggily, dusting dirt off my t-shirt. And I stop *dead* at what I see in front of me.

I don’t think I’m in Hong Kong anymore. A glittering set of stairs spreads out before me, engraved with silver filigree in the shape of chrysanthemums. Beyond that, a sprawling palace extends beyond what I can see, complete with towering roofs, pavilions, and tiered pagodas— an identical copy of the palace from my Chinese History textbook. I seem to have landed on the first step of the landing before the staircase. Squinting behind my glasses, I can see the sun reflecting off golden bells in the courtyard, and little figures milling about busily throughout the grounds.

“Am I dreaming?” I say out loud, pinching myself like how they do in the movies to wake myself up. “Old man, where are you?” I half expect someone to take down the backdrop: that I’m in some kind of highly advanced museum exhibit, and someone will come in to tell me the time is up. So I wait. The clouds continue tracking across the blue sky, the people keep walking up and down.

I figure I’ll have to do something to escape. In books, the hero always has to complete some kind of quest, or slay a monster to return to the real world.

I take the first tentative step on the golden staircase. As I’m walking down, I see three figures approaching me at rapid speed. They glitter in the sun, making it hard to see their features in a blur of gold.

“STOP RIGHT THERE, INTRUDER!” the first figure yells, drawing a pike from the holster on his back. The other figures who I assume are soldiers form a triangle, pointing weapons that look very sharp at me from all sides.

Sweat beads on my neck, and I sink down on my knees in front of them, holding my breath. It’s only been five minutes in the ancient Chinese world, and I don’t want to die. As loud as I can, I yell, “I COME IN PEACE!”

The advancing of the swords stop. The first soldier looks suspiciously at me, noting my modern clothing. “Who are you? You don’t look like you’re from around here: how dare you approach the palace without our Emperor’s approval?”

I rack my brains furiously, looking for an excuse. “I’m an emissary from the far-off country of Heung Kaung. My crest is the tea leaf. Here, you can look at it.” I proffer my apron to the soldier, who takes it, looking unimpressed.

“Never mind that.” the second soldier says, looking me up and down. “He *does* look extremely foreign. Let’s take him to the Emperor. If this guy is actually a legitimate emissary, he’ll know what to do.”

I'm marched down the steps and into the palace. The marvellous golden columns and beaded curtains clamour for my attention, in a dazzling array of colours. Palace servants rush past me, tending to their various jobs and errands. However, nothing seems out of place: there's an unspoken rhythm to their actions as they march in and out of rooms, ducking and weaving through corridors. I'm the anomaly here.

Finally, I'm placed in a dark room, illuminated only by a single oil lamp in an alcove on the wall. The three guards stand at the door, preventing any curious onlookers from coming in.

"When will the Emperor come?" I ask quietly, shuddering in place. "Do you know what he's going to do to me?"

"Story falling through so soon?" one of the three soldiers quips, laughing at my horrified expression. "If you're the emissary that you say you are, you should have *nothing* to fear."

"ANNOUNCING THE EMPEROR!" the soldier rings out mid-sentence, gesturing furiously at me to compose myself. The shadow of a large man falls across the curtain at the entrance.

A courtesan scurries into the room, lighting the rest of the lamps in their alcoves. The room finally brightens with colour, and I see the man himself come into my vision.

The Emperor looks, for lack of a better word, sickly. He's clothed in traditional garb, with a bright red hat and golden greaves under his richly embroidered robe. Large golden shoulder plates rest on his lapels. But the large man seems to be weighed down underneath his finery, face drawn with grey and his lips pure white.

The soldiers by his side are balancing items precariously in their hands. Two wheel a boiling pot of water under roaring fire, while the other carries a tray with various twigs and leaves on its surface. The courtesan from earlier holds a mortar and pestle, and is in the process of tirelessly mashing yellow leaves to a pulp.

"Emperor, please stop!" the courtesan begs, contrary to her still-moving hands. "You've taken more than sixty herbs over the course of this month. How are you certain that the next one will be the solution to your weakness?"

"I have to find it," the Emperor says, his rumbling voice emanating out from some deep point in his body. "Please hand me the sixty-fifth herb. It should be an infusion of schisandra berry and scorpion venom."

The Emperor finally notices me. "Who are you? Speak!"

"I'm an emissary from the far-away land of Hueng Kang." I repeat.

"An emissary, you say?" the Emperor rumbles. "Perhaps you can be of assistance to me here. Tell me, what medicinal plants do you export in Heung?"

"Erm.." I'm at a loss for words, but thankfully the Emperor is too distracted. "What would you add to this infusion? Possibly an extra drop of yellow snake venom to counteract the healing properties of the schisandra...no, no, that would make it a neutral.."

I spot a familiar bunch of tea leaves on the tray. The Emperor reaches for the sixty-sixth herb, accidentally knocking that very bunch into the giant cauldron of boiling water beside him. Herb forgotten, the Emperor rushes over to check on the bubbling green tea leaves. He wrings his hands frantically as the leaf is slowly dissolved, almost looking like he's going to explode with fury. "That could have been the crucial element to my cure, and now it's gone!"

Overcome with emotion, he falls back and is quickly righted by the soldiers at his side, who have worried expressions on their faces. I'm no plant aficionado, but I feel uncomfortable watching such a noble man reduced to desperation. The bunch of tea leaves has almost completely dissolved, leaving a dark green sheen to the water in its wake.

Speaking up, I say, "The herb might not be completely gone. Why don't you try drinking the mixture of tea leaves and water, and see what happens?"

The Emperor looks sceptical, but he gestures to the courtesan to hand him a cup. She abandons the pounding of the yellow pulp and dunks it into the green tea.

Holding my breath, I watch the Emperor down the cup of tea. I watch his Adam's apple bob as the tea sloughs down his throat.

His face shifts from worried apprehension to delight. What looks like a thousand years peels off, and his colouring brightens from grey to a rosy flush on both cheeks.

"I've done it! I'VE DONE IT!" the Emperor says raucously, raising the tea in the air as his bones seem to gain strength. "And the solution to my illness all along was mundane tea leaves. Doesn't taste bad too, now that I think of it. How did you know how to do this, emissary from Heung?"

"Erm." I say again. There's no reason why I would have brought knowledge from the future here. "I read it in a book?"

"A marvellous book that was!" the Emperor exclaims, eyes bright with amazement from the beneficial effects the tea is having on his body. "You must stay in my cabinet. Together, we can explore many more herbs for China."

I'm saved from having to answer anything else by another burst of white light.

I'm back in the Starbucks chair again. The old man sits in front of me, a knowing twinkle in his eye. "Did you enjoy your nap?" he asks, pointing to the enormous pile of spit I've left on the table next to my head.

"What just happened?" I rear back, shaking in disorientation. "Did you put me in that nightmare? That was the scariest thing that's ever happened to me in my whole life."

The old man just smiles, fanning his tea. Somehow, the Starbucks drink is gone, replaced by a cup of tea that's the deepest green I've ever seen.

"Tea seems a lot more important now, doesn't it?" he says.

I think back on what just happened. The Emperor's strange dedication to finding herbal medicine had touched me— the effort that it took to create the tea I'm drinking right now was impressive. I still didn't entirely love the tea shop— the dream hadn't infected me with odd morality. However, there *was* some meaning in keeping an old art alive.

"I guess tea isn't as useless as I thought it was."

"And that's exactly the answer I like to hear."

## Stories of a Kite 战国时代

*ESF King George V School, Zhao, Rou – 16*

There is two years worth of work chiselled painstakingly into the bird the philosopher crafts carefully out of silk and painted wood. He stands on the crest of a hill and holds it between the palms of his hands so that his long fingers make steeples above its featherless head. There is a flying line made of silk, unravelled carefully from thumb-sized cocoons the philosopher finds on mulberry leaves a little ways past his yard. He wraps this around one fist and holds the wooden bird in another.

It seems impossible that the thing of wood could take flight into the sky but the philosopher holds on tightly to the promise of hope. The flying line tethers the creature to his fist like an umbilical cord and when he finally thrusts it from the palm of his open hand, he can't help but close his eyes, a little scared of what the wind might do.

The prototype is ready and wrapped up in white fabric precisely one year after. With his son hoisted securely on his back, the philosopher prepares to make the long trek up to the mountaintop. He pictures the very moment the boy realises he is able to make things fly, and bites down on his bottom lip to prevent himself from smiling too hard. The lame boy stays as still as he can and can't help but think it is times like this he wishes more than ever he was born with the ability to walk. He barely breathes and wonders faintly about the contents of the bundle held tightly against his chest.

When the father sets his son down on the crest of the hill, he unravels the tightly wound fabric and the child's first thought is that the wooden bird is beautiful. He doesn't think of much else as he watches the philosopher start to twine the flying line around his palm. You must move your arm in a specific way to push the bird into flight and the philosopher shows this to his son. He is eventually satisfied enough to place the creature gently in the child's open hand and urge him to throw it into the sky.

Should the wind cast the wooden creature too far, the boy is afraid that he won't be able to catch it in time. He spreads his body out like a starfish, as wide as he possibly can and when the philosopher tells him to toss it into the sky, the son is obedient and does as his father says. The strength of his throw pushes the bird far, and the boy cranes his neck to watch. It begins to tip gradually into its descent and he half-wonders again, for the purpose of the entire procedure.

The boy almost misses it the very moment the wind catches the bird. There is the barest resistance from the silk line and like a compass needle that laboriously tugs itself towards true north, the wooden creature rights its course all of a sudden in a motion so imperceptible you could only notice it if you were watching closely. The bird begins ascending drunkenly into the blue, open sky as if unaware it had just performed a miracle.

The crippled boy stares upwards, and it is a look so wondering you could have mistaken it for reverence. Every subtle shift of the morning breeze sets off a new change in its path so the bird is in constant motion like the flame of a flickering candle. Yet the wind is only able to sustain it for so long until gravity begins gradually, to reel it back down to earth. The silk line guides it into the palm of his hands and the boy doesn't hesitate before he releases it back into the sky. He, with the useless leg, is captivated because it reminds him stirringly of everything that he is not. It is unbound and it is free so it is beautiful.

In time, it becomes so that it is always the boy and the wooden bird that crown the crest of the hill. The villagers notice and start to wonder to themselves how the philosopher's son has managed to capture a bird. It seems almost like a cruel joke – the lame boy and the wooden bird that could fly.

He is just happy to have a playmate.

It is only much later that the father decides to unveil finally, what gifted such a creation with flight. It is much later after that does it catch the eye of the emperor, and it is ultimately given a name. He is just a philosopher, not an inventor, and his wish was only ever to see to his lonely boy having a companion. He continues to care for his lame son and perhaps he will never find out how much he changed the world. He will go down in time though, forever as the father of the kite.

Some centuries later, some hundred miles away, a band of kites are carried by a wayward gust of wind. Times have long changed, and these are decidedly lighter than the ones from the past. Though inspired still, by the legend of the philosopher and the wooden bird, these are crafted meticulously from paper and strong bamboo.

They drift idly, a dozen Chinese kites guided by hands of a ragtag band of soldiers. These are good men, unfortunate enough to be born in such a time so troubling. Sent out by generals, it is a desperate attempt to silence the dissent of incensed families that have lost their sons to the Mongols. These are mothers and these are fathers with the manic hope that their children are still alive; fortunate enough to be locked away as hostages only, behind the unbreachable walls of the Mongol prisoner-of-war camp. The rescue mission is sent out then, as a small squadron of martyrs that march themselves bravely to their deaths. They are doomed by command from exhausted generals, issued nevertheless, as if they were Gods.

The men have sent their kites out for days now, skywards far enough to remain undetected as they shift idly between the clouds. When the wind picks up its pace, the flying line begins to unravel faster and faster until it appears so far away it is scraping against the underbelly of the sky. The first soldier whispers a prayer and reaches out to snap the silk lines between his two fingers. Whatever control he has had up to the very point is relinquished instantly; what comes next is decided entirely by the wind. It must guide the paper kites down from where they perch, high up in the sky, waving madly and mounting the currents of the fluctuating breeze. It relies unreasonably on the negligence of the Mongol guards; additionally, the timing and velocity of the hot desert wind so that it is able to deliver the sky-blue kites down upon the prisoner-of-war camp below. The superstitious soldiers watch from afar and think to themselves that it rests in the hands of fate; perhaps it is a little bit of both.

The first person to catch a kite is a little boy. He stops at what he is doing and looks up to the sky with eyes filled with wonder. The guards do not notice the emaciated boy and the strange shape that bulges out from under his shirt. He takes it proudly to his father and shows him the Chinese characters inked across its paper surface. An orphan finds the other, and a general the next. Each kite is scooped up prudently and it is unclear today, the message of the blue paper kites, but it is true that there was a riot on the very same night.

Perhaps the kites were missives sent out to notify the prisoners that help was coming gallantly on its way. Perhaps it was a message that became a moving remembrance of their human character and the people that they were capable of being. For a heaven-sent message to be delivered in such a way, perhaps it is none of this, and perhaps it is simply a belief; devoted and whole-hearted into the existence and benevolence of the gods.

The riot is so large that it will make its way down through Ancient Chinese history; there is a mass prison break by dawn. The prisoners lift their paper kites high up into the sky and make a mad dash for the timbered gates as if bamboo and paper is enough to fend off arrow and spear. It is not, and so there are many good men who die on that fateful night but there are plenty more who are fortunate enough to escape with their lives. You reach a culmination then, when there are far too many desperate people rushing towards you, that helplessness becomes nothing but a necessity. The teeming crowd ploughs the Mongol guards down like a flood in a field of rice. They do not lose their vigour until the sun has made its way high up into the morning sky.

They follow the trail of broken kites, these are the ones that did not survive the journey. It is then, a massacre of torn fabric and mangled Chinese characters that smash themselves at odd intervals against the desert sand. It is on the second day that the prisoners of war reunite miraculously with the rescue troop, they say that it is a miracle. There is a little, fatherless boy at the front of the group who carries a blue kite he holds tightly to his chest.

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Some centuries later, some hundred miles away, a squadron of soldiers crawl in a ditch. The sun has lowered itself into the horizon and takes with it, some of the frenzied clamour of war. Here is a time where resources have begun to dwindle and morale has taken a crippling blow. Whether the land is taken over that night will surely dictate the remaining course of the war, this is what the general knows.

A few thousand metres to the west lies the enemy encampment. Over time, the squadron has succeeded in pushing the enemy forces back; they have been advancing slowly now, one tedious step at a time. It is with the absence of light that the plan begins to take shape – they will crawl across the final stretch of land under the cover of night. The general assures his soldiers with confidence that the win would surely be an easy one.

It is the sort of task you could not do on your own – at least there are stars that night. The religious soldiers take these and pray desperately upon them in hopes of reaching their celestial deities. There is the silence of graveyards when the first line of soldiers begin to advance. It means shifting the entirety of your body's weight



between your hands and your knees, so that it is your thighs first, then your shoulders that begin to ache unbearably. The soldiers crawl blindly through the rotting corpses that are friend and foe, and it is also a deep loneliness that is impossible to put into words.

It is a long time after that the soldiers are able to pick up on the faint flicker of motion, transient and vague in the distance, not so far away. It is even longer after this does the general decide to signal for the soldiers to prepare for the final rush ahead. They will never know because there is a wail then, that explodes itself into life. It drifts madly in the way that it is bodiless; a ghoulish whistle you could mistake for a shadow in its furious pursuit. It hurtles and you could not tell left from right, up from down. When your world is thrown off-kilter and your limbs are dripping with the blood from victims of yesterday's war, the soldiers do not know what else to do but to run.

It is only in the morning, under the watery sunlight that they realise it is kites, just kites. A field of corpses, paper and thread, a few thousand metres to the west lies the enemy encampment. *The demons are not angry with us*, someone says with relief. It is true that the demons are not here today, because it is only hollowed wood. They have been attached painstakingly to paper kites and perhaps they wail when the wind passes through them.

The general stands off to one side and observes the wreckage with a calm expression. He turns back to his soldiers and there is a smile on his face that is sad. The soldiers begin to laugh uneasily amongst themselves because they have become fools to such trickery. The general will wait until tomorrow then, before he tells them that the war has already been lost.

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Some millenia later, some thousand miles away, a father buys a kite from a vendor and gives it to his son. The boy indulges him long enough to give it a perfunctory whirl in the sky. It is beautiful, briefly, but the child loses attention quickly and it is not long before the kite becomes ensnared in a tree.

He is a little bored and he is a little tired so he takes out his phone. Perhaps he will take a few pictures and tell his friends the next day, of how his father insisted on buying him a kite, and how the massive tree caught it in its arms. Perhaps the anecdote will receive a brief chuckle, the kind reserved for something that is notable but not humorous. Then perhaps they will move on to talk about more important things.

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The kite is a tethered craft with wing surfaces that react against air to create lift and drag forces. Consisting of wings, tethers, anchors and a tail, it is designed so that wind is able to lift it effortlessly into the air. Taken from Ancient China, each of the short stories are based loosely on true events.

# Procedure

*ESF West Island School, Lee, Giselle – 15*

“Will stabbing my body with tiny needles really help relieve back pain?” Liu Sheng asked, an eyebrow raised as he studied the medicinal tools laid out in front of him. The sharpened iron sticks stared back at the prince as the doctor chose his weapon of choice. Not even the most lavish silk beds of the Han Dynasty could bring him solace from his aching lumbar, but the reasons as to why it was hurting was unknown to Liu.

The doctor’s room was on the far east side of the Han Palace, surrounded by four walls so narrow the prince’s wingspan was the length of one side to the other. Lined with cabinets filled with all sorts of herbs and spices, Liu always believed the doctor possessed magical powers...and housed strange spirits at the same time. The energy he had felt upon taking his first step inside the doctor’s room was not one of extreme comfort.

“It’s the best and only treatment that can cure you of your sorrows,” the doctor replied as he motioned the prince to change out of his Hanfu to start the procedure. “Unless you’d like me to give you medicinal tea, but your current state is not due to heatiness, I’m afraid.”

Liu let out a chortle. “Fine by me, I cannot stand the bitterness of it anyway,” as he laid face down on the doctor’s bed, the cool wood surface raised the ends of his hairs. Placing his arms neatly by his sides, he waited for the wizard of peculiarities to begin his healing process as the room soon grew into an eerie silence. If the doctor had dropped his needle, the prince would have heard it as clear as day.

His mind began to wander, eyes drooping to a close as he retreated to his daydreams to keep him occupied, completely forgetting that he was trusting someone he barely knew to stick needles into his body and hoping it did not accidentally kill him. His shoulders slumped towards the bed surface, limbs relaxed for a second before feeling a sharp prick to his lower spine.

“Ow!” He yelped, jerking his head up and looking towards the doctor in disbelief. “Why did you not warn me before you put that thing in?” Liu protested, only for the doctor to twist the lethal needle further into his back, small drops of blood blossoming from the prince’s skin. He gritted his teeth as he hissed at the pain, hoping it was simply a temporary exchange of hurt for the riddance of his aching back. The doctor, without saying a word, picked up another needle and stuck it in Liu’s back, adjacent to the previous one.

There was no way of telling time in the doctor’s room – it could have only been minutes of the procedure, but the lingering sting of the iron sticks hitting bone felt as though eternity had passed by. At first, Liu Sheng routinely complained at each punch of needle that was driven into his body, however as the procedure started to hurt a little less the more his back was being tortured, he managed to come up with a way to not feel anything, tapping into his other sensations and tuning his ears to the distant crows squawking as they passed by the palace wings.

After shuffles and scuffles, poking and prodding, the doctor let out a small sigh, before starting to pluck the needles out of the prince’s back at a deliberately turtle-like pace, dropping the freshly-bloodied sticks on a cloth, red spots forming to stain the fabric. Liu, curious as to what had just happened, turned towards the doctor’s desk to peek at the tools used, eyes widening in shock as he saw the amount of blood and needles that had been put in his body, panning from the doctor to the desk repeatedly. His brain could not comprehend, in fact refused to comprehend, how a mere mortal like him survived from whatever that was. Returning his focus to the doctor, he managed to word out, “That...many?”

“Well, try sitting up now,” the doctor said, shrugging as Liu shifted his legs off the bed, using his arms to stiffly pull his weight upwards to sit on the bed. Surprisingly enough, his back no longer suffered from any pain. He was ache-free, but a tad bit confused. Had the doctor worked some of his magic and worked a miracle? The prince scratched his head, letting out a laugh of disbelief. “Wow! I feel great.”

Upon hearing those words, the doctor raised an eyebrow in concern, examining the blood-stained tools one by one, before looking at the prince’s bareback. It was indeed littered with tiny spots of red, but the reality was that Liu had been cured.

“Thanks a lot doctor! You’re a miracle worker,” Liu cheered happily, quickly getting up and hugging the doctor before getting dressed once more, nearly tripping over his feet as he stepped into his Hanfu. “I cannot believe I did not do this earlier. Sorry I doubted you as well, doctor. For all we know, I would have thought you were trying to stab me to death. You should call that procedure punch-related, because that was surely what it felt like. Maybe acu...acupunch-ture? Acupuncture. Aha! There, acupuncture,” He rambled on, swinging the door to the doctor’s room, nearly hitting the cramped cabinets lined against the narrow walls as the afternoon sun creeped in to graze his cheeks. Liu waved the doctor goodbye and skipped out blissfully, missing a thin-looking official by a hair as he raced to tell his friends the good news.

The official, after seeing Liu leave, entered the doctor’s room and shut the door, shaking his head in disappointment. “How was I supposed to know—” The doctor started to say in defence, only to be shut up by the official, who raised a hand in front of his face.

“I was supposed to see a prince’s corpse by the end of the day, not a well and alive human being, jumping around as if his life were not fragile enough,” The official started sternly, before looking at the needles and cloth that were corrupted by Liu’s blood. “You used these?”

The doctor nodded nervously. “Look, I have no idea what you just did, but I suppose we could make this work. You need the money anyway,” The official continued, eyeing the peeling paint that decorated the vacant, narrow walls. The cabinets filled with herbs and spices were worn down, knobs missing on some and glass covers shattered on others. “Next time, when you try to ‘cure’ someone, please make sure you do not actually cure them.”

# Gone in Flames

*Hong Kong International School, Lau, Nicolette – 13*

My Dearest Wei Wei,

As I sit here, pen in hand, I am overwhelmed by a deep well of emotions that words can barely express. The weight of the war and the impending loss of gunpowder bear down on my heart, threatening to extinguish the flicker of hope that remains. It is in this fragile state that I write to you, my love, pouring out my soul in the hopes that my words will reach you, even if I cannot.

As my body succumbs to the relentless grip of illness, my heart aches for your presence. Six long years have passed since the war's inception, and in that time, my thoughts have never strayed far from you. I have missed you with an intensity that words can scarcely capture. I yearn to see your face once more, to feel the warmth of your embrace, and to hear your laughter echoing through the corridors of my weary mind.

In the tranquil expanse that was once our sanctuary by Zhangjiajie's side, we used to saunter along for hours, awestruck by the ethereal tapestry nature painted. Do you remember the vibrant tales we would exchange as we walked amidst the verdant valleys? Our laughter would dance upon the wind, mingling with the birdsong and the susurrations of leaves. But alas, that idyllic haven has succumbed to destruction. The ethereal serenity has faded, replaced by the haunting specter of desolation. A pall of smoke, thick and suffocating, clings to the air, intertwining with the tendrils of despair that thread through the valleys. It is a symphony no longer, but a discordant cacophony with the relentless roar of heavy machinery tearing through the peacefulness, the resounding crash of falling trees shattering the tranquility, the cries of the wounded reverberating through the ravaged earth. Even my memories seem to falter as if shrouded in a veil of sorrow. Our people are suffering, Wei Wei, and I fear that the end is near.

Six years ago, on June 6, 2968, the sun tentatively emerged from the horizon, casting a somber glow upon our desecrated land. The symphony of violence reverberated through the air, a cacophony of gunshots and explosions that shattered the fragile calm of morning. The acrid tendrils of smoke clung stubbornly to the air, a constant reminder of the relentless destruction that had befallen us. Once majestic cities, now reduced to mere husks of their former grandeur, stood as haunting specters, their streets choked with rubble and despair. It is against this backdrop of desolation, where hope seemed but a distant memory, that destiny thrust me into a perilous mission burdened with the weight of our nation's survival.

Three months had passed since your deployment to the front lines of the war. As I grappled with the lingering pain of knowing that each day could be your last, I sought solace and distraction in alchemy. It was during this tumultuous time that my fascination with gunpowder began to take hold, propelling me into a world of research and discovery. However, my research took an ominous turn, like a wayward star veering off its celestial course, spiraling into the abyss of the unknown. The scarcity of sulfur, the very essence that birthed the alchemical elixir, grew increasingly apparent as mining expeditions yielded meager returns. It was as if nature itself had conspired against the perpetuation of this volatile force that had shaped the trajectory of conflict for centuries.

As my research delved deeper, I uncovered the accounts of alchemists who had lived centuries before me, echoing my fears and foretelling the demise of gunpowder. Their prescient writings spoke of a time when the alchemical essence would dwindle, leaving nations grappling with the consequences of their destructive reliance. The threads of history intertwined with my own fervor, weaving a narrative of inevitability that I could no longer ignore.

Gunpowder, the pulsating lifeblood of our warfare, teetered perilously on the precipice of extinction. The elusive sulfur, a mystical component vital for its creation, had become a scarce treasure, eluding our desperate grasp. Without this alchemical essence, our military prowess, once formidable, would crumble like a fragile edifice under the relentless assault of time. The government, masters of deception and illusion, draped their hollow promises and polished speeches before our disquieted masses, attempting to pacify the lingering fear that clung to their hearts. Yet, my dearest love, I saw through their veneer of false reassurance. I beheld the flicker of desperation that danced within the eyes of our leaders, a silent acknowledgment of the impending cataclysm that loomed ominously over us. It is this chilling awareness that stirs the embers of my resolve, compelling me to embark upon a treacherous odyssey, in search of an alternative, a glimmer of salvation to wrestle our hopes from the clutches of desolation.

In the desolate early days of the war, when the world was enveloped in the asphyxiating grip of conflict, I became consumed by a desperate mission. The realization struck me with the force of a thunderclap—our access to gunpowder, the very essence of our military might, teetered on the brink of destruction. The once-abundant sulfur deposits, the lifeblood of the alchemical symphony that birthed its destructive power, dwindled at an alarming pace. Each passing day sowed the seeds of doubt that sprouted like poisonous weeds, entwining their tendrils around the very core of my being. The hollow reassurances and hollow promises that trickled from the lips of government officials no longer held sway over my restless spirit. Beneath their polished facade, a sinister truth lurked, casting an enduring shadow of uncertainty upon the path that lay ahead. With every beat of my heart, a foreboding sense of impending doom gnawed at my very essence, a relentless reminder that without a steady supply of gunpowder, our defeat was not a mere possibility but an inescapable, predestined fate—a fate that loomed before us like a colossal, unforgiving titan, ravenous to devour our hopes and dreams.

With the weight of our nation's future pressing upon my weary shoulders, I embarked upon a treacherous path, a pilgrimage into the depths of history, where the echoes of forgotten alchemists whispered faintly in the winds of time. In my relentless pursuit, I delved into the annals of Wei Boyang's legend, a figure who had once harnessed the explosive powers of gunpowder. His tale served as a beacon of inspiration, igniting a flicker of hope within my heart, Wei Wei. With unwavering determination, I sought to recreate his triumph, to unlock the secrets of his alchemical prowess, and forge a new path toward salvation.

My journey led me through labyrinthine corridors of ancient knowledge, where yellowed pages held the wisdom of ages past. Secluded libraries became my sanctuary, their shelves laden with volumes that whispered tales of alchemical transformations and hidden truths. I immersed myself in the writings of long-forgotten alchemists, deciphering their cryptic texts and decoding the intricate symbols that danced upon their pages. I experimented fervently, combining rare elements and substances in hopes of stumbling upon a fabled substitute for gunpowder.

In my quest for alternatives, I sought the wisdom of renowned scholars and sages, engaging in fervent discussions and impassioned debates. I embarked on journeys to far-flung lands, seeking the guidance of master craftsmen, erudite in the alchemy of their respective cultures. From the alchemists of the East, I learned the secrets of saltpeter, a critical component of gunpowder, derived from the depths of the earth. The vast deserts of the West whispered tales of potent minerals and compounds that could potentially ignite the flames of our salvation. With each encounter, I absorbed their knowledge like a parched traveler drinking from an oasis, hoping to quench the insatiable thirst for a solution.

Yet, my love, the path of salvation is never without its obstacles. The halls of power echoed with skepticism, resonating with the clashing dissonance of disbelief and fear. The grip of tradition and the comfort of familiarity bound their hearts, rendering them resistant to the winds of change. They dismissed my discoveries as mere alchemical fantasies, remnants of an era long past. My fervent pleas fell on deaf ears, and my hopes were dashed against the rocks of their indifference.

But I refused to surrender to the swells of despair. The fire within me burned brighter than ever, fueled by the knowledge that the fate of our nation lies within our own hands. I would not be deterred by the naysayers who clung to the remnants of a dying era.

Through nights fraught with restlessness and days consumed by ceaseless labor, I persisted, driven by an unyielding belief in the power of innovation and human ingenuity. The journey was arduous, the road fraught with uncertainty, but I refused to surrender to the specter of despair. For you, Wei Wei, for our country, I delved deeper into the labyrinth of possibilities, guided by an unwavering determination to find a substitute for gunpowder and secure our nation's survival.

In my early pursuits, I concocted a concoction of charcoal, saltpeter, and a medley of elusive earthy elements. Drawing inspiration from age-old formulas, I meticulously measured and melded these ingredients, yearning to recreate the explosive reaction synonymous with gunpowder. But my enthusiasm swiftly gave way to disappointment as the mixture failed to ignite with the desired intensity. Instead of resounding crescendos, feeble sparks and a pungent stench filled the air, leaving behind a trail of shattered aspirations.

But as I reflected upon our shared memories, an idea took root within me, one that blossomed from the depths of our treasured moments together. It was the vivid recollections of your bedroom, Wei Wei, a haven adorned with an array of vibrant flora, each plant a testimony to your tender care and devotion. The shelves, a

tapestry of seed packets, patiently awaiting their chance to germinate and flourish, bore witness to your abiding fascination with the botanical realm. I could vividly recall our strolls, where you would generously impart your wisdom, acquainting me with the wonders and secrets harbored by myriad plants.

Driven by an unrelenting curiosity, I felt an insuppressible urge to explore the latent potential concealed within the very plants that had captivated your heart. Could their inherent properties hold the elusive piece of the puzzle we sought? And thus, I expanded my experimentation to encompass unorthodox constituents. I embarked upon a journey into the realm of botanical marvels, extracting volatile essences from sources like willow bark and cherry pits, renowned for their combustible nature. With meticulous precision, I merged these organic elements with substitutes for sulfur, hoping to unlock a new path of alchemy. Alas, my endeavors merely yielded smoldering embers and feeble flickers of flame, far removed from the explosive potency I yearned for.

Fueled by an unquenchable thirst for knowledge, I ventured deeper into the enigmatic realm of metallurgy. I traversed the realm of alloy compositions, fusing diverse metals and scarce earth minerals in my quest for a potent alternative. Forging ahead amidst the intricate terrain of metal amalgamation, I subjected the elements to heating, cooling, and manipulation, seeking to unlock their concealed potential. Yet, despite my fastidious craftsmanship, the resulting compounds lacked the incendiary might required to rival the awe-inspiring force of gunpowder.

In a bold and audacious experiment, I dared to delve into the realm of volatile gases. Inspired by ancient accounts of alchemical marvels, I aspired to harness the might of compressed air and inflammable vapors. I constructed intricate apparatuses, compressing gases and blending them with carefully chosen solvents. However, my efforts merely yielded a series of sizzles and feeble bursts of flame, falling woefully short of the explosive might indispensable for our military aspirations. The enigmatic substitute for gunpowder, like a shimmering mirage, remained agonizingly beyond my grasp.

Oh, Wei Wei, how I longed to spin a tale of triumph for you, to recount the grand culmination of my mission. Alas, destiny's cruel hand conspired against me. Each endeavor to unearth a substitute for gunpowder crumbled into disheartening failure, leaving me balanced on the precipice of despair. With each passing day, burdened by the weight of war upon my weary shoulders, the consequences of our struggle revealed themselves in scenes of unspeakable agony. I bore witness to the unrelenting devastation unleashed upon our once-vibrant land—the shattered remnants of proud cities, the desolation choking once-thriving communities, and the anguished cries of the innocents, stripped of everything. Their pain and suffering etched deep into my soul, carving sorrowful wounds that bled with a lament of profound sadness. It was an incessant reminder of my perceived inadequacy, an agonizing burden that threatened to shatter the fragments of hope slipping through my desperate grasp.

Yet, even in the face of overwhelming despair, I stubbornly clung to the flickering embers of my resolve. The fire within me, kindled by the countless lives shattered by the ravages of war, continued to burn, casting feeble shadows of tenacity and unwavering determination. Though my quest had yielded no tangible results thus far, I sought solace in the knowledge that I had fought with every fiber of my being. Each failure served to deepen my understanding of the colossal challenges we faced, amplifying the magnitude of the task that lay before us.

As time marched forward relentlessly, a suffocating veil of decay settled upon my feeble frame. On a fateful evening during one of my late experiments, I sought to ignite a concoction, driven by an unwavering fervor that knew no bounds. However, my frail body trembled under the unyielding pursuit, and its toll became apparent. Despite my hopes, believing this time I would achieve the desired reaction, misfortune struck. The flame caught onto a nearby piece of paper, swiftly transforming into a voracious inferno with an insatiable hunger. The smoke suffocated me, panic gripped my heart, and the flames mercilessly seared my frailty, inflicting excruciating pain.

In the aftermath, my already weary body, now compounded by the agony and damage wrought by the fire, withered away like a wilted flower, drained of vitality and life. The weight of the war, like a leaden anchor, dragged me deeper into the abyss of despair. It clawed at my spirit, gnawing relentlessly at the edges of my consciousness, until I was but a hollow shell, a mere echo of the vibrant soul that once resided within.

In the depths of my desolation, I lay bedridden, a prisoner to the confines of my own failing body. The dreams that had once burned brightly within me now flickered feebly, like dying embers on a cold hearth. The flame of hope, once a roaring inferno, was reduced to a mere wisp of smoke, dissipating into the air, lost to the cruel whims of fate. And yet, even amidst the suffocating darkness of those moments, a glimmer of resolve clung desperately to the

fringes of my consciousness. It whispered, a faint echo, that perhaps my endeavors had not been in vain, that somehow, in some small way, I had made a difference.

But now, as I painstakingly etch these words upon paper, the weight of bitter truth bears down upon me with crushing force. The substitute for gunpowder, the elusive answer I sought for so long, proved to be an intangible mirage in the desert of despair. Like a lone voice crying out in an ocean of desolation, my efforts were but feeble ripples, swallowed whole by the merciless tide of war. In the face of insurmountable odds, I faltered. I stumbled. I failed, Wei Wei. I failed our country, our people, and, above all, I failed you.

As the final breath quivers upon my lips, I am acutely aware of the relentless symphony of destruction that rages unabated beyond these walls. The thunderous explosions, like the anguished cries of a wounded beast, reverberate through the very fabric of our land. They serve as a constant reminder of the immeasurable price we have paid, the sacrifices made in the name of an ideal that seems ever more elusive with each passing day. China, once a mighty dragon, now teeters precariously on the precipice of defeat.

As I face the inevitable conclusion of my journey, I cannot help but wonder if there was more I could have done. If I had possessed the strength to find the elusive answer, to unlock the secrets that held the key to our salvation. The weight of regret threatens to consume me, to drown me in a sea of what-ifs and if-lys. But, my love, I beseech you, release me from the shackles of guilt. Grant me the solace of knowing that our love was not in vain, that it stood as a testament to the resilience of the human spirit amid the darkest of times.

Wei Wei, as I bid farewell to this mortal realm, I implore you to remember me. Remember me as the girl who loved you with a passion that burned brighter than the sun, whose heart beat with a fierce devotion that defied all reason. Remember me as the warrior who fought valiantly against the encroaching darkness, wielding love as her weapon and determination as her shield. And know, my dearest, even in the cold embrace of death, my love for you remains unwavering, an eternal flame that cannot be extinguished even by the cruelest of fates.

Though China's fate may be sealed, its spirit shall endure untarnished, for it resides not merely in the boundaries of land, but within the hearts of its people. We, my beloved, shall never end, there is always us, at the end as at the start, and through all the in-betweens, I love you.

Take care my Wei Wei, my heart, my soul, my life,

Qing Qing

# The Snake and the Tiger

*Maryknoll Convent School (Secondary Section), Choi, Wing Ching Celena – 16*

The Snake resides in the human realm by choice. The Tiger has no idea why the streets welcome her so, but today he intends to make use of that.

“Fancy, fancy Tiger.” The Snake greets him at her door. “You’re the last of the Twelve I ever thought I’d see down here. Finally swallowed your pride and paid a visit?”

“Shut it, Snake.”

The Snake ushers him inside. “Tell me your business.”

The Tiger pokes suspiciously at the long chair she directs him to. It’s comfy, unnaturally soft. “I came down to learn more about human beings.”

She tilts her head. “Why?”

It’s the Dragon’s fault, and his fantastical tales of fireworks and folklore; the Tiger resents humanity for grinding his former home into dust, but the Snake’s serpentine brother has piqued his interest. “To see more.”

“Of course.”

The way she smirks is infuriating. “You mock me.”

“Lies.” The Snake’s eyes are luminous, amber jewels ignited by the warm lamplight, the last part of her body that remains inhuman – except perhaps her tongue. “Tell you what, I’ll take you out for dinner tonight. We can see the city a little.”

“Now?”

“Sure.” She eyes him, and gives his elaborate silks a tug. “We need to do something about this, though.”

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“More tea?” the waiter offers.

The Snake bats her eyelashes seductively. “Please.”

He departs in a hurry, scribbling something onto his notepad. The Tiger suspects it is irrelevant to their order.

“Men,” the Snake sighs, languidly draping an arm over the back of her chair. “So gullible. I could cheat them of their life savings if I tried.” Her eyes narrow. “Tiger, darling, you’re shredding the tablecloth.”

“It’s too fragile.” The Tiger lets go. “How long will this be?”

“Soon. I’m sure you’ll love the fish, kitten.”

True to her word, the Snake’s recommended dishes are served in a flash – steaming buns, bubbling broth, plates and plates of meat – the Tiger’s stomach can’t help but rumble with delight. At the Snake’s invitation they dig in. It’s delicious.

Rather than paper notes, the Snake pays for the meal with a small contraption. When the Tiger asks, her smug answer is, “A brilliant device of magic and money. Come on, let’s see the harbor.”

They leave the restaurant and step onto the bustling streets, amidst a sea of lowered heads and glowing phones – a technological modern drug, the Snake calls them. The Tiger revels in it all; the towering skyscrapers that have long since replaced the olden trees, the radiant lights that turn the black of night to blinding day, and the quiet surface of the sea, a mirror reflecting the life of the city. It’s a pleasant surprise, how vibrant the land of humans has become.

The Snake points. “Look.”



The Tiger's gaze trails after her finger and rests on a child — a boy, no more than twelve, hunched under a crudely built stall. He lifts up something square in his hands, its surface blotched with splashes of color, to no avail. The pedestrians pass by him as if he were nothing but air.

“Let's go see,” the Snake suggests.

As they approach, the Tiger sees what the boy is holding — a painting, its patterns simple, yet the strokes are bold and elegant. The child looks at them meekly, and holds up his canvas again.

The Snake smiles wryly. “The Hare. The Fourth of the Twelve Zodiacs.”

The boy nods.

“Which one's your favorite?”

“The Tiger.”

The Snake shoots the Tiger an amused look. “Why?”

The boy looks up at him with round eyes. “Because tigers are brave and beautiful. I wish I could be a tiger. I want to grow up to be someone strong and admirable, too.”

The Tiger doesn't quite trust the Snake's smile as she asks the child a few more questions, but something else catches his eye. Carefully he selects a figurine from the piles of paper and plank.

“It's me,” he says in surprise.

The boy frowns, confused.

The Snake leans on the Tiger's shoulder to inspect the figure. “Oh, you have talent, child.”

It's far beyond that. The model is smooth to the touch, cool from sitting out in the winter air, each detail painstakingly etched into its surface. No color is painted onto this tiger, yet its expression alone speaks levels: a prideful roar, the face of power the boy must aspire to one day embody. If he were told that this child was a deity, too, one that breathes life into the unalive, the Tiger would believe it.

“How did you make this?” he rasps.

The boy perks up. “It's paper clay. I had to make it myself from old newspapers that people throw away.”

“Paper clay,” the Tiger repeats. The Dragon mentioned paper as well in his stories, a universally praised invention with infinite uses; this method, however, was not one he ever brought up.

The boy nods seriously. “I think people nowadays take too much for granted. We should be making things, instead of just taking them.”

The Snake reaches out to ruffle his hair. “I'll buy everything you have.”

His eyes fly wide in shock. After a little bit of convincing from the Snake that she means it, he hurries to find something to bunch all his paintings together with.

The Snake hums appreciatively. “I like him.”

The Tiger does too.

The boy returns with a battered bag. “Th—Thank you for your purchase!”

The Tiger wishes the Snake wouldn't smile. She looks like she wants to eat the poor child alive. Maybe she does. You never really know with the Snake. “Keep drawing, kid.”

“Wait!” the boy cries, as the Tiger turns away. “Sir. Wait — I want to give you something — uh, hang on!”

He scampers off, rummaging through the contents under his stall, and pulls out an intricate cirlet, uncolored like the other figurine, but unbelievably detailed all the same.

“Just now, when you picked up the tiger figure, you said it was you,” the boy says. He holds up the crown. “Does that mean you want to be brave and admirable like a tiger, too?”

The Tiger falters. For something as simple as paper, invented for the purpose of writing on, to evolve and morph into something so raw, so feeling; is this the truest nature of humans, the beautiful side of an endless, fragile humanity?

He kneels in front of the boy, who places the crown onto the Tiger’s head.

The boy beams in delight. “From now on, let’s work hard and become tigers together! One day I’ll be a king of the jungle too.”

Stoic as he is, the Tiger can’t resist a small smile of his own.

As his generous patrons depart, the boy’s attention turns to the tail snaking out from under the gentleman’s coat.

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“How do you feel?” the Snake asks at last, after a completely silent walk through the night streets and onto the train.

The Tiger casts a glance out the window. The platform blurs into a streak of gray as the train picks up speed and charges ahead, propped by a bridge made yet again by human hand and mind, into the breathtaking night, alive with the wildest of wonders. “Odd.”

He sees himself reflected in the window, his own humanoid form, and the crown of paper clay resting on his head. If a young boy can have such aspirations, to chase after the likes of a god, the Tiger can no longer say just how much humanity will one day come to make.

The Snake nudges him with an elbow. “You like it here, after all.”

“Do not laugh, Snake.”

She pretends to look offended, lifting her arms in mock surrender. “I’m not!”

“I can hear it in your voice.”

“Not everything is about you, you narcissist.”

The train rumbles on, a cut of silver light alongside the stars.

## Ink and Ashes

*Pui Kiu College, Ngai, Ngo Nam – 17*

Coarse sand scrapes mercilessly across my face, relentless winds threaten to push me directionless. Lost in the heart of the raging sandstorm, a faint yet hauntingly familiar image emerged. Amidst the swirling tempest, the silhouette of a slender figure defies the ferocity of the elements. Hypnotized by the figure, I mindlessly approach it, only to trip on a hidden obstacle buried under the shifting sand. As I tumbled, possessions scattered around me, leaving them vulnerable to the storm's grasp. I instinctually grabbed the manuscript that slipped out of my pockets, clutching it close to my chest as my supplies of food, and coin pouches were taken by the strong gusts of wind, disappearing into the sandstorm. Yet I feel relieved, relieved that I still have the manuscript, my poem, with me. I turned my gaze towards the figure, the silhouette that takes the form of my spouse who has been missing for thirteen years, yet she was no longer there. Perhaps she was never there, just a mirage, haunting me and toying with the hope that she may still be alive. I regained composure and tidied my sand-filled clothes as I continued my journey to search for her.

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Mei Ling, my beloved spouse, we've been inseparable since our youth, bound by a love that defies all odds. We are intertwined in a tapestry of shared dreams, laughter and unspoken promises. Mei always radiates warmth, affection and strength, the guiding moonlight in my darkest hours, and her absence in the last thirteen years has caused a void in my heart. The memories of the last YuanXiao festival we spent together often revisited my mind. As the soft glow of lanterns illuminated the night, Mei and I wandered through the bustling streets. Amidst the joyful atmosphere, we found ourselves mesmerized by the spectacle of fireworks that painted the sky in vibrant hues. The gunpowder burns brightly like our affection for one another, and each explosion seems to mirror the bursting love within our hearts, illuminating the depth of our connection. We stood shoulder to shoulder, gazing upwards with awe and reverie, our fingers entwined in a silent promise of eternal love. At that moment, I made a vow to myself, a vow to immortalize our love in words. "I shall write you a love poem," I whispered amidst the reverberation of fireworks. "A poem that will encapsulate our bond, the memories we share and the strength of our love. This will be a testament to the depths of my affection towards you, Mei Ling, my guiding moonlight." Mei's eyes sparkled with delight and tenderness as she nodded, her smile radiated even brighter than the fireworks in the night sky. And so, beneath the canopy of bursting fireworks, the promise was sealed. As the embers of the fireworks faded into the night, I carried within me a flickering flame of hope, fueled by the promise to write a love poem that captures the essence of our love story.

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"Hey pal," A deep but caring voice reached out and dragged me back to reality. "You look a little out of it." I glanced at the finished poem that I clutched tightly in my hands. "Here, have a cup of mead, it's on the house." The tavern owner patted me on the back, handing me the beverage. "You know, I peeked at the poem you carried around, it's a masterpiece. It truly radiates the affection you've had towards her, such a shame she hasn't seen it yet." I took a sip of the mead, its sweet taste distracting me from my desperation. "I've heard stories of a new invention over in Chang'an. They call it 'Printing', maybe you can make use of it by mass copying your poem and spreading them across the country." For a fleeting moment, the idea sounded enticing, yet skepticism quickly took over. Printing technology is a marvel no doubt, but it was untested. Could I trust such an alien technology to convey the emotions woven into every line of the poem? What if it got lost amidst the flood of other printed content, like a needle lost in the sea? "Thank you for your kind suggestion, but I fear the printed pages may not capture the essence of the words in the poem as I intended them to. Even more so, I would much prefer to deliver this poem to her in person." The tavern owner nodded, understanding and respect evident in his gaze, "I see. There's a timeless beauty in handwritten words that cannot be replicated. If that is your conviction, my friend, then I wish you the utmost success in your pursuit. May your words find their way to the one they are intended for." I smiled gently as I waved him goodbye and continued my journey.

As I trod across the countryside, I scanned the environment around me, hoping to acquire some useful resources that had been left behind. Walking through the forest, subtle sounds of horses trotting closer usually meant friendly company, however, my heart sank as I recognized the Tang army flags wavering above the horses as a patrol squadron

approached. Scrambling for ideas, I hid behind nearby foliage. “What—”, unbeknownst to me, a young, masked boy was also finding cover behind the foliage. “Shush, don’t ruin my plan.” The boy whispered as he lit a firecracker and lobbed it towards the incoming escort. As the firecracker exploded amidst the patrol squadron, the horses reared in fright, causing chaos and confusion. The boy seized the opportunity, swiftly snatching the supplies and bolted away as I ensued.

Upon fleeing the scene, the boy pulled out a knife and pointed it towards me. “I’m sorry, you are a witness to my crimes. I cannot let you live.” His face remained masked, yet his shaky arms and hesitant movements revealed his struggle with the thought of inflicting harm. Trapped facing this dilemma, the boy eventually dropped his weapon as tears streamed down from his eyes. “I’m sorry, I was consumed by fear and anxiety. I had to steal from them to feed my little sister, she’s... she’s all I have left.” “I understand your desperation, but we must rise above the circumstances that forced us into this situation. We all make mistakes, but it is never too late to find a different path, to make amends and seek a better future.” Tears continued streaming down the boy’s face as he nodded, his resolve strengthening. “Thank you, mister, you reminded me of another kind stranger who had taught me the same lesson. I didn’t understand it back then, but I think I do now. I believe her name was Mei.” The name he mentioned echoed in my mind as I asked the boy for more details. “Oh, do you know her? If my memory stays true, she mentioned that she was heading to Yangzhou.” I thanked the boy as he walked away with a handful of supplies. His recklessness reminded me of my past self.

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I found myself standing before Mei Ling in a small courtyard adorned with blooming cherry blossoms, yet the air is filled with anticipation and sorrow, for the impending war that looms ominously. “After the war is over, I promise no matter what happens, I will come back to your side.” Mei’s eyes shimmer with unshed tears, mirroring the ache in my heart. “Promise me something,” Mei responded, her voice tingled with longing and hope, “When you return, bring me the love poem you’ve been working on. I want to hold your words close, to feel your love in every line.” A tender smile graces my face, as my eyes lock with hers, “I promise.” In that moment, time seemed to stand still as we cherished our final moments together before the cruel hands of war separated us.

Amidst the chaos of war, I found myself thrust into the harrowing sights of the battlefield. The smell of gunpowder spread across lands. Explosions echoed in the air like fireworks, and arrows rained down like shooting stars, while they were accompanied by agonizing screams and terror. Whenever I felt like giving up, the captain of my squadron, Zhang, always patted me in the back, reminding me of the promise I made to Mei. Zhang was a responsible leader, strict with orders, yet he constantly revealed his empathetic side, catering to me.

With a heavy heart and a flicker of hope, I returned to Dunhuang, my hometown on a mission, desperate to find any trace of Mei. But what awaited me was a scene of unimaginable destruction. The familiar streets were reduced to smoldering ruins, the charred remains of a once-thriving city. My heart sank as I stood before my former house, reduced to ashes. At that moment, I was consumed by a whirlpool of emotions and recklessness as grief, anger and despair clashed, threatening to shatter my resolve. I searched desperately for any signs of Mei, calling out her name amidst the ruins, yet the silence was deafening. I couldn’t bear the thought that Mei might be gone forever. The weight of our love and the vows we made fueled a determination that surpassed my loyalty to the battlefield. With a resolute decision, I would desert the squadron, defying orders that bound me to the ravages of war and embark on a journey to find Mei. Captain Zhang tried to dissuade me from my dangerous path, believing in the importance of duty and sacrifices for the greater good, he pleaded for me to reconsider, yet it was in vain. Torn between duty and empathy, Zhang knew he had to dictate an order to eliminate deserters on sight. As he was conflicted by his understanding of my plight, Zhang issued the order reluctantly.

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I woke up bathed in sweat, while the thought of Zhang catching up to me still haunts me. I walked the last leg to Yangzhou as my heart throbbed with excitement and anticipation. Every corner, every face in this bustling city held the potential to be Mei. I tirelessly search for her, asking the locals and inquiring at every turn, desperately seeking the information that will lead me to her.

Finally, my eyes fell upon a woman with delicate features and a hauntingly familiar smile. The name of her lips was Mei, my heart soared with hope. I slowly approached her, “Mei?” I uttered, my voice trembling with a mix of excitement and trepidation. The woman turned around, her eyes meeting with my gaze. A moment of anticipation

hung in the air before she spoke, her voice gentle yet laced with confusion. “Yes, I am Mei. Who might you be?” She replied, her voice slightly different from the one etched in my memory. A wave of disappointment crashed over me, my heart sinking like a stone. She was not the Mei I was searching for, instead, it was a cruel twist of fate, a bitter reminder of the vast world, and that names could be shared among countless souls.

Upon finding out about my intention, she reached out and gently placed her hands on mine, offering a comforting gesture. “Do not let this encounter diminish your spirit,” she said softly, “she must be out there somewhere. Your poem, and your words carry a profound weight, and the world deserves to hear them. The newly developed printing technology holds the power to transcend boundaries, to touch the hearts of countless souls, perhaps your spouse would be one of them.” My eyes met with hers, gratitude shining through my gaze, yet a flicker of uncertainty remained, as I still wished to reunite with Mei in person, along with the skepticism towards the printing technology. Sensing my hesitation, the woman smiled gently and spoke with a reassuring tone, “Change is often born from uncertainty, and growth emerges from the willingness to take risks. Embrace the unknown, for it is often within those uncharted territories that the most extraordinary stories unfold.” With those parting words, the woman released my hands, her touch leaving an indelible imprint upon my spirits. She wished me well on my journey, her gaze filled with a blend of genuine empathy and unwavering belief as she faded into the crowds.

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As I searched through the archives, I flipped through every record of the casualties in the war. My hands were shaking, not only from fear of finding Mei’s name in the record, but also from the fragility of my body that aging had come with. I began to notice wrinkles on my hands, wrinkles that were not there before. It has been another twenty years since my search in Yangzhou, twenty years of traveling, twenty years of searching for clues, and twenty years in vain. The hope of reunion dwindled, yet I did not halt. What if she is just beyond the next corner? The voices of the tavern owner and the woman in Yangzhou often revisit my head, reminding me of the option to use the printing press. Perhaps it has finally come to that, as my aging body cannot take much more. “Have you found what you want?” The archivist asked in a friendly manner, “Thanks for letting me search through the archives, but unfortunately no. On another note, do you know where the printing technology can be accessed?” Surprised by my question, the archivist paused to think before answering, “It’s quite developed in Chang’an, but the closest city is probably in Kaifeng, to the east.” I expressed my thanks to the archivist as I made my way towards Kaifeng.

As I approached the outskirts of Kaifeng, distant bursts of fireworks illuminated the sky, casting a bittersweet glow upon my weary face. Memories of past Yuanxiao festivals flooded my mind, intertwining with the ache in my heart for Mei. I clutched the manuscript closer to my heart, savoring the warmth it brought, a tangible connection to the love we once shared. But I was abruptly pulled from my reverie as a figure emerged from the shadows, their uniform bearing the unmistakable insignia of Captain Zhang. My heart sank, knowing that my time had come and that I was finally caught up in the clutches of duty and fate. Zhang’s eyes bore a conflicted expression, torn between his allegiance and the empathy he felt for my relentless pursuit. “I cannot let you go further,” Zhang said, his voice plagued with regret.

Summoning the last reserve of my strength, I stood tall and gazed into his eyes, pleading with a sincerity that cannot be denied. “Captain Zhang, I implore you to honor one final request,” I beseeched, my voice quivering with desperation and hope. “Take this manuscript, my love poem, and bring it to the printing press. Let be carried far and wide, to all the lands that sunlight reaches, so that Mei, or anyone who holds a piece of my heart, may finally see the depth of my love.” Zhang hesitated, his internal struggle evident upon his weathered face. After a moment of contemplation, he nodded solemnly, a glimmer of understanding in his eyes. “I will fulfill that request,” his voice filled with both compassion and duty, “but I must first resolve this conflict between us.”

With a heavy heart, I accepted this inevitable clash. I knew my frail body couldn’t match Captain Zhang’s strength, but this time, I chose not to flee as I had done before. Instead, I stood my ground, fighting with all the determination and passion that burned within me. The battle was brief yet fierce, the clash of wills and echoes of unfulfilled dreams. In the end, the weight of duty prevailed, as I found myself defeated, my body crumbling to the ground.

As I lay there, gasping for breath, I watched as Zhang picked up the manuscript. Our eyes met one final time, a profound understanding passing between us. He nodded, a silent promise that would honor my plea. Looking at the fireworks that blossom in the sky, I wondered, Mei, are you seeing the same fireworks as I do? Are you bathed in the same moonlight that shines upon me now? Are you right around the next corner, separated by a thin wall? Are we cities apart? Or does the barrier of life and death separate us? I pondered the questions that I would not find the answers to. As my vision started to blur, I held onto the hope that somewhere, in the vast expanse of the world, my

words would reach Mei's eyes, and she would know the depth of my unwavering love. In that moment, I found a measure of peace, knowing that even in defeat, the power of love and the resilience of the human spirit would endure.

With my final consciousness ebbing away, a serene acceptance settled within me. My body may be defeated, yet my spirit lives on. The printing press, fueled by the ink of my heartfelt words, would carry my love poem to distant lands and unknown hearts. Whether Mei's eyes would ever grace its pages remains a mystery, one left to the whims of fate and the vastness of the world. But the mere possibility, the flicker of hope, was enough to sustain my soul. And so, I surrendered to the embrace of the unknown, finding solace in knowing that my love would forever echo, transcending space and time, in the hearts and minds of those who dared to seek and cherish its tender embrace.

# Cure for Paralysis

*St. Joseph's College, Lai, Chun Fung Ethan – 16*

After a grueling day of school, Jacob returned home. He changed into his pajamas and plopped on the couch, with no one home he usually practiced his singing while playing the song he sang on the telly. He was hitting those notes when the song he was playing on the TV was abruptly stopped, "Sorry to interrupt your programs ladies and gentlemen, but we have received confirmation from the Chinese medicine headquarters, and we are delighted to announce that China has found a cure to cancer! The method used to produce the medicine will not be made public, however, cancer patients from stage one to four can all receive free doses of this cure! The medicine is made from a substance only found in China, so only we have the ability to mass produce it, exciting news isn't it? From now on, we don't have to be afraid of losing loved ones to cancer anymore! And this is all thanks to..." Jacob's mind went blank, he wasn't paying attention to the newscaster anymore, he changed to his casual wear in an instant and called a taxi to Saint Louis Hospital.

The ride was longer than usual, everywhere the eye could see was filled with cars and taxis, probably because it was the rush hour. The driver asked "Hey kid, its gonna cost ya a bit in this jam, sure you wanna take this car?" Jacob didn't speak, his attention grabbed by the thoughts racing through his mind. "I'll take that as a yes then." In about half an hour the taxi arrived at the hospital, Jacob rummaged through his wallet and paid the driver. Wasting no time, he rushed up the stairs to the second floor, and burst into his mother's room. He hugged her and wanted to tell her the good news but couldn't say a word, tears kept rolling down his cheeks until there were wet spots on his mother's blanket. His mother woke up, startled to see her son like this, she immediately hugged him back with the little strength she had. "Sweetie what's wrong? Everything ok in school?" She lovingly asked. Seeing his mother care for him in the condition she was in made Jacob even more emotional, he stuttered out a few words before going back to crying uncontrollably "Cure... we can... cure you..." "Sweetie, I thought we went over this already, cancer is a terminal illness, there's nothing we can do. The doctor gave me 3 months so it's a miracle that I'm still alive after 5! Calm down, I know you're sad but mommy will always be in your heart." "No." Said Jacob, still sniffing. Regaining his composure he explained to his mom "China invented a cure for cancer, you can be healthy again, you can finally come back home and live with me and dad." Shocked at this news, she burst into tears alongside Jacob, unlike the last time they cried together, this time they were shedding tears of joy.

Half a year has passed since then. Jacob now lives with his mother and father happily ever after... or so they wished. Ever since the Americans and the Brits heard about this cure China invented, they've been trying to get the resources and the formula. China only wants to sell the cures to them and didn't intend on teaching them how to make it. Because of this cure, China has been treated with a little more respect internationally than before and has risen to the top, even better than America. Of course the Europeans couldn't stand an Asian country basking in glory, so just like in WWII, America, Britain and some other countries formed an alliance and plotted to invade China. Sensing the danger, China responded by strengthening their armed forces, preparing for an all out war. All while the united nations stood by, unable to do a single thing.

1st January, 2025, when most people were celebrating the new year, Tiananmen square suffered an aerial raid. There were no civilian casualties thanks to the might of the anti-air weapons stationed nearby. But this also meant that a war was started. Civilians were ushered into underground bunkers or safehouses while bombs exploded and guns were fired, the gunfire lit up the dark sky, like fireworks, but not that pretty. Jacob and his family took shelter in a nearby safe house.

Days, weeks, months passed by. The radio broadcast kept on repeating the same things "A war has started, please seek shelter and evacuate from your home immediately, bring with you the bare minimum and remember, stay safe." Through a camera outside of the shelters the people inside them were able to see outside. Except for the occasional insect, the city was dead. Metaphorically and literally, bodies were rotting on the street, glass shattered, cars burnt, like those zombie apocalypse movies where dust and sand were everywhere, except this wasn't a movie. Inside the shelter there were enough rations to last 100 people 5 years, but it wasn't the lack of resources that killed, it was the suffocating atmosphere and despair the civilians were facing. One by one the mentally weak succumbed to the dread of this war and either took their own lives or left the shelter seeking the enemy. Jacob was lucky that both his parents were with him, or else he might have lost it too.

23rd October, 2027, China finally succumbed to the united might of over 10 countries. Their final military forces were decimated in Beijing and the Europeans were victorious. The remaining people in the shelters didn't

know about it of course, so it was a shock to everyone in Jacob's shelter when they heard a knock on the door. The camera outside was covered with grime so they couldn't see outside anymore. They huddled up near the door and started discussing if they should open it. In the middle of this they heard the word "Clear" and off came the door, smashing into a nearby wall and killing two people in the process. Everyone else scattered and looked in horror as a group of soldiers walked in. "Well well well lookie what we found here" Said a man who looked to be their commander "More of these Chinese scum, I thought you had a one child policy, kill off the men and have your way with the women." With fear in his eyes Jacob watched as the merciless guns took aim and fired, with his remaining time he tried to protect his mother but in vain, his couldn't see anything anymore and slowly drifted into unconsciousness...

"Jacob! Jacob! You're finally awake!" Jacob sat up, dazed and confused, he was in what seems to be a hospital and his parents were next to him. "The Chinese government found a way to cure paralysed people! You can finally walk and talk again!" Exclaimed his mother, overwhelmed with joy Jacob got off his bed and embraced his parents. "What was it like?" Asked his mom. "Being paralysed for three years? I don't really remember anything" Said Jacob "I think I had a really long dream but it doesn't matter, as long as we're together and healthy nothing in the world could stop me from feeling this happy!" Or so he thought...



## The Weaver's Tale

*St. Paul's Co-educational College, Cheung, Hau Yin Chloe- 14*

Sunlight trickled in through the canopy like liquid gold, heralding the start of a new day. Dewdrops glittered amongst the trees and bushes like little diamonds. The lotus flowers rested idly upon the lilypond, nestled between giant jade plates of lotus leaves, and goldfish sporting vibrant scales the colour of glowing embers could be seen frolicking beneath the crystal-clear depths. Melodious laughter like a chorus of tinkling bells floated into the picturesque palace gardens, as a procession of ladies entered, all of them members of the imperial court. The most striking of all was the lady at the front of the procession waited on by all the others, who were her maids. She had silky, raven hair woven into an elegant bun atop her head, with loose strands framing her delicate features. Her eyes, which rested appreciatively on every beautiful blossom in the garden, glowed with the lustre of black pearls. Her willowy figure made her look all the more regal – fitting for a woman of her stature.

Her maid-in-waiting, Yinsi, brought her a steaming cup of tea, bowing respectfully. “Your imperial highness, please have a drink.” The woman, Empress Leizu, accepted it, “Thank you, Yinsi.” She took a seat below a mulberry tree and raised the cup, breathing in its soothing herbal aroma, and raised the cup to her lips, taking a sip, closing her eyes and letting the earthy notes take over. Mornings like this were heavenly for her, as she took a break from her worldly duties and took a moment to unwind. Leizu was the wife of the Yellow Emperor, who ruled China from 2698 to 2598 BC. As the empress, she worked by the emperor’s side and had to attend many court rituals and ceremonies. It proved tiring occasionally, having to be perfectly poised all the time, but Leizu found solace in her inquisitive mind, and the gentle, familiar aroma wafting around her, diffusing into the morning air.

“Empress, Your Imperial Highness! there’s a cocoon in your tea!” Her maids’ startled cries jolted Leizu from her reverie. “Oh! There is!” Leizu watched the silkworm cocoon, which had tumbled down from the branches of the mulberry tree she was seated under, drifting around her tea. It bobbed about in the hot water. The Empress attempted to lift the cocoon from her tea. She fished around slightly clumsily, trying to get it out, while her maids panicked, worried about the hot tea scalding their empress’s hand. As she wrestled with the cocoon, she found it beginning to soften and unravel into a long smooth filament. The slender fibre felt soft to her touch. A sudden idea struck the ever-thinking Leizu, and her arm froze in mid-air, the thread suspended above her tea. She gazed thoughtfully at the thread, lost in a string of thoughts. She glanced at her maids’ garments – functional, but rough and not that comfortable – then at the fibre again. “What if...what if we used these fibres for weaving?” she murmured ponderously.

She took her idea to her husband in the evening when she was having tea with him. “Using worm cocoon strands to weave clothing?” the ruler furrowed his brow. The very idea seemed completely ludicrous. “Yes, I’m sure it’ll work somehow! It truly is the softest, smoothest thread I’ve ever touched.” Leizu gestured emphatically. The emperor had his doubts, but he was an inventive soul himself, with many inventions having been introduced under his reign, including carts, boats, writing and wooden houses. He sighed, “Well, how would you like me to help you?” “Just let me have a grove of mulberry trees. I’d like to learn more about these worms and the intriguing material they produce.” Leizu pleaded. The emperor agreed – the determined glint in Leizu’s eye was enough to convince him.

A couple of days spun by, and to Leizu’s utter delight, her mulberry grove was ready. Along with her maid-in-waiting Yinsi, she took her first stroll around the grove. “Excellent, there are many worms here!” she exclaimed rapturously. “Your imperial highness, these are ideal conditions for silkworms!” Yinsi remarked happily, lightly amused at the normally composed empress’s excitement, but pleased as well, for she also saw the potential in the silkworms and silk cultivating. “I must get started right away!” The empress declared, “I’m certain that my innovation will benefit the empire.”

Her heart ablaze with determination, the Empress set her sights on perfecting the silk production process and transforming it into a material. Instead of taking leisurely walks in the gardens, Leizu would head to her mulberry grove. At the break of dawn, when the just-awakened sun first casts its warm glow upon the earth, the empress could be seen in the grove peering into tree branches and walking from tree to tree, diligently observing the silkworms in the trees. She learnt to domesticate silkworms and experimented with making silk, collecting cocoons, and using different methods to obtain the silk from them. She spent her days absorbed in her task and earned valuable knowledge about the silkworm's life cycle. She would trek in the grove, rain or shine or snow, till the last rays of sunlight faded away. Only then would she retire to her chambers, exhausted yet satisfied by her newfound knowledge, and note down her findings on rolls of bamboo strips. By the time she'd written down all she wanted to write, it would be deep into the night, with no soul save for the moon awake. Sometimes, she would be so exhausted by the end of the day, that she would fall asleep while writing and get scratched by the bamboo. Months later, she had amassed an extensive collection of notes, which were kept in her chambers, and shared only with those closest to her. Leizu soon found that collecting the cocoons and boiling them caused the threads to unravel. These wispy threads could be woven into a smooth fabric through methods carefully developed and perfected by the empress.

She also formed a hardworking team of people who helped her with this project. Most of them were devoted members of her court, along with some interested scholars in the imperial court. Her team enlisted the help of farmers to help them with rearing silkworms. The farmers worked in the mulberry grove, taking care of the mulberry trees and silkworms.

Meanwhile, news of the empress's research spread like wildfire within the imperial court. Bitter courtiers, who bore petty grudges against Leizu, grew resentful of Leizu and her team's work. They whispered behind her back, deviously plotting to improve their reputation with the emperor by bringing her down. They argued that the resources the emperor allocated to her team, such as the mulberry grove, were too much. They also stated that silk was too extravagant and impractical a material. They spun elaborate webs of lies, which they craftily fed to the emperor, hoping to tarnish Leizu's reputation. "Empress Leizu is using that mulberry grove as a place for idle entertainment, wasting our precious resources, and she lounges around all day doing nothing..." "Empress Leizu is splurging on custom-made jewellery with the money the emperor granted her; soon enough, she shall plunge the imperial court into debt!" These deceitful whispers echoed endlessly within the palace walls. The courtiers also snuck into the mulberry grove when the empress and her workers were absent and would use swords to hack away the branches and leaves of the mulberry trees, harming many of the silkworms and cocoons, as well as the trees themselves. Leizu and her team were positively boiling with indignation at this, but as they didn't have solid proof, they were forced to bear with it. The courtiers also tried to turn the maids on Leizu's team against each other, goading them into squabbles about petty matters like stealing possessions, making it impossible to maintain healthy group dynamics. Yinsi often begged Leizu to punish the courtiers, as she was getting gossiped about too, "Your Highness, those courtiers have been driving us all apart!" Despite this, Leizu, ever the diplomat, decided against acting on hot-headed impulse and devised a plan to cool tensions.

The empress decided to host a special banquet at the palace dining hall to unveil her now-perfected invention. She sent out invitations etched on ornately carved stone tablets, emphasising how much of a momentous occasion it would be. The emperor, high-ranking courtiers including the bitter ones, and even the highest-ranking ladies of her court were invited. At the high-profile banquet, she proudly presented her method of manufacturing silk fabric to the guests. Using a loom, a machine she had designed especially for weaving, she carefully wove silk threads into a smooth fabric and presented it to the emperor and his guests.

The emperor was enthralled, beaming like an enthusiastic schoolboy. "Well, I must say that this is the smoothest, glossiest, most luxurious fabric I have ever seen! The sheen, and the texture, show plenty of promise. Who would have known that worms could do such a miraculous thing?"

“I agree with his imperial majesty. Truly, this new textile is amazing!” Some of the courtiers nodded in agreement, “If I may suggest something, perhaps embroidery or dyes could be added to decorate these fabrics? Some colour, along with some intricate needlework, would work wonders.”

Leizu’s eyes shone with inspiration, “Yes! That would be a splendid addition, thank you for your input.” Other courtiers also expressed their ideas, which were carefully noted by Leizu’s team for later review.

However, the bitter courtiers took it upon themselves to drag the empress into the mud. “Your imperial majesty...” the ringleader of those courtiers simpered to the emperor, leaning towards him, “The empress’s success in making this material is astonishing — I’m sure none of us expected her and some lowly servants to finish the job; however, we have spotted various worrying problems regarding multiple aspects of the silk-making, and we felt that it is of utmost importance to raise it to your immediate attention.”

“Indeed, Your Imperial Majesty,” another courtier drawled. “A fact that deeply concerns us is Empress Leizu’s mulberry grove and her extravagant spending.”

“The sheer amount of money flowing out is staggering. Surely an entire grove along with her allowances is too much since all that is being done, if it’s even being done, is the questionable practice of...raising and boiling worms?” another courtier leered slyly, drawing venomous looks from Leizu’s team. Leizu’s lips were pressed together in a tight line as if to prevent a torrent of daggers from spilling out.

“Oh, do forgive me, your imperial Highness, but these practices seem more like witchcraft than weaving,” he added unctuously. At this, gasps came from the other guests, and some scandalised whispers of, “How dare you!” “The audacity!” escaped from those on Leizu’s side. The emperor glanced uncertainly at Leizu; his face conflicted – he did not want to be accused of meddling in black magic.

“Do permit me to clarify that the process of silk making is very time-consuming and meticulous. My team and I employ farmers to assist us in rearing the silkworms, who are paid workers. As for the mulberry grove, it is where we rear the silkworms. As for witchcraft, Minister – frankly, I’m afraid your imagination might be just slightly too vivid.” Leizu replied patiently.

“With all due respect, your imperial Highness, I can hardly see how it is time-consuming. Also, your proposed price for selling this material is so high, although it is a very impractical material requiring delicate upkeep. It’s a luxury that can hardly be afforded by the majority of the population, who work in agriculture and need functional clothes that can withstand wear and tear. What benefits then, may I ask, can they reap?”

“The silkworms are first cultivated in the mulberry grove. They consume mulberry leaves as they grow, and soon they get to the stage where they spin protective silk cocoons to pupate in. Then, we and our farmers harvest the cocoons once the pupation is complete. After that, we have to boil or steam the cocoons to soften the silk fibres and remove proteins. Then we unwind the silk filaments, a delicate process requiring a lot of care, and spin them into threads using a silk reel – another device I invented. After that, we interlace the silk threads on the loom and weave them together to create fabric. It’s all very labour-intensive.” Leizu explained.

“That may well be, although I believe that process is overcomplicated; but how is it supposed to benefit our economy? It’s not as if we can sell it to the commoners. They’ll never afford such an ostentatious thing.” a courtier scoffed sceptically.

“Allow me to explain this, Minister.” A scholar on Leizu’s team piped up, “This material her Imperial Majesty has invented, silk, is indeed expensive, but that is a benefit. It could be used to trade with other countries along with tea leaves and porcelain. We can keep the silk-making procedure a secret so that we’ll be the sole producers! It could rake in huge amounts of money.”

“Additionally, producing silk could provide job opportunities for many commoners! Our farmers are benefitting already, and many more could be employed. Women could also participate in the weaving process, so they can earn their income too.” Yinsi added.

“With such a complicated procedure to make as you described, how is it supposed to be mass-produced? It can’t possibly be mass-produced! Is Your Highness simply planning to keep it to yourself?” another courtier questioned snugly, thinking this would floor Leizu. She was not floored.

“As we just said, we will be employing more people to help us with mass production, and I’ll be improving the design of my loom and reel. You are welcome to help out with this procedure if you wish.” Leizu said pleasantly. The courtier grimaced. “No, your imperial Highness, I find worms unpleasant creatures, and working around them very unbecoming.” He retorted pointedly. At this, several of the maids opened their mouths, insulted, but Leizu silenced them with a look. Drawing herself up, she summoned up all her courage, and in her most regal manner, began to speak.

“Over the past months, my team and I have been toiling hard, and we’ve gleaned a vast web of enchanting knowledge of silk and its making.” she began, her dark eyes sparkling with genuine ardency. “Not all of you appreciate this new material, which is understandable; yet I hope in time you do recognise its potential. The way I see it, we must kindle innovation by harnessing the power of nature. The threads produced by these tiny, seemingly insignificant worms are untapped jade deposits; it’s a fact that’s impossible to disregard. We’re just scratching the surface of this vast abyss of natural wisdom. It is yet another way of living in harmony with nature. Regardless of what happens to my invention in the future, I want to try doing all I possibly can to develop silk. I know that now, it’s far from flawless, but with the invaluable support of the court, I’m sure that it shall metamorphose into something unimaginably spellbinding; something that will bring significant prosperity for centuries to come.”

The room fell silent. Heads swivelled, and the emperor found dozens of expectant eyes locked onto him. Those on Leizu’s team held their breaths, their hearts racing wildly, desperate to know what the emperor would make of her proclamation.

The emperor nodded approvingly, a smile breaking out across his amiable face. “Yes, I do hope it does. I shall look for ways to integrate silk into the court, and I shall find ways to let our people reap the benefits. It’s a tremendous invention, it is, and we ought to treat it as such.” Leizu’s team was in seventh heaven after hearing this, though they managed to compose themselves long enough to thank the emperor with profuse bows. The guests – some earnestly, some with a begrudging reluctance – acquiesced to the emperor’s words, their heads bobbing up and down either vigorously or stiffly. Silk was soon introduced into court rituals and used for ceremonial purposes, and gradually worn by people. It was traded as a precious commodity to people all around the world, bringing prosperity to the Chinese Empire.

The noble art of silk-making soon spread throughout the Chinese Empire and weaved its way into human history. A tale of serendipity, ingenuity, and innovation, Leizu's invention of this coveted fabric brought progress, knowledge, and power to people for centuries and continues to do so today. Seamlessly weaving together traditional skill and modern ingenuity, the invention of silk remains a testament to Leizu’s, and many other Chinese inventors’ innovative spirits.

# A Lesson in Flight

*St. Paul's Co-educational College, Tso, Si Ling - 15*

You are made of wood in your first lifetime.

At the moment you are an uncarved piece of wood. You are laid flat on a carpenter's workbench, heavy in your unshaved bark and unchipped features.

Fingers -- calloused, telling of their power of creation -- run across your body and pausing on your midriff, as if in contemplation of the possibilities that they can spin out of you.

You cannot help but vibrate in anticipation, wondering what these hands will make of you.

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It takes the logician three years to complete your creation -- three years spent mooring over countless blueprints and designs, consulting other scholars of his calibre, and chipping away at the finest details.

You take shape slowly, but definitively.

Your wings, once flimsy attachments to your midriff, now extend past your sharply carved head as if they are outstretched arms. You are broad and flat, wide yet thin; day by day you come to resemble more and more of the birds that come and go by the branches next to the workshop's window.

A friend of the logician once stopped by, curious to see the progress his friend had made thus far. Upon setting his eyes on you, he sighed deeply and left but one word.

Madness. A word that may have been a more accurate descriptor for some of the logician's more outlandish blueprints, but it is accurate in its description of his vision for you still; a man-made invention capable of flight -- a device capable of a function known to be exclusive to nature's creations.

The logician is determined to prove himself capable of replicating miracles yet. *Wooden bird*, he calls you, the streamline of your head and the outstretch of your wings reflections of nature's unfathomable forces in designing, yet products of his human ingenuity. *Wooden kite. Someday you will fly.*

*(Fly for me, is what goes unsaid.)*

His gaze drifts to the clouds, bringing with it your thoughts -- you want to soar, soar above the clouds, up and away from the workshop -- but a comet-like streak of yellow drags your stare back to ground-level.

A bird lands on the windowsill of the workshop, its claws flexing to clamp onto the wood, solid in its landing. The bird cocks its head at you.

*Poor thing, trapped inside a human's workshop, it chirps. Your wings look practically unusable!*

Struck by its words, you are all at once aware of all the flaws present in your body; the weight of wood a heavy anchor to the earth, and your carved wooden boards but a facsimile of the bird's beautiful, feathered wings.

.....

It was not long until you experienced your first flight.

The bird was right. Your wings are flawed, and to conclude the mishaps in your design with that one simple line is to scrape the tip of an iceberg. You were made to mount the winds, but it is the winds who push and pull at your flimsy, boarded body.

It is not impossible to make it to the sky at first -- but of course. Even a simple leaf can experience a short period of flight if thrown with enough force into the air. What is impossible is to remain airborne, dragged down by the ever-present weight of your materials and the cutting resistance from the air.

As it turns out, all of your difficulties serve as a stark reminder of what remains as impossibility for those destined to dwell on the earth. The heaviness of wood pales in comparison to the weight of your creator's sadness as you spiral down, down, and down, as the peak of your altitude morphs into the limits of where human ingenuity could take him.

It had not been long since you experienced your first flight.

(It had not been not long since you experienced your last.)

---

You are made of paper, in a later lifetime.

The memories of your first flight have lingered, and will always linger. You remember the first touch to the ground after failure -- a strangely soft embrace from the earth; yet you also remember that there was no rebound, no recoil.

You are sure that you will never fly again -- a belief solidified by your distrust in your new vessel. The hands that piece you together from a combination of paper, wood, and glue are not so calloused as your first creator, nor so experienced; hands that speak of handling fine materials, silk and paper; hands made smooth from the nurture of this more-developed society, where writing is no longer inscribed upon bones nor bamboo scrolls.

The eyes that follow those hands are sparkling with anticipation as they review their own blueprints. You catch a glimpse of versions of your old blueprints, scribbled and remarked upon with ink extensively. You wonder if it makes a difference, this revision and consolidation of an invention already proven a failure from lifetimes past.

In an instance, tools that were yet to exist before your first flight fill into your field of vision. You let these hands tailor your edges and smear glue onto your sides, all the while without an inkling of how the runny glue will cement your materials together.

All that you know is that you are paper-thin, large yet lightweight. Fragility upon fragility. How will you mount the winds if you cannot withstand even the slightest drafts, or the stronger breeze?

... You lie still on the workbench. There is nothing to anticipate when all that awaits must disappoint.

.....

The wind is mild near the workshop today.

*Paper bird, paper kite.* The young inventor ushers. *Fly!*

And with that, he lets go --

The first gust of wind catches you directly in the midriff. The thread tethering you to the spool in the inventor's hands loosens, before you ride into your newfound flexibility, mounting the wind as you would on waves in the ocean.

Your journey lasts more than a blink this time.

You wonder what the logician, the first to dream of a wooden bird, would think of this sight in the skies today. You wonder what he would think of the failed product of his dreams, now renewed into an invention that fulfills every expectation that has been placed upon its fragile body.

But for now you revel in the young inventor's joy, joy so overwhelming that it floods even your paper vessel, capsizing your body --

The reinvented thinness of your structure allows you to rebalance in the air.

.....

Birds take two wings to fly.

-- For you, it takes two wings and two generations to fly.

You have been made of wood and paper, and you are made of dreams, each rendition of you painstakingly crafted with the intention to capture the beauty in nature's flight, time after time.

Legacy is passed from the experienced to the inexperienced, from the old to the young. Refinement after refinement is made across generations, until you finally take off and remain connected to the heavens, resonating with the skies.

Remain airborne.

Creative Writing

# Fiction

Group 5





# The Looking Glass

*The Church of Christ in China Ming Yin College, Choy, Siu Long – 17*

## *Reflections of a Murky Sky*

Along a long and desolate road I walked, monochrome structures entering my retina and fading as I absentmindedly passed them one by one. As I watched my boots clack, a gray puddle came into my view, though nothing could be seen besides lines like bleeding ink forming my face. Impenetrable clouds block any hope of light seeping through, enveloping the Capital in an ominous air. Eventually, I started seeing people – or more so – figures. Figures formed by lines vaguely representing people were queued up, telling me I was heading to the right place.

At last, I reached the only source of colour, a massive screen displayed on a towering structure, and its many speakers echo their broadcast into my skull.

*Are you lost, unable to find a meaning for yourself?  
Are you not content, grasping at straws for your future?  
Do not fear, my friend. With Tomorrow's Vision, you will find your purpose in life.*

*Let us guide you, to a tomorrow built by your perfect self.*

Tomorrow's Vision – a recently patented technology, if I recall. A machine capable of calculating one's abilities and possibilities, then outputting "the Perfect Job". An anchor for misguided souls, and a compass for lost lambs. At least, that's what they say.

Suddenly, I felt a touch on my shoulder, and heard an unfamiliar voice.

"Here you are!"

I turned to see an actual face, coloured and everything. Seeing my surprised face, the man thought for a moment, before seemingly realizing something. He quickly scrolled through his watch, and with a tap, my senses overloaded as the world returned to colour, and figures faces.

"Sorry about that, Mister Chailyn! A clerk must have forgotten to whitelist your name on our Perception Blocker System. As the CEO of Tomorrow's Vision, I sincerely apologize. We shouldn't have made this mistake when we were the ones inviting you here!" The man scratched his head, awkwardly smiling.

"Don't worry about it, I found the experience riveting. Truly magnificent – blocking out defining traits to enforce anonymity and security is a system I would've never thought of," I said, looking around. "Congratulations on claiming a seat as the Four Great Inventions."

"Ha ha, I'm grateful for being equals to legends like you, Mister! I'm more than proud of Tomorrow's Vision, but I couldn't have imagined it making me a District Keeper."

"Tomorrow's Vision –", I pulled the conversation back on track, "A supercomputer that decides a person's future for them, a 'compass', you could say. But, do I have it right when..."

*Let us be your compass, friend.*

"...Tomorrow's Vision is a compass for the city?"

"You're amazing, Mister! It is as you have said, Tomorrow's Vision determines the needs of the city, and allocates the people by their potential. With this technology, we can guide the city to a brighter tomorrow!"

*Built on the blood of the desperate, huh.*

"Yeah." I agreed.

## *Dragon's Rest*

In the city was a grandiose tower in red and gold, and atop laid Dragon's Rest, a space reserved for myself. I rested silently in my chair, blankly staring at the ceiling expanse. While my assessment on the new Great Inventor had no problems, I admit the results had been worthless. I had expected Tomorrow's Vision to be nothing good, but for it to have been to this extent was demoralising. I looked online to see if anything notable had happened.

'Tomorrow's Vision estimated to raise labour production by 40%'

'Mantle CORE announces new technology "Combustion Down"'

'Riot in District 3 suppressed in 20 minutes'

'Zones in District 2 to be repurposed for Research Complexes'

*I wasn't informed about this.*

I left Dragon's Rest, and headed to the R&D branch under my jurisdiction. I entered the white lab and greeted me as usual was my head researcher.

"Good day, Sir. What brings you here today?"

"Justine, why haven't I been notified on the repurposing of the Residential Zone?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean what's on the news."

Justine looked at the screen on her wrist as an article appears. She looks at other pieces of information before she concluded, "There had been a direct command from the Authority, merely hours ago, when you were over at District 4. I apologize for not informing you as soon as you have returned."

"It's fine. How's the progress?"

We discussed the development of a new technology, a possibility born from what made me Great Inventor, among other things. Due to my status, I was by extension District Keeper. However, my subordinates were really those who managed the area. If not for them, I would not have the freedom to roam the city nor explore new ideas. In truth, I am grateful to them, but I suppose the City seldom has time for expressing and receiving sincerity. Nevertheless, I tried to show my appreciation to them.

"The prototype is still too unstable for safe usage. Unfortunately, it will be quite some time before anything concrete can be announced."

"Thanks. You're the best, Justine."

When I returned to my office, I passed my seat and stood on my balcony, a deck bounded in glass walls – would one call it a balcony, or an observation deck? Artificial lights hung on the tower illuminated my view, yet below was a city dark and void of warmth. I was reminded of the sight

I saw in the invitation to Tomorrow's Vision, people on the concrete ground, omitted from the world created by the Perception Blocker. Where were they now?

### *Premonition*

A monotonous day like any other would have been fine, but today had been unsettling. I followed my routine, stopping by R&D and walking through the district, albeit more cautiously.

Nothing out of the ordinary had I seen, yet in my gut there was a sinking feeling. An eerily cold breeze grazed the streets, sweeping up withered leaves and torn fliers. I hastily returned to the tower, unable to shake off the ominous air.

In my office I kept an eye on the security system, screens showing the surrounding areas of the tower. And then, I spotted it –

– the mural of an eye, etched onto a surface.

The eye was painted in black, its ink leaking down to the floor like tears. Immediately, I turned to contact my staff –

"There's graffiti on the building. Can it be removed as soon as possible?"

"Right... Um, Sir, where is it?"

I turned to the screen.

"The outer wall, on the ground floor, there's –"

Nothing.

*What?*

"Sir? We're looking at the cameras, but we don't see anything..."

"Can you dispatch a team to patrol the tower, in and out?"

"Yes, Sir."

As the call ended, I turned back to the screen, trying to comprehend what had happened. I was sure I saw a mural of an eye, and the mess it made. But now, it was gone, as if it had never been there. Was it my imagination?

In an attempt to focus, I left the office to take a breather. Going down, I reached the Arboretum, an open green space with a variety of plants I've come to gather since becoming District Keeper. I have never been fond of the stale city streets, so I constructed this place, as well as to remind me of my roots. I rested on the grass, gazing at the cloudy sky – if only it had been a sunnier day.

The wind blew, and a flier landed next to me.

### **WE KNOW**

And blotted on the paper, was an eye, its ink seeping across the page.

And I understood at once.

## *Blotted In Eyes*

I rushed towards my office, quickly contacting my staff. Fearing for the worst, I ordered them to evacuate the premises. At best, this could be merely a child's prank.

At worst, it's a district takeover.

When I finally reached my office, what greeted me was not a sunny balcony behind a cozy desk. The entire glass pane enveloping the observation deck had been covered by fliers and posters, all of which had inked eyes staring into my soul. Stray lines of WE KNOW appeared behind the eyes instead of rays of light, putting my office in total darkness. What I had feared appeared to be true.

Taking up the mantle of "Printing" among the Great Inventions was Projectionist's Ink, an invention I had always found eerie. Printing in the Old Ages utilized ink, usually with the assistance of machine. Yet, anything using Projectionist's Ink was *etched*, as if it had been there all along. With this technology, graffiti became rampant in areas wealthy enough to afford it, so commercial use had been strictly prohibited. However, the sight I was seeing can only mean two things: either regulations became lousy, or, this was an act backed up by authorities.

In my confusion, I heard a voice, coming out of the bleeding ink, and after, a foot appeared from the void covering my office walls. I observed cautiously, as a refined man stepped out from the ink, one whom I had known.

"Cassius."

"How've you been doing, my friend?" he said nonchalantly, fixing his gray suit and tie.

"Why is the head of Projectionist's Ink here, entering my office brazenly and without notice? Even if you are a Great Inventor, I'm not available whenever." I questioned.

"I have an opportunity for you, you know, relax. Have a seat, would you?" Cassius rested on the guest seat, as cool as ever. "So as you may have already known, you're one stubborn man. Why have you refused to share your invention with the team, Chailyn?"

A familiar question I was asked. It was not the first time the Great Inventors asked for my collaboration.

"I would the instant the City finally decides to use their inventions for good."

"And what does that mean?"

"All I've ever seen in the City are golden trophies held by bloodied hands. It would be my greatest wish to see it realized."

"You know, that Tomorrow—Visions—thing, it's being used to give everyone a job. People who had to live on the streets can now work to get off their feet."

"You speak of those jobs like they aren't dead ends."

"What if they were?"

"The City gives people false hope. People put everything on the line to reach their hope, only to find out the stars they dreamed of were on a fabricated sky. And we gain from each shattered dream."

"So? Our technologies are a force of good. The city benefits from each invention, and the people live better lives. We only take what we need, and the people get the rest."

"Don't speak of 'good' byproducts as if they were equal to genuine forces of good!" having felt every cut of his twisted morals, I finally had enough.

"...I see we won't see eye to eye," Cassius sighed, "the Looking Glass is something *special*, you know?"

He stood up from his seat with a regretful exhale, and fixed his tie.

"The Authority has ordered your retirement, Chailyn. Thank you for your invention, but we'll take it from here. Sorry it has to be like this, but not really."

Cassius melted into a puddle of ink, and that's when I realized the Projectionist's Ink had seeped into my office, and I found my desk melting into the floor.

## *The Looking Glass*

In my final moments in the office I would never be in again, I witnessed the room collapsing into itself like melted metal, and ink splattering onto each and every surface. I know the Ink can etch onto things, but I didn't know it could destroy them.

*In other words, I don't know what it is I'm facing.*

I ran into a hallway, where the Ink slowly bled into. The evacuation system had sounded the Third Trumpet, the alarms ringing through the walls illuminated in red. I reached the Arboretum, where I had an emergency escape, leading me far off to another District. But when I opened the hatchet, all I was greeted with was an overflowing flood of Ink, surging up to my face. Before it could have peeled my skin off, I managed to throw myself on the dirt. A tiny drop of Ink landed on my wrist, and it melted through my skin, and cauterized it just as soon. Yet I felt no pain.

With my mistake, the Ink had surrounded me, and approaching still. Out of options, I pulled out the fragment of a mirror, and thought of an escape route.

And then, I dropped through the ground under me, and fell onto the floor below.

“There it is! Took you long enough, Chailyn.”

Cassius emerged from the Ink once more, a satisfied grin on his face.

That’s why I didn’t want to use it.

“The Looking Glass, in all of its glory,” he looked in admiration, “A technology capable of capturing the imagination, and manifesting it into reality. Imagine what you could do with all that power!” he continued. “The commercial version is so heavily encrypted. Honestly, we could not crack it for our lives! The City very much welcomes your intelligence, you know. Imagine what we together can do! We can mold the city from the ground up, and make whatever we desire reality!”

“Truth be told, what I wish for will never coincide with yours.”

“Your definition of ‘good’? What good is it to the people, huh? Who would dare to dream of flying when they can’t even stand? You, no, WE have the power to change that! WE are the people who will overcome anything the City stands against!”

... Now I see.

“The Projectionist’s Ink, embodies ‘Domination’,” I concluded.

“The Ink can be etched onto things, as if it had always been there. And things stained by the Ink, will eventually be amalgamated into the Ink, as if it had always been the case. It is the complete assimilation of others, am I right?”

“What took you so long, huh? We will guide the City to a brighter tomorrow, and the people will carry the ark! What is more noble than that?” Cassius shouted, as the Arboretum roof gave in, gushing Ink through the hole, and I phased out of the collapsing garden. Only one goal remained in my mind.

### *The Distant Dream*

I made it to the main lobby, where the Ink had only just started dripping into. I ran out, only to see Dragon’s Rest enveloped in a barrier.

*It has to be technology from Mantle CORE.*

The mantle of “Gunpowder” has always been unstable. Technological advances made each and every weapon more dangerous than before. In this age, continent-leveling weapons were nothing rare. This resulted in the most powerful weapons company being shield manufacturers counter-intuitively. Their shields, normally, were nigh impenetrable. However, the Looking Glass can phase me to the other side. I ran, and ran, to the laboratory, where I would make my last stand.

The white laboratory had long since been evacuated, leaving only the sirens echoing in the facility. I ran to the prototype development room, where on the pedestal I put my Looking Glass into.

“This is it, Chailyn!” Cassius’ sound emerged from afar. My time was up, but it wasn’t over.

“Whatever may this be?” he snickered, looking at my terrible state.

“I’ve just upgraded my Looking Glass. The prototype expands my influence to a district-wide scale,” I heaved, trying to regain my breath. “If you value anything, anything at all, leave. Now!”

“Hah, hahahahaha! Do you truly think you are in control now?” Cassius laughed.

The Projectionist’s Ink melted through the walls, exposing a clear sight to Dragon’s Rest, now covered in Ink.

“A test trial for ‘Combustion Down’ has just been approved. Mantle CORE sends their regards.”

In the blink of an eye, the tower was enveloped in bright red, like a fiery fabric had covered the Ink-stained building. And a moment later, sounds like fireworks popped and I watched in shock, as the tower crumbled to dust, leaving only trails of ashes.

“Their barriers have improved quite a lot. They said it would’ve wiped the district if not for their shield. So what now, hmmm?”

I could not give a reply.

Because I understood now.

How powerless I was.

“You might be wondering why I came knowing the dangers of your technology. It’s all thanks to Tomorrow’s Vision, you know? It all but guaranteed that you would surrender the Looking Glass. So would you kindly hand it over?” Cassius said.

Ah, so all the Great Inventors were against me. Ha ha hah, I never did stand a chance.

“You’re just another cog in the system, Chailyn.”

I wanted to reject all of this.

“It’s just that we stood out more than the others that the City bothered to polish us. What you do doesn’t matter; what you provide matters.”

I wanted to break out of the City’s chains.

“You understand? You don’t matter.”

“ENOUGH!” I screamed from the bottom of my lungs, as if every breath led up to this moment.

“It doesn’t matter if everything was in vain. My every scream, my desperate attempts, trying to find meaning in this barren hell, mean something.”

I held the Looking Glass tightly, and raised it up high,

“Witness my meaningless struggle, hear my pathetic cries, my only prove that I existed.”

And stabbed it into my heart.

*And then was heard no more*

So this was what the Looking Glass truly was.

On a peaceful sea, I floated.

Gentle waves carried me to thought after thought.

They came and went, fluttering into the horizon.

In a yellow hued workshop I rested,

tinkering with concepts unknown.

Inventions no longer held worth in me.

Instead, what filled me was a foreign yet familiar dream.

A child’s curiosity.

Blissful, and pure.