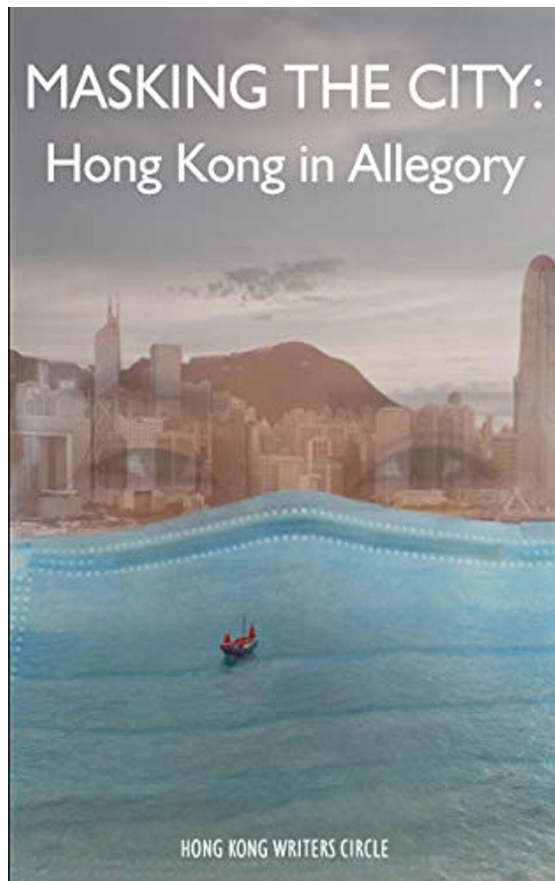


# CREATIVE WRITING PORTFOLIO

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 (*Pen Name: J.M. Wong*)



## The City on the Dragon's Back

*(published in the Hong Kong Writers Circle's yearly anthology- "Mask: Hong Kong in Allegory" under the pen name: "J.M.Wong")*

There was once a world made up of four cities on the backs of four sacred beasts: the Azure Dragon of the East, the White Tiger of the West, the Scarlet Phoenix of the South and the Black Tortoise of the North. The beasts had always been in their own corners until one day, the Dragon and the Tortoise came together at the very centre of the world.

In the city on the Dragon's back, everything was utterly white as if a blanket of icing sugar had fallen on every object. Every house and structure puffed and wobbled, like clouds. A fresh floral aroma filled the air and the weather was always balmy and pleasant as though it was

wrapped by a cosy quilt. The people living in this bleached city were the Gorias: beings with an upper body of a human but limbs of a bird. They were able to travel to the far sides of the world to discover the cities of the Tiger and the Phoenix. By discovering these two cities, they learnt that the other races did not possess their ability of flight and acquired new knowledge such as the concept of trade from the wise people on the Tiger's back. They had been trading their feathers with tears from the city of the Tiger and with flames from the city of the Phoenix before they met up with the Falias, the people dwelling on the Tortoise's back.

The friendly Gorias decided to hold a party in their city to welcome the Falias.

One of the Falias, which had muscular bodies made of rocks and clay poked his rocky finger at a wiggling cloud-made statue, instantly turning it into sparkling solid.

The statue of the Gorias' ruler and creator, Lady Rague, blindfolded with feathery limbs extended backwards in a proud manner, used to be snow white and it would rock back and forth under a breeze but now, it stood firm and still, and was gold from head to talons except for the silver balance scale around her neck.

Each Goria would only meet Lady Rague in person and hear her voice once in their lifetime on the day they were born. She would entrust them with a secret before sending them off. Once they were out of her temple, none of the

Gorias could ever return. Any further communications between her and her people were done through the silver balance scale around her statue's neck.

If a Goria was guilty of wrongdoings, the scale would tilt left as though invisible rocks were placed on it, and Lady Raguel would bestow punishments upon the wrongdoer so as to right the imbalance from the scale. One who had stolen from others might find twice as many of her possessions gone the next day and one who harmed others might find herself thrashed by an invisible whip which would cause twice the pain she had inflicted on others. The scale would keep tilting left until Lady Raguel's punishments had been delivered, and keeping the balance at all times had been her only goal.

The Falia who had turned Lady Raguel's statue to gold mischievously aimed his gilding finger at a fluffy bench, only to be startled at the sounding of a great gong, and instead raised his hand to salute a marching troop of Falias coming through the city's gates.

Shimmering bangles and chain necklaces were around each of these Falias' wrists and ankles as they advanced orderly in two rows. They came to a halt and shuffled into two straight lines on each side of the road, clearing a path for a much taller and bigger Falia who wore a velvet fur coat, had a gold-tipped lance in one hand and a pair of long and sharp crystal horns on his forehead.

Lord Samyaza, the Falia's creator, was a ruthless, coldblooded ruler. The moment he caught sight of the Falia next to Lady Raguel's statue who didn't wear the bangles and chain necklace he had given to him, he stopped walking, flung back his left arm and threw the gold lance at the Falia. The Falia's body disintegrated, turning into a pile of dust as the lance came back into Lord Samyaza's grasp like a boomerang. Then, he continued to walk while his eyes lingered on the area where Lady Raguel's statue stood. His attention was not placed on the Falia he had killed mercilessly but instead, it was hungrily fastened on the shiny balance scale.

'He's allowed in!' The Gorias gasped as the door of Lady Raguel's temple opened. It was the first time for them to witness someone being invited into the temple instead of being pushed out.

While the Gorias were excitedly flapping their wings at the unusual sight, the Falias stood straight and motionless, not moving a single muscle. Before entering the temple, Lord Samyaza gave an approving nod to his troops, and immediately, the Falias' jaws relaxed and their military-sharp posture loosened up.

Once Lord Samyaza was out of sight, the Gorias surrounded their guests with bouquets of cotton flowers in their arms, their eyes glowing with gladness and anticipation. They offered one stem to each of the Falias in the front row. But the Falias grabbed all the flowers and the ones from the back lost their temper. They shoved the Falias in the front to the ground, kicking and punching each other. Soon, buddless stalks and ruined cotton buds were scattering all over the

venue. Fortunately, the Gorias had recently imported a new type of emotion called Empathy and a new concept of 'embracing differences'. At that moment, they found this newly acquired emotion and knowledge more useful than ever before.

Unlike the Gorias who had bodies that were flooded with vibrant colours and had lilting voices, the Falias were covered in a uniform grey and they interacted with each other by thumping their chests, stomping their feet, shaking and popping their heads, and pointing at this and that.

'What's life like in your city?' A Goria with purple wings approached one of the Falias.

No sound came out of the Falia's parted lips. He only gestured with his arms and hands in the manner of pointing and jabbing his finger at her.

'Here, take this!' The Goria took out a cockleshell containing a drop of aqua blue liquid, and handed it to the Falia. 'Look at me!' She demonstrated to the Falia so he knew he had to drink from the shell.

'So what's life like in your city?' repeated the Goria.

The moment the drop of aqua blue liquid touched the Falia's concrete tongue, brain cells grew, injecting images and symbols into his empty clay head and allowing him to say, 'The weather is cold and dry there. Everything in our city is hard and shiny yellow...'

'Where do you recommend I go when I visit your city?'

While a conversation was developing between the two, a Goria with cobalt wings on their far right was babbling.

'The people on the White Tiger of the West is the only race with intelligence and a voice. Their tears...' She gestured at the empty cockleshells on the table. 'fill our heads with knowledge and allow us to express ourselves! As long as the trade among us goes on, we can enjoy each other's specialities!'

'So you mean if the people on the Ti...Tiger's...b...ack...k...' The brain of the Falia sitting opposite to her was melting.

'Oh, sorry, the effect must have worn off. You have to keep having them from time to time in order to sustain the effect. Same for the feathers and flames.' the Goria explained and handed him a filled cockleshell.

Not far from where they were sitting, a cloud-made wagon was stationed just outside the woods. A Goria with multi-coloured wings placed a cockleshell on the counter and said, 'A ball of flames with some Generosity and Courage please!'

Flickering balls of flames on cloud-made cones were handed to the Goria. She passed the green and yellow mixed flames to the Falia next to her and said, 'All of these emotions are imported from the city on the Phoenix of the

South. This one is the most popular mix currently! And this is my personal favourite!’ She referred to her own ball of flames which was rainbow in colours. ‘It’s a mixture of wanting to punch someone in the face, a desire to laugh, an impulse to face deepest fears, an enthusiasm for life, a rush to cry, an eagerness to learn new things, and a shiver up your spine! Oh! And remember, be careful with the rosy pink ones, they make you feel so hot that you would sweat a lot, and your heart beats so fast that it feels like it’s about to jump out of your chest especially when you meet eyes with the first person you encounter...’

The Falia inhaled the flames and immediately, a lime color sprouted from his lips and spread across his grey body. At the same time, the blank expression on his face lightened with amusement. Under the influence of the blaze burning within his heart, the Falia collected pinches of clouds from his surroundings and upon his touch, the light soft materials became heavier and stiffer and he flooded the Gorias’ cupped wings with little circular chips of gold that didn’t wiggle, vaporize, extinguish, or go through her feathers like tears and flames.

Near houses stacked as tight as scales, another Gorias’ milky feathers had just turned rosy pink and a Falia’s cheeks were blushing after consuming the last bit of the pinkish flames. The two strolled along the lane of clouds in silence while feeling the rapid pounding of their hearts.

‘Do you want to know what it’s like to fly?’ The Gorias finally broke the silence and her face dissolved into an affectionate beam. She plucked a few of her feathers and gave them to him.

The Falia took the pinkish feathers and tied them to the gold chain around his wrist. Instantly, he felt his body being lifted up by invisible force. He flung himself into the air while the Gorias spread her wings. Then, the two flew off together towards the clear horizon.

With friendship and romance blossoming between the Gorias and Falias, a deal was struck by Lord Samyaza and Lady Raguel by the end of the party, and the Falias officially joined with the three other cities.

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The alliance with the Falias allowed the city on the Dragon’s back to build structures that no fluffy clouds, shapeless tears and flickering blaze could achieve, and it wasn’t long before the city was no more pure white. Streets were gilded and houses weren’t shaky anymore. They stood firm and still on the newly paved floor where glistening yellow bricks lined neatly in rows. Meanwhile, after getting access to tears and flames, the Falias were no longer a race of muted and apathetic clones. Though at one point, Lord Samyaza did place a restriction preventing them from consuming colours other than the blue flames for Loyalty and red ones for Pride.

During these harmonious days, Lord Samyaza became a daily visitor to Lady Raguel’s temple and every time he came out of it, he would go down to the city centre where the statue with the silver balance scale stood. He would wrap

his palm around the scale's pivot and pull, and would always leave with irritation boiling in his heart, for he couldn't take it from the statue's neck no matter how hard he tried. After countless failures, he decided that if the direct path to getting what he wanted wouldn't work, he would turn his target to something else first.

One day, after coming out of the temple, he gazed thoughtfully at a Falia and a Goria with their offspring passing by. The connection between the two cities had led to the emergence of beings who bore mixed features of the two races. Upon his return to his own city, Lord Samyaza commanded some Falias to bond with the Gorias more intensely to gain their trust. At the same time, gold scissors were distributed to Falias who had Goria partners. Those Falias would buy their partners rosy coloured flames and then, when the Gorias were drunk in love, they would entice them to cut off their own feathers with the pair of golden scissors. Jokes on the limited functions of feathers like 'What do you call people living in a house built by feathers? Homeless!', were spread around while an eye-catching poster also emerged on walls around the city, showcasing a Goria's proud smile after all her feathers were trimmed and a phrase: 'Featherless is the new trend.'.

As time progressed, the Falias' ideas had spread and keeping one's feathers untrimmed grew from being viewed as unfashionable, to disturbing and eventually, disgusting.

Falias squinted at Gorias who kept their feathers dense, intentionally evading them and whispering among themselves, while they gasped and their eyes sparkled at the so-called 'brave ones' who had featherless limbs.

'Mommy, please don't!' A wail of pain sounded in one of the households.

A Goria with grey-colored wings was spanking her half-Falia, half-Goria offspring.

'Why can't I keep them?'

'Your daddy won't like it if he sees you with these!' said the Goria in a stern tone and she forcefully plucked out the last feather drooping from her offspring's right arm.

Fewer and fewer feathers were seen on the Gorias while more sparkly cuffs and chains appeared around their necks, wings and heels. And instead of grooming their feathers, plucking them and polishing their gold became the priority.

'This is perfect!' A Goria twirled around in front of a gold mirror. Through her reflection, she saw her raw light pinkish wings with goosebumps popping out all over her skin like rows of tiny pimples.

'You're the hottest chick I've ever met!' praised her Falia partner.

'It wouldn't be perfect without these!' said the Goria while showing off the glittering bangles covering her greasy wings to the tips and gold chains adorning her neck and wrapping around her ankles. 'I can't wait to show these off on my wedding day!'

The trading of goods among the cities was not affected by the trend of trimming feathers. The Falias introduced crimson flying capes, a substitution for feathers, that allowed whoever wore them to fly to the other cities without worrying about falling off the sky in the middle of their delivery of goods.

‘This is amazing! It is as good as having feathers!’ A Gorias landed on the ground and took off a cape, returning it to the Falia who set up a stall next to Lady Raguel’s statue. ‘I would like ten of these please.’

‘I’m sorry, you are only allowed to buy one per week.’ the Falia answered. ‘We barely have enough for ourselves. Lord Samyaza has already forbidden us from selling these capes to the people of the Tiger and of the Phoenix. He’s only allowing us to sell these to you. We are one family after all.’

With more and more Gorias disregarding their feathers and the Falias controlling the supplies of capes to the Gorias, a lot of Gorias were unable to sustain their delivery services and the other cities began to rely on the Falias’ instead.

In the meantime, stalls owned by Falias were set up one after another in the middle of the Gorias’ city, selling their gold, capes, and imported tears and flames, and soon this became a thriving street market. Ten feathers could only be exchanged for two ingots of gold and a ball of flames which originally cost one drop of tears became five and even cost ten if one decided to pay with feathers. However, if one was willing to pay with gold, the price would be greatly reduced.

‘Can you believe it?’ said a Gorias after sucking in a ball of crimson flames. ‘This only cost us one gold coin!’

‘As they say, the one with the most gold rules!’ echoed her sister. ‘You own it, and it’s yours forever but with tears and flames, you can’t really say they are your possessions. Saving up gold is definitely better!’

‘I am trimming my feathers again today so I can get more gold with them!’

‘You go, girl! Trim all those feathers!’

The two chortled, amazed by what a great deal that was.

Everything was going swimmingly as Lord Samyaza had hoped, until, shadows of doubt towards the Falias’ intentions had slid into a few Gorias’ minds since the day they received tears and flames from the people of the Tiger and of the Phoenix containing knowledge and emotions that couldn’t be found in the Falias’ market.

Their minds became curious and they began to wonder what materials were used in the making of the Falias’ capes and how they were made.

‘The texture...the smell...’ Tearing the capes apart, they found a thin layer of soft, ticklish and hairy substance under the crimson fabric. They compared the substance to the feathers on their arms.

To further prove their speculations, they sneaked into the Falias’ city and found their factories where they saw huge gold storage tanks filled to the brim with feathers. They witnessed the Falias stuffing and sealing the feathers into

the pockets of the capes. In the storage rooms, capes crammed from floor to ceiling, spilling out the doors and into the corridor.

They were furious at the Falias' lies about their stock of the capes and the materials used in the making of the capes. They got even more furious when they watched their people deteriorating into voiceless, emotionless, featherless beings that were constantly craving for gold and nothing else. But with their people submitting themselves to the Falias willingly, the scale never tilted left; the situation just kept worsening. So the Gorias who discovered the truth decided that their people needed a wake-up call.

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One early morning, three Gorias flew down to the city centre and landed next to Lady Raguel's statue. They had ardent burning eyes and rainbow-coloured wings that remained full and strong.

Regardless of the unfriendly glares that were cast upon them, the three feathered Gorias each sang a song in the middle of the square. The first song praised the beauty of feathers. The second warned against Lord Samyaza's schemes; and the last was a revolutionary call for Gorias to stand up against those who strip them off their birthright.

'Join us, sisters! To liberate our city and get back our feathers!' cried the three Gorias after each song.

Their calls were met with little enthusiasm and even hostility from their own kind at first.

Some Gorias whose featherless arms were royal blue, accosted them, 'Stop spreading these conspiracies and ruining our peace!'

'Cut your feathers! You are making us sick! You are disgusting!' Others whose limbs were ruby red threw rocks at the performers. When their violent actions made the scale tilt left, they were met with punishments. They turned to the Falias who taught them ways to prevent the scale from tilting like instead of throwing rocks, they hurled insults and covered the performers' voices with their awful yowlings instead.

Those physical and verbal attacks didn't scare the Gorias and the next day, they returned to the same spot and sang the same songs, and when their voices were drowned out by their opposers, they sang louder and longer, since persistence was something their adversary lacked. Bit by bit, their spirit began to break through the barriers of some Gorias' hearts and one by one, more Gorias joined in to sing along. Day by day, the rally grew bigger and bigger, and their message spread further and further, reaching places outside of the city. People on the Tiger and Phoenix's back heeded their calls. Whenever the Gorias ran out of voices or became timid, jars of tears and yellow flames of courage would be brought back by feathered Gorias travelling back from the two cities so they could rally again, and soon, they were distributing these donations to others who couldn't afford the Falias' high priced goods.



With so much support from people across the world, the Gorias thought they finally had the upper hand and Lord Samyaza would have no choice but to back down. Yet, he didn't.

With the scale not tilting left, Lord Samyaza was still welcomed at Lady Raguel's temple no matter how cynical he was and one night, after coming out of Lady Raguel's temple, he went to where the silver scales were and, despite his failure to turn it gold, a wide grin crept across his face. He had known that the fastest way to fulfill his desires was the death of its current owner, and it was an impossible task until he had overheard the secret in Lady Raguel's temple a few moments ago.

For the next few days, he came in and out of Lady Raguel's temple in the morning, not showing concern or interest in the expanding group of Gorias chanting against him. But covertly, his eyes searched for Gorias who showed distaste towards the rally and he asked the Falias to track them down and bribe them with gold.

On the day when the number gathering around Lady Raguel's statue had reached more than half of the Gorias' population, Lord Samyaza took a few of his most loyal Goria followers – those who had black featherless limbs covered in gold jewellery – with him into the temple, hiding them under his velvet cloak while leaving his Falia guards down the stairs along with the Gorias with burgundy skin, the result of a mixture of blue and red flames.

The burgundy-limbed Gorias and Falias began to attack the choir with gold sticks, hammers and knives while Lord Samyaza sneaked the black-limbed Gorias into the temple.

'The scale is tilting left!' Gorias shouted while trying to dodge their adversaries' attacks. 'Just endure it a little longer! Lady Raguel will punish them!'

They hid and they waited, casting anticipating gazes at the scale. Yet, the imbalance was not corrected and their attackers remained unscathed and were not whipped as they should be.

'What's wrong? Why isn't she doing anything?'

Right then, a shriek pierced the air.

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The door of the temple was flung open and Lord Samyaza came out with his chin jutting out proudly, his chest puffed up and a devious grin on his face. The Gorias who came after him had his gold lance with silver liquid dripping from it and a head with a face the Gorias thought they would never see again in their lifetime and a blindfold still over her eyes.

'My child...my creation...No one can harm or kill me, except you. I will die only in your hands and so despite being the most powerful being in this world, you also hold a great power over me.' These were the words Lady Raguel had entrusted to every Goria when they were born, and the last time she spoke of this secret, Lord Samyaza was right

outside of the door, eavesdropping. But his learning this secret had never seemed a threat to her, because she had never expected treachery from her own creations.

Lord Samyaza plunged through the transfixed crowd and stopped at Lady Raguel's statue. This time, curving his palm around the pivot of the scale, the silver turned to gold and when he tugged, the scale broke off from the statue's neck. He held up the gold scale like a torch and declared, 'There will no longer be two cities but one country here from now on.'

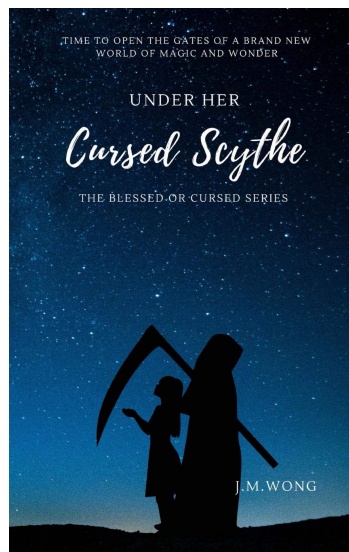
With the boundaries gone, the Falias and the betrayers ratcheted up their violence against the Gorias. They were forced to kneel on the ground, restrained and beaten with heavy clubs. Lady Raguel's statue was pulled, crashing to the ground, and shattered.

While his followers were rejoicing their victory, Lord Samyaza sat on the fallen statue of Lady Raguel while his hands fingered the golden scales, appearing to be troubled. He gazed at the left side of the scale which kept dropping as his followers continued to strike and nerve-wracking wails came out of his opposers' mouths. He pressed onto the right end of the scale in an attempt to restore its balance. Yet, the right pan refused to drop and he pressed on it again, more forcefully this time. A crack appeared in the middle of the scale and a black mass burst out of it.

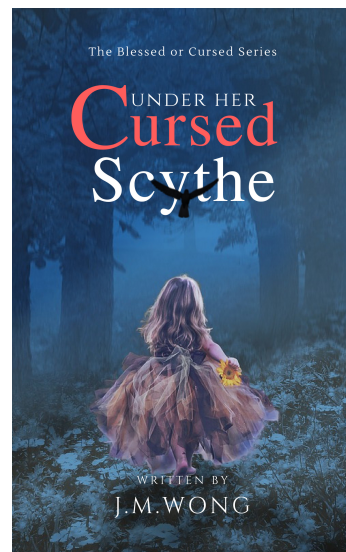
The clot of dark magic formed into a huge cloud, roiling, twisting and growing until the black mass erupted like a volcano. Murky mist sank down over the city, decomposing everything it touched, including Lord Samyaza. Deafening screams and horrid cries subsided into a dull, inward keening. And then utter silence.

# First Chapter of my self-published novel - “Under Her Cursed Scythe”

(written under the pen name: “J.M.Wong”)



(Paperback Version)



(Ebook Version)

## 8 DAYS BEFORE HALLOWEEN

*♪Stars will always shine to guide you out of there  
Even if the hope is frail, sorrow everywhere  
Just keep on wishing  
Keep on praying  
And believe in...♪*

The melodious sounds were travelling fast across the place as the musical notes bounced off the dark brown pillars, the grey marble floors, the silver handrails of the balcony, the glass ceiling, the colourful store signs and...

*\*BEEP*

Before the notes could bounce any further, the music had ceased from playing, all of a sudden.

With her glove on, *the girl who dressed in all black*, switched off the cell phone and gingerly slid it back into the pocket of the man who was struck mute and was now lying on the floor of the empty mall with all his muscles locked down, stiff as a flat line on a heart monitor.

But his wide-opened eyes followed her intently, remaining “alive”. This had never happened before...

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*Who the hell came up with this shit idea of Miracles happening if I pray?* The girl wondered. *Screw that! You can't just sit there and pray without doing anything.*

She shook her head at the motionless man at her feet whose eyeballs were now directed at the glass ceiling above him.

*What's there to look at?* The girl curiously followed the line of his gaze.

*I guess you believe in this shit...crap too...* She thought when she spotted a bright “gem” flowering in the dark sky.

*Okay...* She folded her arms. *Let's see whether “miracles” will come and save your sorry ass then.* And she too, began to stare at the glittering and sparkling figure, waiting to see whether something was going to happen or someone would appear suddenly before her eyes to prevent her from doing what she was about to do.

Yet, second by second passed and she heard nothing. She saw nothing. There was nothing peculiar happening but silence. Just cold, cold silence...

*It's just bullshit after all!* She smirked while her eyes casted back to where the motionless man was.

Then, she kneeled. And the moment she did that, the pupils of the paralyzed man immediately dilated and his breathing became much harsher than before.

The girl took note of the sign of melancholy.

“Let's make this clear first. I don't have a choice either-I never did!” she denoted and extended her hand slightly.

In reaction, the man's eyeballs began to dart all over the place, desperately hunting for something or someone that could bring salvation.

“Hey! Hey!” The girl slapped the man's face. “Stop it! No one's gonna rescue you. It's destined to happen!” she denoted. “It's your *fate!* You can do nothing about it!”

Considering that the girl's words might be true, the man's eyes came back to her, again locking on her face with a pleading expression that sent an earthquake down the very bones of her soul.

“Stop it...” she voiced weakly against the man's intense stare. “Stop looking at me like that!”, and swiveled away from him, forcing herself to pay no more attention to his eyes.

She took off the glove of her outstretched hand, revealing the antique ruby ring on her right middle finger as well as her star-shaped birthmark on the back of her palm between her thumb and her index finger.

“Time of death, 12:00 a.m.” the girl noted while looking at the clocks hanging on the wall of a store, and lowered her right bare hand, shortening the distance between her fingers and the paralyzed man's chest.

In doing so, the man's eyes began to twitch rapidly in dread, and frightful tears were trickling down his wrinkled cheeks at one point.

But despite how fearful he appeared to be, the girl didn't halt her movement.

With a little more will and effort than usual, she lifted her palm.

A white ball emitting warm and shiny rays of light like a tiny sun with tiny flares emerged instantly, and the moment it attached to her skin, a faint sizzling sensation ran through her body like gentle waves of a hot spring, spreading comfort all over her and urging her to doze off. Yet, she managed to stay awake like always by bearing the significance of completing this task at hand- in her head.

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The second the glowing orb was extracted, the man's eyes stopped twitching and widened even further. Then, the eyelids never came back down again. The sparkle in them had become a blank stare and what was left was nothing more than a pair of icy, coloured marbles.

*Finally!* The girl thought.

"Name-"

She paused.

"Who am I kidding?"

The girl gave a bitter chuckle.

"What's the use of mentioning his name now? He won't know I'm not the real deal... I'm just a bloody-"

She broke off, surprised.

"I'm just a... bloody..."

She tried to squash down the lump in her throat.

Queer. She used to get over what she had done with simple sarcastic jokes of herself.

But this time was different: she couldn't "get over it". Her breath hitched. Her palm tightened on the glowing ball. And she knew something was wrong.

*Damn it! I shouldn't have looked into his eyes! I shouldn't have! Damn it!* She showered herself with curses. Then, she thought. *Quick! Say those "magic words"! Say it and be done with it!*

"I'm sorry." she mumbled under her breath after sparing one final look at the man.

Then, robotically, she stood up again, thrusting the glowing ball into a black oil lantern that held several other glowing figures; tapping the top of the lantern three times to shrink it back into the size of a keychain; sliding it back into the pocket of her black hooded jacket; and forced her feet to walk away from the dead.

First step. Second step. Pause. *Perhaps, I can still-* A shot of pity went through her.

*No!* She told her brain.

Third step. Fourth step. Pause. *But he doesn't deserve-*

*No!* She snapped at herself again.

Fifth, sixth, seventh, eighth...

Once she was far, that urge of going back wasn't there anymore. Yet, she couldn't help feeling a tinge of tingling sensation which she hadn't felt for quite a while rising up somewhere around her chest and uncontrollably seeping into her mind.

*No! Stop it! Stop doing that!* Again and again, the girl punched her temple with the ankle of her hand, as though doing so could squash down the rush of conflicting emotions that were battling space in her head and abstain herself from dwelling on certain hopeful thoughts. *You've got to stop it now or else you would ruin everything! Stop it! Stop thinking there's gonna be an alternative! Stop it! We don't have a choice! We-*

*\*KATA...KATA...KATA...*

The girl straightened up at once and her heart leaped like a fish out of water, when sounds that sounded like rapid footfalls, unexpectedly echoed from somewhere just up ahead.

Did someone see her? Did they notice the things she did? But she had searched every floor of the mall twice, sealing every exit and making sure there was no one in the mall except for her target. No one could have entered the mall during that period of time and certainly could not have reached the top floor without her noticing!

*Unless it's a - no, stop it! It's not real.* The girl thought as she cast anxious glances around the mall. *Even if it is, it's too late. Everything has been settled and there's no going back anymore...*

As the sounds from above became clearer and clearer, she accelerated her pace towards the balcony of the mall, promptly.

"8 more days..." she hissed to herself in undertone, attempting to cover up the voice in her head that kept on reminding her how much she had hated her current life. "8 more days before Halloween comes, then I can finally stop doing this! 8 more days..."

Her quick pacing soon evolved into a rapid pounding of her feet into the floor as the sounds from above had not only become clearer but also closer and closer as if they were chasing after her.

When she finally reached the handrails of the balcony, she ceased her footstep. She started to mumble an ancient language and at the same time, ripped the skin of her left index finger with the sharp end of a pin on her jacket, smudging the blood oozing out over her ruby ring.

A gust of cold harsh wind brushed against her cheek as she outstretched her neck and observed from the balcony on the 4th floor of the mall.

She took notice of the cold, hard concrete ground far below her, without any soft bushes or a green lawn. Still, she fell back a few steps, heaved her shoulders and charged towards the balcony.

When she was a foot away from it, the sprint led to a jump as if she was leaping over a hurdle. And afterwards, she was arrowing down with blinding speed.

The concrete ground grew closer and closer by second but the feeling of "warping" seemed slower than before. There was a second when her head was alarmingly close to the ground. A sense of concern crawled up in her chest and she wondered whether she had spoken out the right words.

Nevertheless, before her head hit the concrete, she vanished into thin air.

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Shortly after the girl disappeared, a group of people clad in cloaks, came bustling into the scene.

When they came across the dead body, they ceased from running on the instant.

"No!" someone howled.

*A boy who was veiled by a white cloak* walked forth, shaking his head. All the while, he looked at the dead body with subtle ache and grief in his eyes.

"We are too late, aren't we?" came another voice.

The boy inclined his head after placing his hand above the dead man's chest and scanning it with soft blue light projected from his palm.

"He's gone, too..." he exhaled in disbelief and his voice filled with a bit of fury.

"How many tonight?"

"Five..." someone gasped. "Five including this one..."

After they had gathered around, lowered their heads and muttered a few words of condolence, the boy in the white cloak knelt down again before the dead body and searched it, investigating for clues that might help them for their next chase.

"Same as the others?" *a girl who enveloped herself in a purple cloak* inquired as the boy in the white cloak lifted the dead man's chin.

"All I can say is that this is definitely not the work of the vampires or werewolves cos there's no bite marks...just like the others." the boy in the white cloak replied in a disappointed tone. "It would be much easier if they were the reason for these deaths."

“It can be one of the Witches or Warlocks, right?”

“I wouldn’t say ‘no’ for sure, since they have stepped up their game these days. And I only began my research on them not long ago... but I must say, from all the cases I’ve studied, I’ve never seen one who could kill in such a discreet manner. No burnt marks, no signs of being strangled or cursed...not even a cut to be found!”

“What’s wrong with that?”

“Witches and Warlocks...are usually impulsive and mindless when it comes to killing. Careful planning and intentional covering aren’t their style. But there might be exceptional cases. I’m not sure.”

“Right...we might need to consult an expert on this matter.” the girl in the purple cloak notified the people standing behind her.

“How about the daemons?” someone proposed. “Demonology is your expertise, right, Agent 616?”

The boy in the white cloak nodded his head in response. “But if it’s one of the daemons’ work, it wouldn’t have left without marking this body. A ‘sting’ mark should be found somewhere around here...” He fingered at the neck area. “And this could have turned into a *Forsaken* already but...” His voice died down suddenly and his pupils enlarged. Something that looked familiar to an item he’d read in the books the other day caught his eye. “Goodness gracious...” he sounded and leaned forward to take a closer look of his discovery.

After scanning the dead man’s chest with the soft blue light projected from his upturned palm once more, he said, half to himself, “Why haven’t I thought of that before? His soul...”

“What’s the matter with his soul?”

The boy in the white cloak looked up at his inquirer and answered with a little thrill in his voice, “It didn’t just leave the body because this person’s *time* was up, you know, like...naturally! It must have been taken out by force!”

“So you think another *Reaper* has gone rogue?”

“I’m not sure. Grim Reaper did update us recently about his...you know, ‘mental health status’...” the boy in the white cloak gestured. “...right?”

That being said, the girl in the purple cloak nodded. “But he didn’t mention anything alarming... do you think...he’s not telling us everything?”

In response, the boy in the white cloak sighed, moving his head from side to side. “I wish he is, so, at least, we know what we are up against but no...I’m afraid he *is* telling the truth. I’ve checked the statistics recently and there’s neither a rise in the Reapers population or any dark spots on the radar...So, with that being confirmed, it’s very unlikely, this is a Reaper-going-rogue that kind of case...” he surmised and rubbed his chin, thoughtfully. “But this must be a mistake cos *this* shows that this-no, wait...” He paused when an idea tapped him on the shoulder. “If he didn’t mention anything special about his *status*, did he mention anything relating to his *lost properties*?”

The girl in the purple cloak jerked a thumb towards one of the persons behind her. “As for that, you will have to ask Agent 106 here.”

The spotlight suddenly switched its entire focus on *the person who wore an emerald cloak* but he didn’t seem to register that. He had been paying most of his attention to the car racing game on his cell phone.

“Hey! They are all waiting for your answer!” Someone gave him a sharp nudge in the ribs to knock him out of the game.

“What?” The person in the emerald cloak looked up from his phone. “Oh! You were asking?”

Someone next to him clapped her hand on her forehead. “They are asking about Grim Reaper...whether he told you anything about his lost properties! Stop playing that stupid game and concentrate! We are on a serious mission right now!” she rebuked with an annoyed tone.

“Okay, okay! Let me think for a second!” the person in the emerald cloak grumbled, putting away his phone. “Ummm...Grim might have mentioned a thing or two when I met him the other day...”

“And what’s that?” The rest of the group looked at him expectantly.

“His... ring...I think.” the person in the emerald cloak uttered softly in an uncertain tone. “He said he has sensed its presence since...um... five years ago but it was faint and he was not sure. It was until recently...when... what was that again? Oh! When something seemed to have disarmed the cloak on it for a brief second that he could finally be certain that it was his ring... And what else? Oh! That’s right!” He cleared his throat and then raised his voice, imitating someone’s elegant style of speaking, “ ‘I am quite astonished that that ring has not been destroyed or discarded by the trepidation and stupidity of humanity!’ That’s what he said to me before we parted. That’s all I remember. “

“A ring? Grim Reaper has a ring?” the girl in the purple cloak intoned, puzzled as well as for *most* people at the scene. “Why didn’t you mention it to us earlier? This is definitely news to us!”

“Not to me.” the boy in the white cloak noted, abruptly. “Now that you have mentioned it, I think I might have read about it from one of the ancient scrolls retrieved from those Ancient Fae Kingdoms last week.” he recalled. “They referred to it as the *Reaper’s ring*... literally. I’ve checked the records in the *Armory* but this ring was never mentioned, probably went missing and was lost after the 800s.” After saying that, he lifted the dead man’s chin again and gestured at a point. “But this must be it. This... *this* here is the proof of this being the work of that ring!” he said it, enthusiastically. “Or else, how can you explain *this*? There’s no other explanation as to why *this* appears if no Reapers have gone mad. I bet the other victims have *this* too but in less apparent places. That’s why we never took notice of it.”

As soon as this was said, everyone else at the scene craned their necks and pitched forward curiously, attempting to figure out what the boy had discovered underneath the lifeless man’s jawline.

“Isn’t that a ‘sting’ mark?”

“No, it’s something different. Trust me. No ‘sting’ mark looks like that.” the boy assured.

“Can you believe it? It has been here all along! “ the boy in the white cloak exclaimed, lifting his head and his eyes were blazing. “The most important clue has been right beneath our noses all these time!”

“斗...Hang on! I’ve seen this before! There was one in...”

“*The Jack Incident!*” both the boy in the white cloak and the one in the emerald cloak voiced, simultaneously.

“Yes! Yes! Yes! That was 亢!” denoted the person in the emerald cloak, startled and excited at the same time. “The only girl who tried to fight *Jack*! It appeared on her the moment she was killed by him! But the power she conjured that night in 1891, they say it was not something anyone has seen before. Do you think-”

“Boyz!” The girl in the purple cloak clasped her hand together, interrupting the boys’ intense discussion. “Is this really the time for this?”

Returning to their previous topic, the girl in the purple cloak said, “Let’s say this *really* is the work of this Reaper’s ring. What does it do then? Care to enlighten the rest of us?” she signaled at the boy in the white cloak.

“This can only be traced back to the first accounts on this ring in the 100-”

“Agent 616, cut to the point!” she interjected, slight impatience in her tone. “This is no time for stories and history lessons.”

“Oh...um...” The boy in the white cloak appeared a little bit upset by the girl’s rude intrusion but he dared not continue, and obeyed the order. “According to what was written on the scrolls, it grants someone the ability to harvest souls like a real Reaper.” he explained, briefly. “The only difference is... anyone, no matter humans, faeries, daemons, Witches, Warlocks, the *Forsakens* or even *us*... as long as we have that ring, we will be able to reap souls!”

“So it’s practically a magical ring that allows any being to become a Reaper even when you are not born as one, or are *chosen by one of them*?”

“Not everyone, exactly. In order to use the powers within, one phrase does suggests that you have to be a *vir*-”

“It doesn’t matter whether anyone or only one person in this world can use it. What matters is...” *another girl in the group who wrapped herself with a dark blue cloak* butted. Her eyes looked at the boy in the white cloak, grimly. “A ring that has the ability to reap souls... It doesn’t just mean someone can use it to kill without being caught!” She cast an



uneasy glance at the dead man. “For sure the *non-magus* will never figure out that this man was murdered. They would probably treat it as a heart attack or a paralyzing stroke! Nonetheless, this is not our greatest concern.” She paused with a sigh and her brows creased.

“What is?”

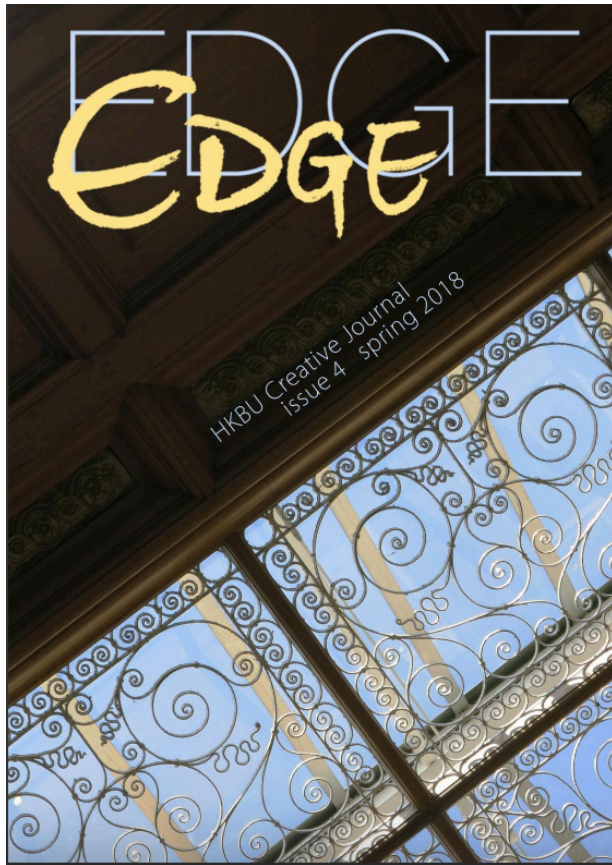
“The owner of the ring, of course!” she answered. “Since you mention about the *Jack Incident*, it reminds me of an ancient prophecy that Grandma Lily once told me...” Having that said, she uttered a phrase with a tongue from another world.

“*One shall...end the Wheel of Life with the scythe of Death?*” the girl in the purple cloak translated the Elvish phrase and her answer got a nod of approval right away.

“Her tribe thought the *prophecy* ended with *Jack*.” explained the girl in the dark blue cloak. “But it didn’t refer to *him*. It referred to someone else or perhaps, *something* else.”

“Don’t tell me you are suggesting-”

“Why not? Think of this, the power of reaping might now be held by an amateur or worse, perhaps, a madman. It’s practically like a ticking bomb and if we don’t find him...*or her* as soon as possible, who knows when he or she loses control of it, or should I say loses one’s mind...just like *Jack*.” Her expression appeared even grimmer. “We might not have witnessed that historic event ourselves but from the monitoring systems and rules they have set specifically for any being who holds *the power of Death*...it shows how serious and haunting that incident was even though our *Senpai* eventually took it under control. But who knows what will happen this time! If this case does go out of hand, it’s not going to be just us failing a mission, it’s going to be the end of a lot of lives, perhaps... ALL...LIVES!”



## I Found My Marble

*(published in the literary magazine- "EDGE: HKBU Creative Journal" Issue 4)*

I found it, stuck between the gaps of my cabinet, a place that I never thought to look.

It bears a simple shape. Small and spherical, it seems nothing special. As it slips between my fingers, its smooth coldness slides over my fingertips and calms and relaxes me. It's crystal clear from far away, but if you look closer, there are tiny bubbles and little sparkles glistening from every angle when you roll it on the table.

It seems tough, solid and a bit heavy based on the bonk bonk sounds it makes when it drops and bounces on the wooden floor.

But when you pick it up, you will find it light, fragile and sensitive like a new-born baby between your fingertips.

Yes, it's a marble. Yet, for me, this is not just a marble. It contains magic - magic that can only be seen and conjured by me and my friends when we were little.

I remember the day when I saw my friend bringing his little glassy marble to class. When he claimed that magic could be found within those tiny little bubbles, my passion for it flared like a wildfire and from that point on I frantically searched for one of my own. Perhaps, I found it from the Chinese checkers game set that I once owned or bought one from my friend who had a whole bag of it with the only five-dollar coin that I managed to earn from doing housework. I was thrilled the moment I held it on my palm because it was the start of everything. It was the start of my magical journey. From that day onwards, it was my precious, my life and my soul. I carried it everywhere. I fingered it when it was nestled in my pockets when I watched Anime of magical girls with their staffs and sparkles. I took it to bed with me and placed it cautiously into a burlap bag beside the pillow, dreaming of the miracles it could bring to me.

I also remember on the day I received the marble, I wrote in my diary two simple phrases: "I can do magic now! Just like my classmate!".

From these ordinary marbles, my friends and I managed to come up and see in our minds many interesting stories and colourful sceneries. We had a theory about the relationship between the number of bubbles and the amount of magical

powers one possessed: the more bubbles our marbles had, the more powerful we were. We compared our marbles with each other. We swirled our hands above the glassy balls and murmured random words which we believed to be spells. We raised the marbles towards the trees and declared that we could control the movement of the leaves with the wind magic released from them. We placed our marbles on the tummies of our stuffed toys, believing that they would come alive at night because of the enchantment we had bestowed upon them. We looked through the glass and believed that we could see our future from within. We were wizards and witches when we had those marbles in our hands.

However, the magic didn't last when everyone graduated from primary school. My friends soon forgot about their marbles. They tossed them aside or worse, into the rubbish bin, and went for mobile phones and computer games instead. I almost threw mine away, but I guess fate didn't want me to do so. A few years later when I began to write stories about magic and fantasy, I found it again and my mind was filled with memories of the magical adventures I had with it.

Now, I no longer see the glamour of it. But I know the magic has not abandoned us, but it is us, the teenagers and young adults, who chose to abandon and forget about the magic. I don't think I can do magic anymore with this marble on my palm due to the "reality" I have to face. But it will always be a joyful memory during my darkest and saddest moments, an inspiration for my stories and a reminder that no matter how old we grow, we can never live happily without imagination and creativity.

This marble, this ordinary marble is mine. And it is a piece of me that once was lost but now is found.

# 100-word Drabbles

*(published in Insignia Stories's anthology- "Japanese Fantasy Drabbles" under the pen name: "J.M.Wong")*

## At the Dinner Table

A family of Onis was ready for dinner.

Papa Oni ate an arm in one gulp.

"How did you do it?" His son looked at him with admiration.

"Easy, I observed the human for days. The food he shared... the flowers he gave and his gentle gazes. I knew he was the one. So this morning, all I had to do was reveal myself to him, and let him give his grand speech: 'Just take me and leave everyone else alone!'. Then, he gave in without a struggle!

Remember, always aim for the kind ones and you will never starve."

## Lost but Found

"Who still uses paper fans nowadays?" I heard her say. "Throw it away!"

I felt the plastic bag containing me being dropped and the giggles of Chicako's granddaughter fading.

Where's Chicako? I thought and tears filled my only eye that grew out not long ago.

"I sense something here!" I heard a soft voice whispering and saw light spilling in while the bag was unknotted.

"We found another Tsukumogami here!" An umbrella with arms growing out of its sides came into my sight.

"Join us!" It extended its hand to me. "You will be the 100th Demon of the Parade!"

## Hate us, never love us

I heard a long howl of pain from the living room.

"Why is the Onmyōji here?" I pointed at the man who held a paper amulet while murmuring an unintelligible tongue.

"To eliminate the Zashiki-warashi!" mother responded.

"She's a good spirit who brought our family the wealth we have today, protected us from bad spirits but never harm us!"

"But she always hid in the corner and it creeps me out at night! Besides, she's ugly! That pale and sulky face scares me too!"

Angry tears rolled down my cheeks as the little girl in a kimono disintegrates into ashes.

**END**