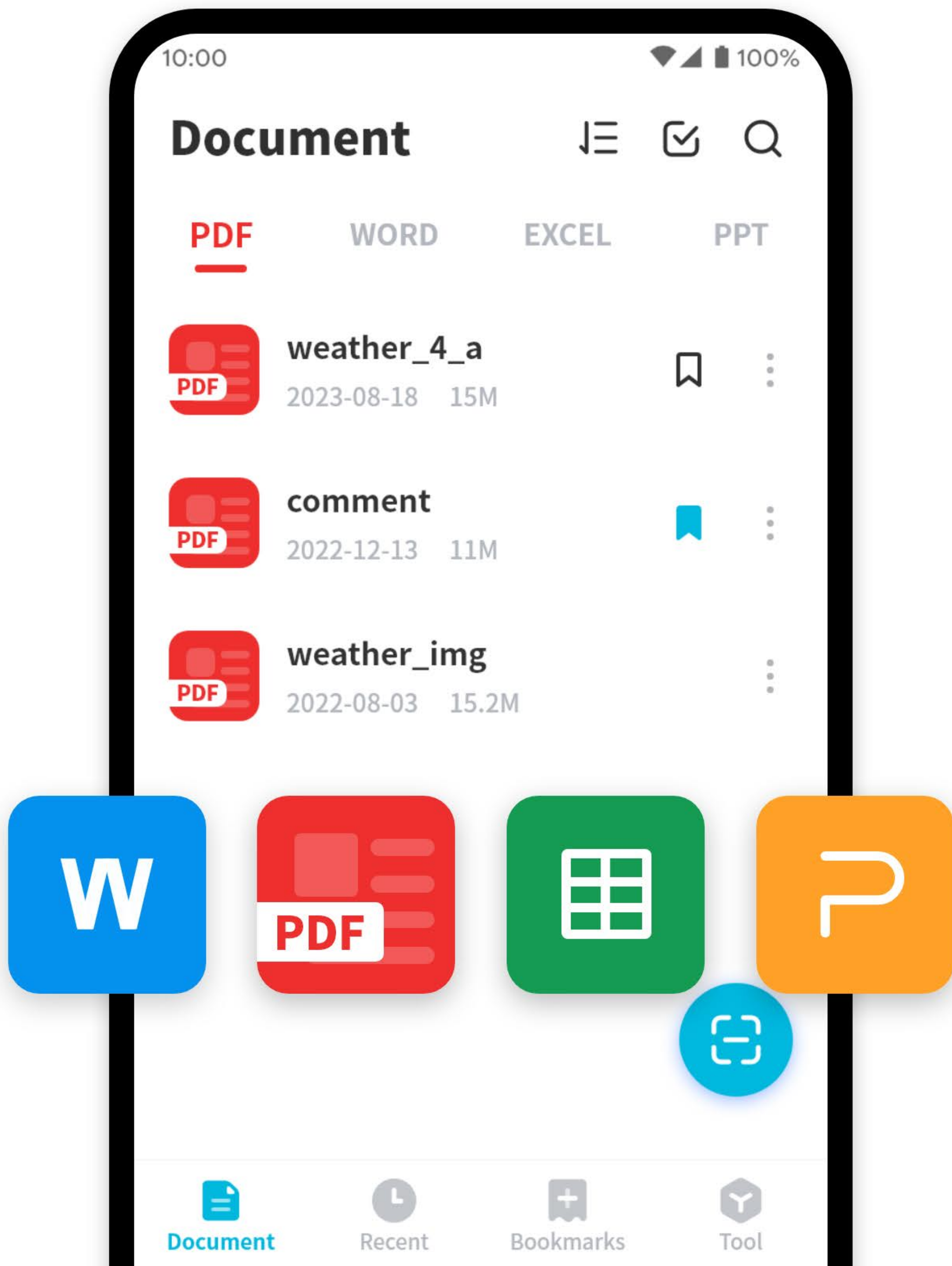




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Zhen Shiyin in a Dream Sees the Jade
of Spiritual Understanding
Jia Yucun in His Obscurity Is Charmed
by a Maid

This is the opening chapter of the novel. In writing this story of the Stone the author wanted to recast certain of his past dreams and illusions, but he tried to hide the true facts of his experience by using the allegory of the jade of "Spiritual Understanding." Hence his recourse to names like Zhen Shiyin.¹ But who are the events recorded in this book, and who are the characters? About this he said:

"In this busy, dusty world, having accomplished nothing, I suddenly recalled all the girls I have known, considering each in turn, and it dawned on me that all of them surpassed me in behaviour and spiritual understanding; that I, shameful to say, for all my masculine dignity, fell short of the gentler sex. But since this could never be remedied, it was no use regretting it. There was really nothing to be done.

"I decided then to make known to all how I, though dressed in silks and delicately nurtured thanks to the Imperial favour and my ancestors' virtue, had nevertheless ignored the kindly guidance of my elders as well as the good advice of teachers and friends, with the result that I had wasted half my life and acquired a single skill. But no matter how unforgivable my crimes, I must not let all the lovely girls I have known pass into oblivion through my wickedness or my desire to hide my shortcomings.

"Though my home is now a thatched cottage with matting windows, earthen stove and rope-bed, I shall not stop me from laying bare my heart. Indeed, the morning breeze, the dew of night, the willow by my steps and the flowers in my courtyard inspire me to wield my brush. Though I have little learning and little literary talent, what does it matter if I tell a tale in rustic language to leave a record of all those lovely girls? This should divert readers too and help distract them from their cares. That is why I use the other name Yucun."²

Do you know, Worthy Readers, where this book comes from? The answer may sound fantastic but after carefully considered is of great interest. Let me explain, so that there will be no doubt left in your minds.

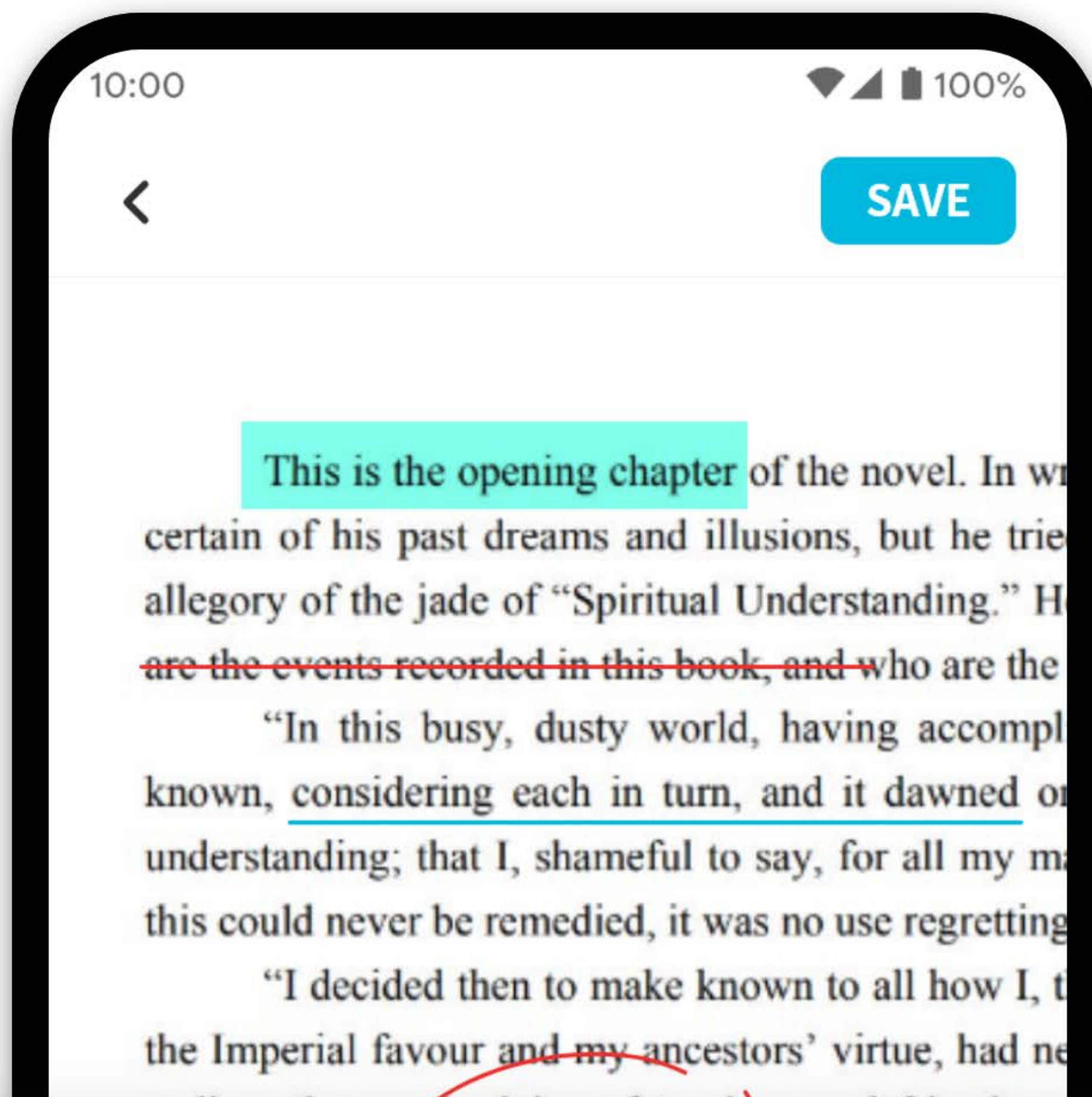
When the goddess Nu Wa melted down rocks to repair the sky, at Baseless Cliff in the Great Western Mountain she made thirty-six thousand five hundred and one blocks of stone, each a hundred and twenty feet high and two hundred and forty feet square. She used only thirty-six thousand five hundred of these and threw the remaining block down at the foot of Blue Ridge³ Peak. Strange to relate, this block of stone as it lay there for so long a time had acquired spiritual understanding. Because all its fellow blocks had been chosen to mend the sky and it alone rejected, it lamented day and night in distress and shame.

One day as the Stone was brooding over its fate, it saw approaching from the distance a Buddhist monk and Taoist priest, both of striking demeanour and distinguished appearance. They came up to the Stone and sat down to chat.

When they saw the pure translucent Stone which had shrunk to the size of a fan-pendant, the monk took it up on the palm of his hand and said to it with a smile:

"You look like a precious object, but you still lack real value. I must engrave some characters on you so that people can see at a glance that you're something special. Then we can take you to some civilized

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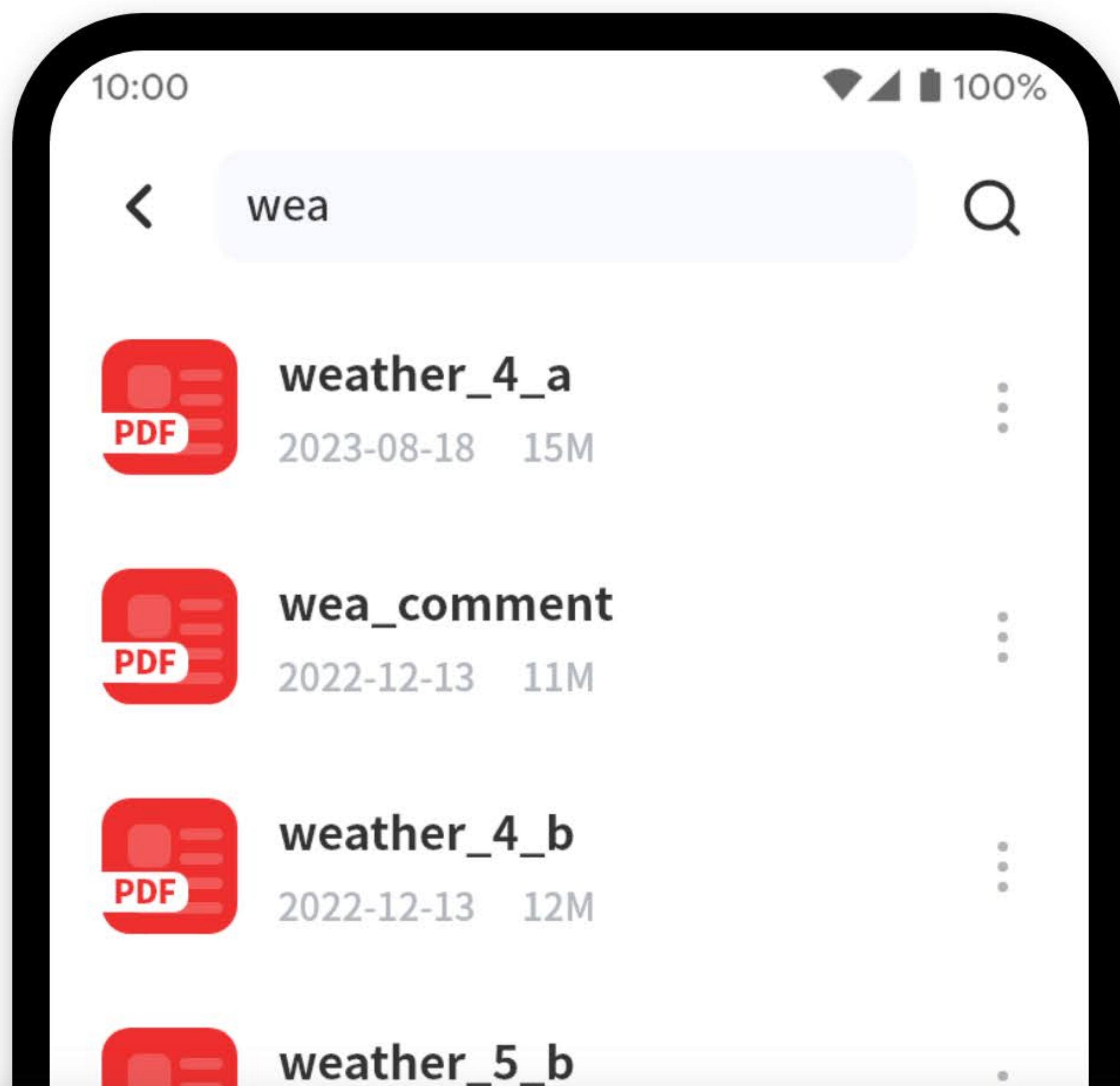


Paintbrush

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