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# The Storyteller

Tristan Speed

Loyola Marymount University, [tspeed1@lion.lmu.edu](mailto:tspeed1@lion.lmu.edu)

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# **The Storyteller**

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements of the University Honors Program  
of Loyola Marymount University

by

**Tristan Speed**

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The Storyteller

By

Tristan Speed

tristanspeed@gmail.com  
203-501-5994

FADE IN:

EXT. CHENG'S BACKYARD - DUSK

A house made of rammed earth with a thatch roof sits alone by a road and barren farmland. We see two figures by the side of the house...

YOUNG CHENG (10, slim, short jet black hair, hazel eyes, dressed in muddy farmer's clothing) stares forward, his eyes misty. JIAHAO (35, pale, unhealthily skinny, worn face, gray eyes, also dressed as a peasant) digs into the earth by their shack using an ancient tool.

Jiahao finishes, turning to face Young Cheng. Jiahao tries to look stoic but can't hide his sadness, sickly features, and uncontrollable trembling. Young Cheng glances away, wiping his tears.

Young Cheng looks up to see a Father and Daughter walking towards them from a road that passes by the home. We can see that the road leads to a village not far away that sits in the shadow of a mountain.

As they get closer, Young Cheng see they are...

SHUI (35, dressed in a green robe) and his daughter YOUNG JIN (10, long dark hair, piercing emerald eyes, dressed in a red robe).

Jiahao puts a hand on Young Cheng's shoulder. His grip tightens as they approach.

JIAHAO  
Shui.

SHUI  
Jiahao.

Jiahao stares hard at Shui. Shui's eyes are soft.

SHUI  
I'm sorry. I didn't hear what happened at the market until this morning. I didn't even know she was sick.

Jiahao doesn't respond.

SHUI (CONT'D)  
(softly)  
You could have told me.

(CONTINUED)

Jiahao snorts.

JIAHAO  
Wouldn't have changed anything.

SHUI  
Can we talk? In private?

JIAHAO  
There's nothing to talk about.

Shui nods towards Young Cheng. Jiahao follows his gaze and frowns.

SHUI  
What's your son's name?

Young Cheng buries his head slightly in Jiahao's side.

JIAHAO  
Cheng.

Shui crouches slightly to appear more approachable to Young Cheng.

SHUI  
Hello, Cheng. You can call me Shui,  
I'm a friend of your father's.

Jiahao snorts. A touch of frustration passes across Shui's face before being quickly buried.

SHUI (CONT'D)  
I'd like you to meet Jin. You two  
can get to know each other while I  
speak to your father.

Shui puts his hand on Young Jin's back, pushing her forward slightly. Young Jin stares at the ground, almost unaware of the actions around her.

Jiahao starts walking towards the fields. Shui chases after him.

EXT. CHENG'S FARMLAND - DUSK

SHUI (CONT'D)  
Jiahao, you can't-

JIAHAO  
What do you think this is? An  
opportunity to prove to the Gods  
(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

JIAHAO (cont'd)  
that you're superior? What charity  
do you offer me now?

SHUI  
You know, for someone who talked so  
much about hating war you seem to  
love creating one.

EXT. CHENG'S BACKYARD - DUSK

Young Cheng looks at Young Jin distantly. Young Jin uses her  
foot to draw in the dirt.

Young Cheng slides the door of his house open and steps  
inside.

INTERCUT DIALOGUE WITH YOUNG CHENG AND YOUNG JIN

Young Jin draws in the dirt: the figure of a woman.

SHUI  
I know what you're going through.

JIAHAO  
If there's one thing I've learned  
it's that we are two very  
different-

SHUI  
I lost her.

Beat.

Young Jin looks up, realizing Young Cheng is gone. She looks  
at the open door and steps inside.

JIAHAO  
When?

SHUI  
A month ago. She....  
(beat)  
Your wife was sick. Are you?

Beat.

INT. CHENG'S HOME - DUSK

Young Cheng is huddled over the corpse of CHENG'S MOTHER (30). Her face is completely covered by a white cloth.

Young Jin watches silently from the doorway.

BACK TO SHUI AND JIAHAO

SHUI

You have to do something.

JIAHAO

It's too late for me-

SHUI

But not for him.

JIAHAO

Everything I've done here has been for them. We're building a life here.

SHUI

Building? Jiahao, we've been here for-

JIAHAO

You need a base to build a family-

SHUI

You won't be alive to realize it! You're stubbornness is killing you and it's going to kill your son!

Jiahao is taken aback at Shui's strength.

SHUI (CONT'D)

Now despite what you say or feel about me, you saved me, and I owe you. Maybe it's too late to help you, but I can help your son.

Jiahao's brow furrows in thought.

JIAHAO

Can you tell stories?

SHUI

What?

(CONTINUED)

JIAHAO

Tales at night, like the soldiers  
used to. Can you do that?

Shui stares at Jiahao incredulously.

SHUI

Don't make light of this offer. I  
can feed him, clothe him, teach him  
my trade-

Jiahao laughs, hard. His laughs are interrupted by coughs.

JIAHAO

Getting men drunk is no trade for  
my son. It's good for him to do  
honest work.

SHUI

And you would leave your child  
alone on this farm?

JIAHAO

He already works with me. He can  
take care of himself.

INT. CHENG'S HOME - DUSK

Young Cheng looks back at Young Jin. He dries his eyes  
quickly.

YOUNG JIN

What happens when someone dies?

YOUNG CHENG

They get buried.

YOUNG JIN

Yeah. But what about after? What  
*really* happens to them?

YOUNG CHENG

How should I know?

YOUNG JIN

I don't know.

Young Cheng turns and looks at Young Jin. He recognizes her  
pain.

He makes a decision.

(CONTINUED)

YOUNG CHENG

When you die... you don't live here anymore. You live in a world without farmland, or animals, or mountains, or a sky.

YOUNG JIN

Is it dark?

YOUNG CHENG

No. It's white, and clean, and nice. And everyone you love is there.

YOUNG JIN

Really?

YOUNG CHENG

Yeah.

Footsteps outside. Young Jin rushes out, Young Cheng following.

EXT. CHENG'S BACKYARD - DUSK

Young Jin rushes to Shui's side. Shui looks sadly at Young Cheng.

SHUI

Take care of yourself, child.

Young Cheng is silent. Shui and Young Jin walk away. Young Jin glances back at Young Cheng once.

Jiahao steps towards the house, coughing into his hand.

YOUNG CHENG

What did you talk about?

Jiahao stops: his hand is speckled with crimson.

He looks back at Young Cheng.

JIAHAO

Grown-up stuff.

INT. CHENG'S HOME - NIGHT

Jiahao lies on a mat while Young Cheng dabs his head with a wet cloth. The interior of the shack is little more than a cramped room dimly lit by a lone candle.

Jiahao stirs.

JIAHAO

I haven't told you a story tonight.

YOUNG CHENG

It's OK. You need rest.

Jiahao grimaces slightly, pushes himself up into a sitting position.

JIAHAO

No, you need your stories.

Jiahao lowers Young Cheng's hand from his forehead.

JIAHAO (CONT'D)

This is the story of a farmer named Cheng-

YOUNG CHENG

Dad....

Jiahao puts a hand on Young Cheng's shoulder.

JIAHAO

Cheng was a hard worker, who never gave up no matter how bad things got.

Young Cheng looks away but Jiahao gently turns him back to face him. Jiahao looks into Young Cheng's eyes.

JIAHAO (CONT'D)

Now, it was painful, and it was hard doing that work. But he did it because he wanted to build something, something for himself and for a wife and child. So he ignored the pain and moved past it to do that.

(beat)

Do you understand?

CHENG

I do.

(CONTINUED)

Jiahao grabs Cheng's arm firmly and pulls him closer.  
Jiahao's face is ghostly.

JIAHAO  
Look me in the eye.

CHENG  
I understand.

Jiahao stares at Cheng firmly, looking for a sign of hesitation.

Slowly, he relaxes.

EXT. CHENG'S BACKYARD - DAWN

Young Cheng uses Jiahao's tool to cover the earth.

THE TWO GRAVES.

Young Cheng kneels down before the graves, shutting his eyes tightly. A single tear manages to slip out.

The lighting SHIFTS from DAWN to...

EXT. CHENG'S BACKYARD - DUSK

Cheng remains unmoving.

EXT. CHENG'S FARMLAND - DAY

Young Cheng looks out across the barren farmland, his eyes red. He stares at the village sitting below the mountain.

Young Cheng glances back at his parents' graves.

With a determined breath, Young Cheng begins to till the soil with a hoe.

Young Cheng stares at the ground as he works. Eventually he can't help but look up and see the wide emptiness around him.

Another glance back at the house and backyard. Young Cheng's body shakes as he tries to remain composed.

Young Cheng looks back at the graves.

(CONTINUED)

YOUNG CHENG

(shaky)

Hey, Mom. Hey, Dad.

(beat)

I've been thinking of a story recently. It's about this warrior who has to stop this dragon who terrorizes his village.

Young Cheng goes back to tilling the soil, but continues to talk out loud:

YOUNG CHENG (CONT'D)

This dragon slept inside of a mountain for many years, but one day he woke up because he was hungry, and started to eat the people in the village.

MONTAGE

-Young Cheng plucks the seeds of the millet, putting it into a bag. His mouth moving as he continues to tell stories.

-Adolescent Cheng spreads millet seeds, his arms moving wildly as he tells another story.

-Adolescent Cheng watches his farmland, his back to the camera. The millet quickly grows until seeds are visible but just as quickly the crops die. Adolescent Cheng stays still.

EXT. CHENG'S FARMLAND - DUSK

CHENG (18) frowns slightly at the mostly barren farmland. He glances back at his parents graves, smiling sadly.

CHENG

The warrior didn't realize the evil his village had done. He didn't know the dragon had lost his brother. He only saw him as a monster. So he killed him and the village celebrated his accomplishment. And he was seen as a hero for the rest of his life.

Cheng looks back at the village in the distance.

INT. CHENG'S HOME - DAWN

Cheng sleeps on his side on a mat, some drool seeping out of the corner of his mouth.

Cheng kneels over a bubbling chipped pot of water, yawning. Cheng pours millet from a bag into the water. Cheng frowns as he feels the lightness of the bag, tossing it in his hand slightly.

EXT. CHENG'S FARMLAND - DAWN

Gray clouds obscure the sun, casting a cold dim light on the land. Cheng's face drops at his pathetic crops.

CHENG

No one's gonna want these.

Cheng's stomach growls. Cheng's brow furrows in thought.

INT. CHENG'S HOME - DAWN

Cheng empties the contents of a small pouch. Three silver pieces land on the floor. One gold coin falls out last, rolling away from them. Cheng snatches it and places it with the others.

Cheng looks over his shoulder, seeing both his crops and the distant village.

CHENG

Every palace begins with a foundation.

EXT. VILLAGE - DAY

Cheng trudges through the village carrying millet. He passes several Townspeople, who either give him dirty looks or avoid eye contact all together...

TOWNSMAN 1 (O.S.)

It's that bastard Jiahao's son....

TOWNSMAN 2 (O.S.)

They say he's mad, you know, just talk to him....

TOWNSWOMAN 1 (O.S.)

Poor child, he's just not gonna make it....

Cheng's face falls at their avoidance and he stares at the ground.

EXT. MARKETPLACE - DAY

Cheng stands in the marketplace with his millet, a good 10 yards away from the other vendors. No one approaches Cheng.

A Mother and Son walk through the marketplace. The Son watches Cheng. Cheng gives him a half-smile.

The Mother follows the Son's gaze and quickly pulls him along.

Cheng looks away, pretending it didn't hurt.

An Old Man walks over. Cheng forces a friendly smile. The Old Man looks at the dying millet and shakes his head. He walks over to another vendor and begins bargaining.

Cheng's face falls.

SHUI (O.S.)

Cheng!

Cheng looks up to see Shui (now 43) and JIN (18) approach. Cheng smiles at Jin, but she quickly looks away.

SHUI

You haven't been here in a few weeks. I was starting to get worried.

CHENG

Thank you sir, e-everything's fine.

SHUI

How's business?

Cheng glances at Jin again. He stands a little straighter.

CHENG

Never better.

Shui looks at Cheng's unsold millet.

SHUI

I see.

Beat.

(CONTINUED)

SHUI (CONT'D)

You know, Jin, it's about that time of year when we have a lot of fresh faces passing through town.

Jin raises an eyebrow at Shui.

JIN

Is it? I recall there being more grass on the ground last year.

SHUI

Ah, your memory isn't so good.

He turns back to Cheng.

SHUI (CONT'D)

We need more grain to make the drinks for the guests, and... well, you see.

CHENG

O-of course.

SHUI

(mentally calculating)

So, I believe we'll need... well, better to overstored that under....

JIN

Are we in the middle of a war, father?

SHUI

How's that, dear?

JIN

Just wondering if we're expecting an entire army to be staying at the inn.

CHENG

I... you don't need to....

Cheng's eyes dart as he goes to war with himself. A flash of pity shines in Jin's emerald eyes before she looks away. Shui smiles slightly in recognition.

SHUI

I'll tell you what, last night I won this poor sap's cow in a bet. Now, I have no need of its labor, and if I tried to cook it the whole

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

SHUI (cont'd)  
village would want a hunk. So, you see, I need to get rid of it. I'd say it's about the cost of your grain, and you'd be doing me a favor.

JIN  
Father-

CHENG  
Yes, yes that's great. That's very kind of you.  
(beat)  
Thank you.

Shui smiles. Jin looks away but says nothing more.

EXT. TAVERN - DAY

Jin brings a skinny, sickly Cow over to Cheng.

CHENG  
Thank you, Jin.

Jin steps away without meeting his gaze. Suddenly, she stops.

JIN  
My father is very foolish, you know. Though he acts generous, we don't have much.

CHENG  
I know. A-and I'm very grateful to him.

JIN  
He's very trusting. Like how he thinks that cow was a decent repayment for him. And now for you.

CHENG  
Oh. OK?

Jin turns around. She looks like she has something she wants to say.

JIN  
Take...  
(beat)  
You can go.

(CONTINUED)

Jin walks inside without another word. Cheng watches her leave with a quizzical expression.

Cheng looks at the Cow.

CHENG

You're gonna be a big help, buddy.

The cow moos painfully.

EXT. CHENG'S FARMLAND - DUSK

Cheng yanks the Cow forward. The Cow groans.

CHENG

(softly)

C'mon, you're gonna be fine.

The Cow groans and digs its hooves in the mud. Cheng sighs and lets go.

CHENG (CONT'D)

It's OK. Just take it easy.

Cheng steps inside the house.

The Cow continues to groan. Finally, it topples over.

Cheng steps out with some rope. He sees the dead Cow and drops the rope.

Cheng drops onto his doorstep, letting out a painful sigh.

Cheng puts his hands on his knees and pushes himself up. He disappears into the house briefly.

Cheng returns with a tiny rusty knife. He turns it over in his hand, giving it a suspicious look.

Cheng kneels before the cow and tries to skin it. He struggles to pierce the hide.

CHENG (CONT'D)

Ah, c'mon.

Cheng's knife finally breaks through. He begins to cut it open.

Cheng drops the knife as clamps his hands around his nose. Cheng gags.

(CONTINUED)

CHENG (CONT'D)  
By the Gods!

Cheng digs a hole near the road. Wipes his forehead with the back of his hand, smearing some dirt. He looks back at the dead cow and sighs.

Cheng rests his head on the wooden handle as rain begins to patter around him.

INT. CHENG'S HOME - NIGHT

Cheng stirs his millet porridge, looking hopelessly into the pot. The dirt smear is still on his forehead.

Outside, a storm howls.

THUNDER. RAIN PATTERN.

KNOCKING AT THE DOOR.

The sound is barely heard above the din of the storm.

ANOTHER KNOCK.

Cheng turns around as he finally notices the noise.

He walks over to the door hesitantly. He slides open the door revealing

ZHI THE OLD MAN (70s, dressed in blue robes, mysterious blue eyes, bald, an almost perfectly beautiful face save for wrinkles).

ZHI THE OLD MAN  
I'm so sorry to intrude, but I've  
been traveling for many days now  
and don't have anywhere to take  
refuge from this storm.

CHENG  
I... suppose so.

Cheng steps away from the door to allow Zhi inside. Zhi smiles at Cheng.

ZHI THE OLD MAN  
You are very kind.

Zhi steps inside, water dripping from his robes. He takes a seat by the small fire.

(CONTINUED)

ZHI THE OLD MAN (CONT'D)  
Do you mind if I dry myself by your  
fire?

CHENG  
Sure.

Zhi's stomach growls.

CHENG  
Have you eaten?

Zhi chuckles.

ZHI THE OLD MAN  
I'm afraid I spent the last of my  
money two days ago.

CHENG  
Two days?

Cheng frowns slightly. He looks back into the pot at what little has left. Cheng walks over to the corner of the room and takes out two bowls and chopsticks. He begins to pour the porridge into the two bowls. Zhi watches Cheng intently.

CHENG (CONT'D)  
I'm guessing you're not from the  
village?

ZHI THE OLD MAN  
No, my home is far from here.

Beat.

ZHI THE OLD MAN (CONT'D)  
What is your name, boy?

CHENG  
Cheng.

ZHI THE OLD MAN  
Tell me about yourself, Cheng.

Cheng glances away awkwardly.

CHENG  
Well... there's not a lot I can  
say. I'm a farmer. Always been one.

ZHI THE OLD MAN  
I know very little of a farmer's  
life. Educate me.

CHENG

Well, I grow millet, and sometimes  
I sell it in the village.

ZHI THE OLD MAN

Ah. And how is that treating you?

Cheng stands ups straighter.

CHENG

It's fine.

Zhi looks up from his food, seeing through Cheng's obvious  
lie.

ZHI THE OLD MAN

How long have you been a farmer?

CHENG

Pretty much all my life. This was  
my parents' farm.

Zhi studies Cheng.

ZHI THE OLD MAN

Well, you're certainly a stronger  
man than me.

CHENG

Why do you say that?

ZHI THE OLD MAN

I come from a, shall we say, more  
spoiled position. I haven't had to  
worry about my own survival...  
well, ever, really. If I was in  
your position, I wouldn't even know  
where to start.

CHENG

It's nothing special-

ZHI THE OLD MAN

Let alone contend with the dullness  
and hardship of it all.

CHENG

I-it's not completely-

ZHI THE OLD MAN

And being so removed, so alone...  
You really are stronger if none of  
that has any effect on you.

(CONTINUED)

Cheng mulls over Zhi's words. Zhi recognizes the look.

CHENG

I mean... it does. But it's not like I have a choice.

ZHI THE OLD MAN

Why not?

CHENG

Because Dad left it for me, it's my responsibility now.

Cheng sighs.

CHENG (CONT'D)

Not that I've accomplished much. Dad must be so disappointed.

ZHI THE OLD MAN

If he's looking down, I'm sure he's still proud of you.

CHENG

Why should he be? When he was my age, he was out fighting for powerful men. Me, all I've done is tell stories while I work in the mud.

ZHI THE OLD MAN

Stories? Like, for children?

CHENG

Well, you said it yourself. It's dull here. You have to find some way to....

Cheng struggles to put it into words.

ZHI THE OLD MAN

To find joy.

CHENG

It's hard for me to... feel content here. When I'm out in the fields, or I'm walking to the village, I'm not focused on my work. I'm not even really paying attention to what I'm doing. I dream up these tales, like the ones my father told me from the warriors he met.

(CONTINUED)

ZHI THE OLD MAN

Would you tell me one?

Cheng looks back at Zhi, temporarily distracted from his frustration.

CHENG

What?

ZHI THE OLD MAN

I want to hear one of the stories you've created.

CHENG

They're not that great. It's a child's pastime after all.

ZHI THE OLD MAN

I won't judge.

Cheng looks closely at Zhi's honest eyes. The right corner of Cheng's lip turns up slightly into a half-smile.

Cheng sits down in front of Zhi, his body language open.

CHENG

There was this, um... emperor in a far away land who was told by the Gods that his son would... would, well, grow wicked and betray him.

Sparks from the fire rise up above the two to the ceiling. The sparks come together, forming the figure of the Emperor from Cheng's story.

CHENG (CONT'D)

The emperor was proud of his power and his worst fear was that he would lose it before he died. So... when the emperor's wife gave birth, the emperor brought his sword.

The Spark Emperor extends his arm: more sparks fly from the fire and form a sword. More figures are formed: the Spark Emperor's wife, cradling a Spark Baby in each arm.

CHENG (CONT'D)

But when he realized that his wife had given birth to twins, he stayed his hand.

(CONTINUED)

The two Spark Babies leap from the Spark Emperor's Wife as she disappears. One forms into a large, bulky and bright figure. The other forms into a thin, wispy figure: The Bad Son and the Good Son.

The Spark Emperor puts his arms around both, but his figure begins to shrink. He extends his arm: more sparks form a cane, and the Spark Emperor hunches over.

CHENG (CONT'D)

Both sons grew up to be handsome, capable men, and the emperor grew fond of both. But years later the emperor became sick and frail. He realized he had to choose his successor. So he summoned his two sons and told them that they needed to prove their love for him.

The Bad Son walks away from the other Son and the Emperor. Smoke from the fire rises and forms a dark figure.

The Bad Son fights the shadow, stabbing him with his sword and pulling out a heart of smoke.

The Good Son takes a few steps away from the Emperor. A brush and paper appears in his hands and he begins writing.

Zhi glances between the Spark Figures and Cheng. Zhi smiles slyly.

CHENG (CONT'D)

The first son left the palace and returned with the heart of a barbarian king that had been terrorizing the borders. The other son simply ventured into his room and returned with a poem.

The two Sons stand before the Emperor, both presenting their gifts. The Emperor puts his hand on the shoulder of the Bad Son.

CHENG (CONT'D)

The emperor looked at his first son's gift and believed him to be a man of action because he had put his life in danger to show his love.

The Good Son extends his paper. The Emperor knocks it out of his hand.

(CONTINUED)

## CHENG (CONT'D)

The other son clearly had no love for the emperor, as his gift was small and safe by comparison. The emperor threw down the poem without even reading it and had the second son arrested. He hugged the first son and named him the future emperor.

The Emperor approaches the Bad Son, embracing him. The Good Son flickers away.

## CHENG (CONT'D)

But as soon as the emperor had done so the son betrayed him and threw the emperor into the dungeon to live out his final days in sickness and despair.

The Bad Son grows twice the size of the Emperor. He picks up the Emperor and throws him away. The flame of the fire dies out and the figure disappear as the room is cast in shadow.

Cheng lights a candle. Cheng continues the story, his eyes staring into another realm:

## CHENG (CONT'D)

But when the emperor awoke in the dungeon he saw his other son. The emperor apologized for his mistake and for dooming them both. The second son smiled, holding no animosity towards his father. He told his father that it didn't matter. What was important was that they were together again, and who cared about who sat on the throne. And so the emperor died as a prisoner, but his final days were some of the happiest he had ever known.

Beat.

Zhi stares at Cheng, entranced. Cheng looks up at Zhi as he comes back to the scene.

## CHENG (CONT'D)

So that's one of them.

Zhi laughs hard. Cheng is slightly taken aback by the laughter.

(CONTINUED)

CHENG (CONT'D)  
Yeah, it needs work.

ZHI THE OLD MAN  
Now, I see who you really are. And  
it's not a farmer.

Cheng looks at Zhi quizzically.

ZHI THE OLD MAN  
I've been looking for someone like  
you for a very long time. You've  
shown me kindness when others I met  
turned me away at the door. The  
compassion of those who let me in  
thinking I was rich soon turned to  
apathy when I revealed I had no  
money. But you? You've given me  
shelter, food, and even  
entertainment. And now I wish to do  
you a kindness.

CHENG  
There's no need-

Zhi raises a hand to quiet Cheng. Zhi is firm.

ZHI THE OLD MAN  
There's magic in your words, Cheng.  
Your words have images inside them,  
and I wish to see that magic used  
to its fullest. From here until the  
moment you join your ancestors,  
those images will become as real to  
you and your audience as I am.

Cheng laughs nervously.

CHENG  
That would be quite the gift.

Zhi leans forward, a knowing smile playing on his lips.

ZHI THE OLD MAN  
It's yours.

Another nervous laugh

CHENG  
Mm hm.

ZHI THE OLD MAN  
You don't believe me.

Cheng struggles between being polite and being honest.

CHENG  
Well... I want to... but... it's  
such a-

ZHI THE OLD MAN  
Try it.

Cheng's taken aback. Zhi gestures for him to go ahead.

CHENG  
Ok. Sure.

Zhi leans back, waiting to see what Cheng will do.

CHENG (CONT'D)  
There was a boy named Cheng who  
lived on a farm with his parents.  
His parents fell sick, and Cheng  
was worried he would lose them  
both.

(beat)  
But, much to his delight, they got  
better. And by the time he grew up  
to be a young man, his parents were  
still there with him.

THE SHACK SHAKES.

Cheng glances at the trembling walls.

CHENG (CONT'D)  
By the Gods, it's really coming  
down out there.

Zhi grins.

THE EARTH QUAKES.

Cheng's eyes widen in fear.

THE WALLS FALL AWAY

White.

EXT. THE WHITE PLACE - DAY

Cheng sits in a world of white, everything from his house gone. Zhi is nowhere to be found.

Cheng slowly stands, his body shaking in fear. Cheng looks around.

Nothing but white.

Cheng looks down.

White.

Cheng looks up.

White skies, but something falling towards him...

THE WALLS

Cheng's house reforms around him...

INT. CHENG'S STORY HOME - DAY

The house has reformed around Cheng. He turns and looks behind him to see

Jiahao and CHENG'S MOTHER (35)

Jiahao stirs a pot. He looks up at Cheng and gives a small smile.

Cheng's Mother sits with her back to Cheng.

Cheng stares, awestruck.

CHENG

Dad?

Cheng runs towards Jiahao and hugs him like a child. Jiahao seems somewhat surprised by the action.

JIAHAO

Is everything OK, son?

CHENG

OK?

Cheng starts laughing. He runs towards Cheng's Mother.

(CONTINUED)

CHENG

Mom....

Cheng puts his arm on her shoulder. She turns...

Her face is completely covered by the same white cloth she wore at her death.

CHENG'S MOTHER

It's good to see you, son.

Cheng looks confused. Jiahao gets up and puts his arm around Cheng's Mother.

JIAHAO

What's wrong, Cheng?

Cheng shakes his head.

CHENG

Why does she have that?

JIAHAO

Have what?

Cheng backs away towards the door. He slides it open to leave and steps out into

THE WHITE PLACE

The house looks exactly the same but the farmland, road, mountain... everything is gone.

There is only white.

And

ZHI THE BOY (8, blue clothes, same green eyes, red wavy hair like fire)

Zhi crouches over a small pool of water. Cheng approaches Zhi.

As Cheng gets closer, he sees two Koi fish in the water: one black with white eyes, the other white with black eyes.

Zhi looks up, smiles.

ZHI THE BOY

What do you think?

(CONTINUED)

CHENG

I don't understand. My mother....

(beat)

Who are you?

ZHI THE BOY

You may call me Zhi.

CHENG

What exactly is this place?

ZHI THE BOY

This? This is the world of your story.

CHENG

So why is it empty?

ZHI THE BOY

You create the world of the story. In this story, you've created your home, your parents, but nothing else outside of it.

Cheng looks back at the house anxiously.

ZHI THE BOY (CONT'D)

You can only create what you can visualize.

CHENG

I can't believe I forgot what she looked like. I'm sorry, Mom.

(beat)

What now?

ZHI THE BOY

Now? What you do is up to you. You may end the story, return to reality, start a new story, all whenever you desire.

Cheng turns around, his head bowed in thought.

ZHI THE BOY (CONT'D)

Cheng, I know you're afraid, but I've given you the instrument to your happiness.

Cheng looks back at Zhi, his eyes uncertain.

(CONTINUED)

## ZHI THE BOY (CONT'D)

Use it.

THE SOUNDS OF THE STORM.

CHENG'S EYES.

INT. CHENG'S HOME - NIGHT

CHENG'S EYES.

Cheng is back in his real home, the sounds of the storm raging outside.

Cheng looks around but there's no sign of Zhi in either of his forms.

Cheng slides open the door, staring out into the blackness.

Cheng is alone.

Cheng sits, staring into the flame of the candle. Debating.

He shakes his head. Blows it out.

Black.

EXT. CHENG'S FARMLAND - DUSK

Cheng steps out of his house. The dirt is muddy from the storm. Cheng's crops have been uprooted and strewn across the ground.

Cheng sighs and walks towards the farmland.

He picks up the torn crops.

CHENG

(mumbling)

There was once a poor woman whose  
venerable parents lived far away.

The ground quakes. Cheng quickly stands up in surprise. He purses his mouth and goes back to the task.

Cheng frowns slightly as he works.

Another quake.

Cheng frowns, looking unhappy.

Cheng drops the crops and stands, a firmness in his eyes.

(CONTINUED)

The world falls away to

THE WORLD OF WHITE

Which transform into:

EXT. FOREST ROAD - DAY

Cheng sits in a tree looking down at the path below. A POOR WOMAN (22) hurries through the bamboo forest carrying a basket of rice cakes.

CHENG

She decided to visit her parents  
and bring them gifts. However, the  
forest was said to be filled with  
many strange spirits and creatures.

The Poor Woman's eyes dart around.

A rustling in the bamboo.

The Poor Woman quickens her pace.

THUMP. THUMP.

A great beast, the Nung Gwama, steps out of the forest onto the road. It has the body of a bull and a massive head with large claws.

The Nung Gwama stares at the Poor Woman, his mouth agape. His teeth are like swords and a human jaw sits on a tooth.

The Poor Woman is paralyzed and shaking.

HER EYES.

THE NUNG GWAMA'S EYES.

The Nung Gwama glances down at the rice cakes.

The Poor Woman tracks his gaze and quickly pulls the basket away.

POOR WOMAN

They-they're for my parents.

The Nung Gwama glares at her. The Poor Woman stands firm despite her fear.

The Nung Gwama snarls and bounds back into the woods.

The Poor Woman relaxes, breathing a sigh of relief.

(CONTINUED)

CHENG (V.O.)

She knew that while she had defended her parents, it was only a matter of time until the Nung Gwama would come back for her.

EXT. TOWN STREET - DUSK

The Poor Woman drags herself through the dimly lit street, her head bowed in thought. Her basket of cakes are gone.

She lifts her head up and sees a Peddler, a Snake Salesman. and a Mason.

A small smiles appears on her face.

INT. POOR WOMAN'S HOUSE - NIGHT

MONTAGE:

-The Poor Woman lays the floor with needles and pins.

-The Poor Woman puts two snakes into a washing pot near the floor.

-The Mason and the Poor Woman hoist a large stone block towards the ceiling.

END MONTAGE.

EXT. POOR WOMAN'S HOUSE - NIGHT

The Poor Woman waves to the Mason as he leaves. She glances up at the full moon and quickly shuts the door.

INT. POOR WOMAN'S HOUSE - NIGHT

It's pitch black. The Poor Woman waits in a corner with a knife in her hand.

THUMP. THUMP.

The Poor Woman's grip tightens.

The Nung Gwama bursts through the door and steps on the pins. It howls in pain and rushes through the house.

The Nung Gwama knocks over the pot with the snakes, which both bite the Nung Gwama.

(CONTINUED)

The Nung Gwama tries to claw the snakes off, but they slither around its body.

The Poor Woman cuts the rope.

The stone attached to the rope falls and crushes the Nung Gwama's skull. It topples to the floor.

Silence.

The Poor Woman lights a candle and walks over to the Nung Gwama. She stabs it once, but it doesn't move.

She begins to skin the dead animal.

Cheng appears from another corner of the room.

CHENG

She sold the skin and bones of the monster and was able to provide for her parents. The other townspeople whispered of her with both respect and a touch of fear.

The world and the Poor Woman fall back to

THE WORLD OF WHITE

Cheng wears a huge grin on his face. He looks behind him to see his house sitting in the world of white.

INT. CHENG'S STORY HOME - DAY

Cheng steps into his home to see Jiahao and Cheng's Mother. Cheng kneels before his father.

CHENG

Dad, I'm sorry for failing you. I haven't continued your line, I haven't even made a profit. But I've been given something here, with you and Mom and this world.

JIAHAO

I don't understand.

CHENG

I couldn't create a life there, but maybe I can create a life here.

EXT. THE WHITE PLACE - DAY

Cheng steps out of the house with Jiahao and Cheng's Mother. Instead of farmland, great fields of glass appear, covering the white floor.

A mountain rises out of the white nothing, but looming higher than the mountain in real life.

A blue cloudless sky appears, bathing the world in warm sunlight.

A road appears leading from Cheng's home to a village.

Cheng grins widely.

EXT. STORY VILLAGE - DAY

As soon as Cheng enters the village he is swarmed by the Townspeople. All smile and talk to Cheng. Cheng smiles and nods before continuing through the village.

EXT. WHITE PLACE - DAY

Cheng walks past everything he has created until he stands in the white place again. He looks back to see the tall mountain still looming.

Cheng tilts his head slightly as he ponders.

A dragon appears in the sky. It snakes itself around the mountain.

Sand appears under Cheng's feet. A great body of water appears in front of him.

Cheng looks to his left: the bamboo forest from the Nung Gwama story appears.

Cheng looks to his right: a large palace stands in the distance.

Cheng looks up at the sky. The Sun disappears, replaced by the moon and several stars.

INT. CHENG'S STORY HOME - NIGHT

Jiahao and Cheng's Mother eat a small dinner of rice. Cheng smiles at them with a childlike innocence.

Jiahao is all business.

JIAHAO

Now, tomorrow Cheng and I will go to the market and purchase some seed, but I don't know what we could exchange in return-

CHENG

(waving off his concern)

Dad, you don't need to worry about farming. We have as much food as we could ask for.

JIAHAO

Rice and millet has kept us going, but it's time to expand. We should purchase a cow, start breeding it if we can.

CHENG

I can get you meat. Yeah, rice... I was just too caught up in the moment to think of anything else, but we can have anything. You want a horse to ride, like you saw in the army, I can get you a horse. If you want a bigger house, I can make you a bigger house, a palace even. You don't need to worry about working anymore, neither of you do.

JIAHAO

You'll build us a house, eh? And with what? Every palace needs a foundation. You need tools, you need wood-

CHENG

Dad... everything in this world... this house, the land outside, the mountain, the village, the ocean... it all belongs to you.

Cheng now has Jiahao's attention.

(CONTINUED)

CHENG (CONT'D)  
This world is yours.

Beat.

JIAHAO  
(practically spitting the  
words)  
Do you expect me to just lie around  
all day like a fool?

CHENG  
No, of course-

JIAHAO  
Do you think that stripping a man  
of his purpose is some kind of  
gift?

CHENG  
I don't-

Jiahao rises.

JIAHAO  
Or perhaps you think that I am  
incompetent, and that I cannot be  
trusted with taking care of my own  
family?

Cheng shrinks back.

CHENG  
No, never.

Jiahao recognizes Cheng's fear. He gets down on one knee,  
looking down at Cheng.

JIAHAO  
Look... life is filled with  
adversity and trouble. But if you  
don't shrink away, if you tackle  
them head on, you experience more,  
you learn more. You grow stronger.  
Now, there are two roads-

CHENG  
Dad, you've told me this-

Cheng freezes at Jiahao's glare.

(CONTINUED)

JIAHAO

These two roads are very different, one is smooth, well trodden. And this road leads through a gentle countryside, and it will lead you to a destination you'd expect. Now this other road is barely formed, and it leads into a dark wood. Now you don't know where this leads, and perhaps there are risks in there. But perhaps there is something greater, something that all those other travelers are missing. Perhaps there's riches, perhaps there's spirits, perhaps there's knowledge. Or perhaps, there's nothing. But when you're sitting alongside your comrades, exchanging the stories of your lives, don't you want yours to stand out like a mountain among hills?

Cheng mulls it all over.

CHENG

If that's what you want... if that would make you happy, give you a purpose... then you can grow your farm. Just make time for me, OK?

Jiahao puts his hand on Cheng's shoulder.

JIAHAO

Of course, son. Anything for you.

Cheng smiles faintly.

THE WORLD OF WHITE

INT. CHENG'S HOME - NIGHT

Cheng's house reforms around him.

Cheng opens the door and looks outside his house. The moonlight reveals the crops are still strewn and the land is still untilled.

Cheng sighs, and closes the door.

INT. CHENG'S HOME - DAY

Cheng sleeps, some drool slipping out of his open mouth.

THE DOOR OPENS

The bottom half of Jin appears in view. She kicks Cheng.

Cheng bolts up.

CHENG

Hm, what?

Cheng looks up to see Jin's stern face. She hands him a basket with a leg of meat.

JIN

Here. My father wanted you to have this.

(beat)

I'm sorry about the cow. I knew it was no good.

CHENG

Thank you, but there's nothing to forgive. It's nobody's fault.

JIN

Oh, yes it is. I told Dad he couldn't trust that man, and dammit he's going to pay for cheating my father.

CHENG

Oh.

(beat)

Well, thank you.

JIN

Yeah.

Jin gets up to leave. She looks back out the door.

JIN (CONT'D)

I don't know why you don't come to the village to talk to my father. It's the least you could do to show him your gratitude.

CHENG

I am grateful, very much so. I'm just busy.

(CONTINUED)

JIN

I don't know what could keep you so occupied that you can't even take care of your dying crops.

CHENG

Eh, they're always dying.

Cheng realizes his statement. He glances over at Jin, who humorously raises a single eyebrow.

CHENG (CONT'D)

Look, I've... well, when I say it out loud it sounds silly.

JIN

Wouldn't be a first.

Jin smiles playfully.

CHENG

I don't think I've told you any of my stories, have I?

Jin's smile turns more sincere.

JIN

Yeah, you told me one. A long time ago.

CHENG

Well, I've gotten better, a lot better.

JIN

Oh really?

The playful smile is back: Impress me.

Cheng studies her.

CHENG

Do you ever wonder how everything came to be?

JIN

Like what?

CHENG

Everything. The earth, the mountains, the oceans, us. How did we all come to be?

(CONTINUED)

JIN  
Gods, divine figures or energies.

CHENG  
Yes. But how?

Jin frowns pessimistically, but she's still engaged.

JIN  
OK.

Cheng can't help but smile a little bit.

CHENG (CONT'D)  
It all begins a long time ago, in a  
place stripped of rock, of grass,  
of people... before everything we  
know came to be.

The roof of the house flies away, followed by the walls. Jin  
freezes and takes a quick breath in fright.

EXT. THE COSMIC EGG - DAY

Cheng looks down. A darkness flows like water around him.  
Cheng looks up to see a bright whiteness above him.  
Surrounding these forces are yellow walls, forming an  
ellipse around the scene.

CHENG  
This was the universe in its purest  
form. There was simply darkness and  
light, and-

Cheng turns to look at Jin, but stops. Jin is  
hyperventilating.

Cheng rushes over to her but she pushes him off.

JIN  
(sputtering)  
What, how, is-

CHENG  
It's OK, it's OK, listen.

Jin's eyes are wild like an animal's. Cheng gently puts his  
hands on her arms.

CHENG (CONT'D)  
Trust me, OK? You're not in danger.

(CONTINUED)

Cheng's eyes are warm and calm. Jin's eyes dart from the white place back to Cheng. She slows her breathing and nods.

JIN

OK... so... where are we?

Cheng glues his eyes to her as he talks.

CHENG

We're in my story, and right now  
we're at the very beginning.

JIN

Of what?

CHENG

Everything.

Cheng gestures at the darkness and whiteness. His voice is earnest and passionate, serving as an anchor for Jin.

CHENG (CONT'D)

These were darkness and light, the  
two basic elements of the universe.  
And yet, they were the most  
incompatible.

The darkness lunges up towards the sky. The whiteness retreats, briefly allowing the darkness to advance.

The whiteness swirls around the edges of the darkness, and the two colors constantly shift.

CHENG (CONT'D)

And from this constant mixing of  
the two forces came the first  
being.

A long tendril of darkness reaches skyward, which is met by a beam of whiteness. The two meet and mix together in an egg-like ellipse.

A blob forms into a vaguely human shape. The darkness drips down the figure, forming hair. The whiteness forms facial features. Tusks come out of its mouth and two horns stretch out of the blob's forehead. One eye turns gold while the other one turns pale.

This figure takes its first step, now fully formed mix of animal and human. This is PANGU (30) and is so tall he makes Cheng and Jin look like ants.

Cheng looks at Jin, who wears a look of awe and fear, and fear is winning.

(CONTINUED)

CHENG (CONT'D)  
Nothing here can hurt you.

JIN  
What is that?

CHENG  
That's Pangu, our creator.

JIN  
And he's a monster?

CHENG  
No, he was very gentle.

Pangu looks at his hands, and slowly uses them to brush against his hairy body. His attention turns to the battle between whiteness and darkness. The darkness leaps up again but Pangu places his hand over it, stopping the attack.

Up above, a beam of whiteness pierces the blackness. Pangu steps in the way, holding it back.

Pangu stands between the two dueling forces, not allowing either energy to pass his grip.

CHENG (CONT'D)  
Pangu just wanted the forces that created him to be at peace. But eventually, this war between the two energies was too much even for this shell of chaos.

The tension of the whiteness and darkness causes the two energies to quiver. Pangu strains to hold them back, and then...

CRACK

The yellow walls splinter and fly away. The whiteness shoots higher and higher into the sky. While the blackness descends. The whiteness is now the sky and the blackness is now the ground.

EXT. PANGU'S EARTH - DAY

Pangu watches the two energies divide, toppling to the ground out of exhaustion.

Pangu's breath grows ragged, and he struggles to keep his eyes open: he is dying.

(CONTINUED)

Pangu lifts his arms to see little specks of darkness and whiteness in his fur. There are Cheng and Jin. Around the two are several other YIN YANG HUMANS, painted with strokes of black and white.

CHENG

We were like fleas on this divine creature, and yet... he took care of us.

Pangu smiles, exposing his tusks. He lays his head back down looking up at the sky. He reaches his hand out longingly. Pangu stops, and looks at his palm again. An idea dawns on him.

Pangu lays his palm over his eyes for a moment. When he lifts his hand away, two objects fly into the sky, one the blazing sun, and the other the moon.

Pangu lets out his last breath, his eyelids shut.

Pangu's body begins to transform. His head becomes rocky, and splits into mountains. His hair turns to trees and grass. His body turns to dirt, and his sweat becomes oceans.

Jin and Cheng turn around to see the Yin Yang Humans building a village. Cheng looks at Jin to see her caught up in the emotions of the moment.

CHENG (CONT'D)

(almost whispered)

And because of his sacrifice, our lives began in this world... his world.

The world falls away...

EXT. THE WHITE PLACE - DAY

Cheng looks at Jin, waiting with baited breath for her response.

JIN

(whispered)

Have you always been able to do this?

CHENG

No. Just recently.

Beat.

(CONTINUED)

CHENG (CONT'D)  
Did you like it?

Jin looks at Cheng. Her eyes are warm.

JIN  
Tell me another.

Cheng laughs, releasing his tension.

INT. CHENG'S HOME - DUSK

The two are back in Cheng's house. Jin looks out the door and sees the setting sun.

JIN  
Father will be worried if I don't  
arrive back before nightfall.

CHENG  
Sure.

Beat.

JIN  
Thank you for showing me.

CHENG  
Of cour-

Jin quickly steps out of the house and heads up the road.

Cheng watches her leave.

Jin glances back at Cheng once. Cheng smiles at the gesture.

Jin blushes and snaps her head forward.

EXT. CHENG'S STORY HOME - DAY

Cheng watches as Jiahao tills the soil. Jiahao's face is red and sweaty from the work.

Cheng looks at the ground, furrowing his brow as he thinks. Plants begin to grow in the earth.

Jiahao notices the act and glares back at Cheng. He grabs the plants and yanks them out. He drops seeds into the holes where the plants used to be.

Jiahao knocks the dirt off his hands, staring down Cheng. Cheng nods and looks down at his feet: the lesson is clear.

EXT. BATTLEFIELD - DUSK

Two armies stand across from each other, one dressed in blue and the other dressed in green. The land is barren and rocky, with blood-red clouds.

Leading the blue army is Jiahao, riding a horse. The horse roughly like a normal horse, but its legs and head are longer.

Cheng stands on a large rock formation, looking down at the battlefield.

Jiahao scowls at the enemy Army.

The Green Commander grips the hilt of his sword, lifts it, and yells a war cry.

The Green Army charges.

The Blue Army follows suit.

THE TWO ARMIES SPRINTING AT EACH OTHER.

THEY NEAR THE CLASH...

JIN (V.O.)

Cheng?

WHITE.

INT. CHENG'S HOME - DAY

The house reforms around Cheng. He whirls around to see Jin carrying a basket covered by a cloth.

CHENG

Jin?

JIN

Did I interrupt?

CHENG

No, of course not. What do you have there?

Jin smiles. She kneels down and pulls the cloth back to reveal several tiny clay figurines.

JIN

Well, I figured that since you showed me your, uh... hobby, I'd show you something of mine.

(CONTINUED)

She lays them out one by one.

JIN (CONT'D)

These are some of the figures I've made over the years.

Cheng picks one of them up, turning it over delicately.

CHENG

Is this stone? How did you carve these?

JIN

Not stone, clay.

Jin takes out a man on a horse.

JIN (CONT'D)

This was the first one I made when I was a girl. The man was passing through the village from some city far away bringing news to another city even further away. I thought the whole thing was a creature at first, half man half horse. I remember staying outside for the next few weeks waiting for him to pass through again on his way back.

(beat)

That was the only time I saw a horse.

Cheng stares at the figure, entranced.

CHENG

Shouldn't its nose be bigger? And its legs?

JIN

No. I mean, maybe I'm wrong, it was long ago. When was the last time you saw a horse?

CHENG

Never.

Jin tilts her head to the side.

JIN

Never?

Jin laughs and gives him a playful shove.

(CONTINUED)

JIN (CONT'D)

Who are you to tell me how realistic my figures are?

CHENG

I'm just going off what my Dad told me.

Her laugh slowly dies.

JIN

Ah, I see. Well, I can't act like I'm steeped in knowledge about the world. I've never even been outside of the village.

CHENG

Me neither.

JIN

I've been thinking about your story a lot.

Cheng brightens at her words.

JIN

And it made me realize... the world's a big place.

(beat)

Yeah, that does sound silly when I say it out loud.

CHENG

Wouldn't be a first.

JIN

Hey!

Jin mock-throws a figure at him.

JIN (CONT'D)

The point is, there's so much outside of this little place. All kinds of places, and people... and stories. And... maybe I can't experience it all, but I want to experience as much as I can. Do you ever feel that way?

CHENG

Maybe.

(beat)

I don't know. What's out there for me?

(CONTINUED)

Jin stares incredulously.

JIN

What's out there? Did the man who locks himself in all day to tell himself stories just ask that?

CHENG

Hey!

(beat)

I don't own a lock.

Jin laughs for a moment, but steers herself back on track.

JIN

You're missing the point! All you do is theorize on what's out there!

CHENG

Well, yeah, and all of that's great for my characters... but for me? I don't know. I mean, my Dad saw the world as a soldier, and he felt that this place was important, like it was the only place to really build our lives.

JIN

I'm not pretending there's not evil in the world, I just hate the idea of living my life in one place with the same boring people forever.

Cheng looks down at the horse figure, mulling over her words.

EXT. SHUI'S HOME - NIGHT

Jin knocks on the door. Shui opens it.

SHUI

There you are! Do you have any idea how worried-

Shui notices Cheng standing a few feet away from Jin.

SHUI (CONT'D)

Cheng, what a surprise! I wasn't expecting you.

(CONTINUED)

JIN  
Cheng was just escorting me back.

SHUI  
Well, thank you, Cheng.

Cheng bows.

CHENG  
You've shown me so much kindness, I  
owe you a great deal.

SHUI  
Well, you can start by having some  
tea with me.

Cheng looks from Shui to Jin. Jin gives a small inviting  
smile.

CHENG  
I'd love to.

Shui opens the door wide and Cheng steps inside.

INT. CHENG'S HOME - NIGHT

Cheng enters through the doorway. As he prepares to close  
the door, he looks back at the distant village. He sighs  
contentedly.

Cheng's eyes wander from the village to his unkempt  
farmland. Cheng sighs again, this time with tired  
frustration.

Cheng's eyes widen slightly as a thought strikes him.

The world falls away...

INT. CHENG'S STORY HOME - DAY

The world reforms quickly. This room is, after all,  
completely identical...

Cheng looks around, but there is no one else. Fear flashes  
across his face. He runs to the door...

EXT. CHENG'S STORY HOME - DAY

Cheng bursts through the door.

CHENG  
Dad, where's M-

Cheng freezes, stunned by what he sees: The earth of the farm is ripped apart, clearly in an attempt to till the soil. Millet seeds are scattered haphazardly in piles. Storm clouds lour overhead, displacing the typical sunny weather of the world.

Jiahao crouches near the struggling crops, breathing raggedly.

JIAHAO  
(mumbling)  
We need more seed, maximize the chances, this earth is good enough, people have started with less-

CHENG  
(concerned)  
Dad?

JIAHAO  
(mumbling)  
Land isn't built on soldiers but on the people, this is good work, honest work-

CHENG  
(louder)  
Dad? Are you OK?

Jiahao's head whips around. Cheng takes a step back. Jiahao's face is pale and sweaty, just like he was on his deathbed.

Cheng rushes over to Jiahao.

CHENG (CONT'D)  
What happened? Why are you sick?

JIAHAO  
I'm fine.

CHENG  
No, you're not.

(CONTINUED)

JIAHAO  
 (firm)  
 I'm fine.

Jiaho pushes Cheng away, rising to his feet and taking a few steps away. He turns his back to hide his weakness.

JIAHAO (CONT'D)  
 It's just been a long day.

CHENG  
 Where's Mom?

JIAHAO  
 In the village. I sent her to buy more seed.

Cheng glances back at the land. Now back to his Father's figure, breathing heavily.

CHENG  
 Dad-

JIAHAO  
 Come on, give your father a hand.  
 Farmers work from dawn to dusk.

Cheng's mouth is open but the words won't come out. He closes his mouth and nods curtly.

EXT. CHENG'S FARMLAND - DUSK

Cheng kneels, covering seeds with dirt. He glances over at the antisocial Jiahao.

Cheng looks at his hands, covered in dirt and sweat.

CUT TO:

EXT. VILLAGE - DAY

Cheng and Jin walk through the village. A passing Townsman gives Cheng a funny look and spits on the ground. Cheng registers the gesture and averts his eyes to the ground.

Jin doesn't seem to notice as she stares longingly at the mountain. Cheng glances at her and follows her gaze.

CHENG  
 I guess I can't blame you for  
 wanting to leave. The people here  
 are....

(CONTINUED)

JIN  
Cheaters, liars, bullies, stupid,  
take your pick.

CHENG  
I think rude is a good enough word.

JIN  
See? You feel that disconnect too.  
This place just isn't for people  
like us. But out there?

Jin gestures at the mountain again.

JIN (CONT'D)  
The possibilities are endless.

BACK TO:

EXT. CHENG'S FARMLAND - DUSK

Cheng knocks the dirt off his hands and stands up.

CHENG  
Dad, we need to talk.

JIAHAO  
Tonight.

CHENG  
No, now.

Jiahao glances at Cheng. He quickly resumes his work.

CHENG (CONT'D)  
(firmly)  
Father.

Jiahao grunts affirmatively.

CHENG (CONT'D)  
I've been talking to Shui's  
daughter.

Jiahao grunts negatively.

CHENG (CONT'D)  
She told me about you and Shui. In  
the army.

(CONTINUED)

JIAHAO  
He's a coward.

CHENG  
Maybe. But Jin is....

Jiahao glances.

CHENG (CONT'D)  
Jin's my friend. And even if she weren't my only friend I'd want to be her friend... does that make sense?

Jiahao grunts uncertainly.

CHENG (CONT'D)  
We were talking and we both felt like....

Jiahao is still entirely focused on his work.

CHENG (CONT'D)  
Dammit, Dad, this is pointless!

Jiahao freezes. He slowly turns toward Cheng.

CHENG (CONT'D)  
I don't... I'm not a good farmer, OK? I never will be. There's nothing here for me, and I'm never going to be what you want me to be. And I don't understand why you're so obsessed with this, I mean not just in my own life but here too! You don't need to grow your own food here, there are countless options for survival that come at no cost to you or Mom, just ask me and I can-

Jiahao slaps Cheng across the face. Cheng's face twists in pain and shock.

JIAHAO  
You're telling me that my life's work is pointless? That every moment I spent creating a world for you to thrive in was simply not worth my time? That me scrimping and saving every coin to buy this land, well that was just a fool's errand?

(CONTINUED)

CHENG  
(incredulous)  
You hit me. You've never-

Jiahao grabs Cheng by the shoulders. Cheng is terrified.

JIAHAO  
Listen, you ungrateful child! I  
will not take any disrespect,  
especially from my own seed.

The combination of the slap and Jiahao's words cause Cheng's eyes to well up.

JIAHAO (CONT'D)  
Don't you get it, you selfish boy?  
Everything I've done has been for  
you! I *died* for you!

Cheng gapes at Jiahao. Jiahao's rage lowers slightly.

JIAHAO (CONT'D)  
Now if this girl has some worth to  
you, then you have to have some  
worth. That means to stop dreaming  
and get working.  
(beat)  
We're clear.

It's a statement. Cheng swallows back his tears.

CHENG  
Of course, Father. Anything for  
you.

Jiahao maintains his intense glare.

Beat.

JIAHAO  
Good.

Jiahao lightly taps Cheng's cheek. Cheng flinches.

JIAHAO  
Let's try to finish before  
nighttime.

Cheng looks back up at the darkening skies.

JIAHAO (CONT'D)  
Let's hope it rains. It'll be good  
for the crops.

Cheng closes his eyes, holding back his words.

INT. CHENG'S HOME - DAWN

DARKNESS.

The door opens, allowing the early morning light to stream in. Cheng stands in the doorway, his back to us. Beyond his figure lies the disheveled land

Cheng's shoulders rise and fall with a determined breath.

Cheng steps out and slides the door shut behind him, casting the house back into DARKNESS.

INT. CHENG'S HOME - NIGHT

KNOCKING AT THE DOOR.

Close on Cheng's eyes. The bridge of his nose is smudged with dirt.

His left eye opens slightly.

Beat.

It begins to close...

MORE KNOCKING.

Eyelid open. The pupil turns towards the direction of the door.

CHENG  
(groggily)  
Yeah?

JIN (O.S.)  
It's me.

Both eyes open. We pull out to see Cheng lying on his mat. He starts to rise.

CHENG  
You can come in.

Jin enters, carrying a basket of cooked rice.

JIN  
Father sends a gift.

(CONTINUED)

Jin notices that Cheng's face and clothes are stained with dirt. She glances down at a basin of somewhat dirty water with a cloth.

JIN (CONT'D)

I see you're back at it.

CHENG

Hm?

JIN

Farming.

Cheng straightens himself.

CHENG

Oh, well, yeah. Of course. I don't want to rely on your father's charity, I need to be a man and make something of my life.

Jin frowns suspiciously.

JIN

I see. You missed a spot.

CHENG

What?

Jinn taps her cheek. Cheng misunderstands and reaches for the opposite, smudging more dirt. Jin laughs.

JIN

No, not... here.

Jin kneels down next to Cheng and pulls the wet cloth from the basin.

CHENG

You don't need to.

JIN

It's alright.

She gently dabs his face with the cloth, wiping away the grime. Cheng attempts to stoically look into the middle distance. Jin giggles. Cheng blushes.

EXT. CHENG'S STORY HOME - NIGHT

Jin and Cheng step out of the house. Jin looks up at the starry sky.

JIN  
Do you ever wonder what those are?

CHENG  
I already told you.

Jin laughs.

JIN  
Right, all Pangu's doing.  
(beat)  
To me, they've always looked like  
little fires.

CHENG  
Like a forest burning?

JIN  
Not that anything's really burning  
or being destroyed... like a  
campfire or lamps in a village or  
lights in a festival. Like each  
star is its own land of people.

Cheng furrows his brow as he tries to match Jin's depth.

CHENG  
(grunting like Jiahao)  
Hm.

Jin turns and smiles amusingly at Cheng.

JIN  
What does that mean?

CHENG  
It means I agree.

Jin chuckles.

JIN  
Ah, I see.

Beat.

CHENG  
Jin, I-

(CONTINUED)

JIN  
Cheng, would-

The two look at each other awkwardly.

JIN  
Yes?

CHENG  
Well... I want to make this work.  
The farm, I mean. And I know my  
limits, but I still need to try.  
And if I'm going to build anything  
here, I want to do it with your  
help.

Jin looks at Cheng carefully, almost suspiciously. She looks  
away for a moment.

CHENG (CONT'D)  
Do you see?

Jin looks back.

JIN  
No, I don't think I do.

CHENG  
Well-

JIN  
Because what it sounds like is that  
you want me to throw away this  
dream I've had since I was a child.

CHENG  
No, of course not.

JIN  
OK. What are you suggesting?

CHENG  
I want us both to be realistic. You  
keep talking about what's out  
there, but you don't even have a  
solid plan. Who's to say that the  
opportunities out there can't be  
found here?

JIN  
What about you with your stories-

(CONTINUED)

CHENG

Yes, and I'm putting that to the side for now.

Jin gapes at him.

JIN

This isn't you talking right now.

CHENG

Well, maybe I have to be somebody different if I'm going to make this work.

Jin's eyes are glassy but her brow is firm.

JIN

Well, you're not.

Jin turns her back on Cheng and heads back up the road.

CHENG

Jin, wait.

Jin doesn't look back.

JIN

You come find me once you stop being you father.

CHENG

(voice rising)

Is being my father a bad thing?

Jin turns around.

JIN

What do you know about your father, Cheng? Because I'm starting to think I know more about him than you do.

CHENG

My father was a great man, who did everything he could to provide-

JIN

(calm, but biting)

He was a coward, Cheng.

Beat.

(CONTINUED)

CHENG

How can you say that?

JIN

Cheng-

CHENG

How DARE you say that.

JIN

He was a general, just like my father. Did he ever tell you that?

CHENG

No, but I don't see how that's bad thing.

JIN

In his final battle he made a disastrous choice that ended up killing almost everyone under his command. He couldn't handle the responsibility of leadership or his failure and he deserted. And my father took the blame. We lost everything and we were banished.

Pain is written on Cheng's face. He looks away in a vain attempt to hide from the truth.

JIN (CONT'D)

What bothers me aren't the choices he made in battle. It's the choice to run away rather than address his failure. And that mistake hurt not only him but the person he called his best friend. And the truth is my father's a coward too for not assigning the blame to him and forcing him to recognize what he did. And now after I started seeing this side to you, this... unique, caring, emotional person... all I see now is cowardice. Do you know how I can tell? You can't even look at me right now.

Cheng's eyes sting with tears. He continues to look away.

JIN (CONT'D)

Did you know there are people in cities that can heal people like magic, Cheng? If we had still been in the city when my mother got....

(CONTINUED)

Jin stops abruptly, trying to overcome a bad memory.

JIN (CONT'D)

As far as I'm concerned, what happened to her is on your father's shoulders too. And to my....

Jin stops again. Cheng wipes away his tears. He tries to speak.

CHENG

You can't... he doesn't deserve all the blame for what happened to you. He tried his best. And so am I.

Jin looks at him with pity.

JIN

But what exactly are you trying to do? What do you want to do?

Beat. Cheng stares defeatedly at her.

JIN

You don't know. And you can't decide, so you'll all you do for the rest of your life is run from your choices and be stuck in the exact same spot forever.

CHENG

I don't want to fight.

JIN

I don't either. But it's time for both of us to realize that there's... there's nothing here. Nothing good, anyway.

Jin puts on a stoic expression, but her eyes betray her pain. Cheng makes no attempts to hide his.

Jin turns away for the last time.

CHENG

Jin!

(softer)

Jin.

Cheng watches her leave, defeated and heartbroken.

INT. CHENG'S HOME - DAWN

Cheng stares at the ceiling with red eyes. He wears the same defeated expression.

He turns his head towards the light shining through the cracks of his shack. He sighs and rises.

EXT. CHENG'S FARMLAND - DAWN

Cheng digs into the soil. He looks up at the village but quickly averts his eyes.

Cheng throws down his tool in frustration.

CHENG

There was once....

The world starts to fall away to the world of white, but then quickly reform around him back to the farmland.

Cheng slumps into the dirt, putting his head in his hands. The world falls away again to the world of white...

CHENG'S HEAD IN HIS HANDS

EXT. CHENG'S STORY FARMLAND - DAY

Tiny objects fall on Cheng's hair. He looks up and his eyes widen:

Farmland. Farmland as far as the eye can see, with dark storm clouds raining... not water.

Cheng brushes his hand through his hair. He looks at his palm: seed.

He turns around towards his house, hoping to see something different behind him: more tilled earth, more raining seeds. His flat roof is covered in the stuff.

INT. CHENG'S STORY HOME - DAY

Cheng bursts through the door.

No one's inside.

Cheng sighs frustratedly. He slams the door behind him. Just as quickly, someone knocks on the door.

Cheng whirls around and opens it.

(CONTINUED)

CHENG

Dad, what-

Outside is ZHI THE MATURE WOMAN (40s).

ZHI THE MATURE WOMAN

So good to see you again, Cheng.  
Would you mind?

Stunned, Cheng steps aside to let Zhi inside.

ZHI THE MATURE WOMAN (CONT'D)

Thank you, my friend.

She takes a seat by the fire. She smiles up at Cheng but recognizes his expression.

ZHI THE MATURE WOMAN (CONT'D)

What's wrong?

CHENG

Can I be honest?

Zhi nods.

CHENG (CONT'D)

Everything.

Zhi beckons him to sit down. He obliges.

ZHI THE MATURE WOMAN

Is it not what you wanted?

CHENG

It was, it really was. The images  
that I could only glimpse in my  
head are so real here. I love that,  
and I love that I can share any  
story with anyone.

(beat)

And now I have no one. I don't even  
have my father anymore.

ZHI THE MATURE WOMAN

Did you make this story like this  
to please him?

CHENG

I don't know, it just... became  
this way. And the way he talks to  
me, it's like nothing he ever said  
me to before. Why is he like this?

(CONTINUED)

ZHI THE MATURE WOMAN  
He only has as much power as you  
give him. He's just a character in  
your story, Cheng, just as I told  
you.

CHENG  
Yes, but he's my father.

Zhi frowns sadly.

ZHI THE MATURE WOMAN  
No. He's not.

Cheng looks away.

ZHI THE MATURE WOMAN (CONT'D)  
If he's acting strangely, then it's  
something of your own making, deep  
within.

Cheng sighs.

CHENG  
I'm not what he wants me to be.

ZHI THE MATURE WOMAN  
Then ask yourself what you are, and  
then live your life in that way.

CHENG  
What do you think I am?

Zhi smiles knowingly.

ZHI THE MATURE WOMAN  
You know. Why else would I give you  
this gift?

CHENG  
What if no one wants to hear my  
stories?

ZHI THE MATURE WOMAN  
(playfully)  
I guess you won't know until you  
tell them.

Cheng shrugs.

CHENG  
Maybe.

The door shatters as Jiahao stumbles through. He crashes onto the ground.

CHENG (CONT'D)

Dad!

Cheng rushes over. Zhi rises cautiously.

Jiahao props himself up on his elbows. His hair is greasy and his clothes are wet with sweat. Cheng tries to help.

CHENG (CONT'D)

You can't push yourself like this.

Jiahao lightly brushes him off.

JIAHAO

(breathless, but grinning)

It's fine. Did you see? Did you see what I've done? It's all....

Jiahao crumples again.

CHENG

Dad, listen to me. I'm not going to keep doing this.

Jiahao's head jerks up. He grabs Cheng's shirt and pulls himself up.

JIAHAO

You disrespectful-

CHENG

(commanding)

Stop.

Jiahao is stunned.

CHENG (CONT'D)

I know what this is now. And you're not... really my father.

Jiahao looks slightly wounded.

CHENG (CONT'D)

But I still feel like you are.

JIAHAO

I am.

(CONTINUED)

CHENG

Then listen.

Jiahao stares suspiciously at Cheng for a moment. Then he nods.

CHENG (CONT'D)

I'm starting to realize that maybe the way I saw you is not who you were. And I've always been trying to live my life according to that image.

JIAHAO

Then what do you want?

CHENG

I want my father. Who he really was, as human as he was. I don't want this anymore.

JIAHAO

You don't want what?

Beat.

CHENG

I don't want to lie to myself anymore.

The house starts to slowly fade to white. Jiahao grows weaker. He collapses like a child into Cheng's arms.

CHENG (CONT'D)

Before I do what I'm going to do, I need to tell you that I'm so incredibly grateful for what you did for me.

Jiahao smiles weakly.

CHENG (CONT'D)

I understand that you did what you thought was best. But that ended up killing you, and it's killing you again. And I want you to trust me to do what I think is best for myself.

JIAHAO

And what if I don't?

(CONTINUED)

CHENG

Then I guess I'll always feel like my father is looking down on me and hating me for disappointing him. But maybe I'll just have to accept that.

The walls are gone. We are now back to...

EXT. THE WHITE PLACE - DAY

Jiahao's eyes flutter as he struggles to keep them open. His body is translucent. He reaches upward, his hand grasping Cheng's palm.

CHENG'S EYES, GLASSY.

CHENG

I love you.

Jiahao disappears. His last breath echoes around the massive space.

Zhi puts a hand on Cheng's shoulder. Cheng continues kneeling, incredibly still.

The walls of his home slowly fall into place, switching back to...

INT. CHENG'S HOME - DAY

Cheng blinks, letting out a long, trembling breath outwards.

ZHI THE MATURE WOMAN

(warmly)

You're going to be fine, Cheng.

CHENG

(softly)

I hope so.

Zhi steps towards the door.

CHENG (CONT'D)

Wait. I need to ask you for one last thing.

Zhi looks back, raising an eyebrow at Cheng.

(CONTINUED)

CHENG (CONT'D)  
I need you take back the gift.

Zhi turns around, a surprised but curious expression written on her face.

CHENG (CONT'D)  
I don't mean to offend you, it's just... If my stories really do entertain people, I want to know that it was those stories.

ZHI THE MATURE WOMAN  
Hm.

Zhi nods to herself.

ZHI THE MATURE WOMAN (CONT'D)  
Very well.

CHENG  
Thank you for everything.

Cheng bows his head respectfully. Zhi smiles, sliding the door behind her.

MONTAGE:

-Cheng washes his face.

-Cheng wraps his pot, some kindling, a bag of rice, and a change of clothes in a large cloth.

-Cheng empties a tiny pouch onto the floor: 5 copper pieces.

EXT. CHENG'S HOME - DUSK

Cheng slides the door open and steps out. He turns back and gazes into the barren interior.

Cheng's hand, lingering on the door...

EXT. SHUI'S HOME - DUSK

Cheng knocks on Shui's door. He waits a moment before knocking again.

CHENG  
Jin, it's me.

No answer.

(CONTINUED)

CHENG (CONT'D)

I understand why you don't want to talk to me. But I need to tell you something before it's too late.

A brief shuffling is heard, but no direct response.

CHENG (CONT'D)

Look... you were right. I see that so clearly now. I'm not going to keep pretending to be something I'm not, not a farmer... and not my father.

(beat)

I'm leaving, Jin. I'm leaving this all behind, and if you don't want to say anything that's fine. I just wanted to tell you and say goodbye.

FOOTSTEPS TOWARDS THE DOOR.

The door slides open...

Shui, with red eyes and wet cheeks. Cheng blushes, embarrassed.

CHENG (CONT'D)

Sir, I'm so sorry, I thought-

Shui waves him inside sadly.

INT. SHUI'S HOME - DUSK

Shui's home is shockingly bright and colorful, including several clay figures lying near the window.

Shui sits crosslegged on the floor.

SHUI

(quivering)

She's gone.

CHENG

What?

SHUI

She left last night.

Shui shuts his eyes to keep tears from flooding out.

(CONTINUED)

SHUI (CONT'D)

She hates me.

CHENG

No, no she doesn't. I'm sure  
there's a....

Cheng struggles but there's no comfort he can offer.

SHUI

Did she ever talk about a  
particular destination or anything  
like that?

CHENG

Not really.

Shui nods sadly.

CHENG (CONT'D)

Jin told me about my father.

Shui looks surprised.

CHENG (CONT'D)

I'm sorry for what he did, and I'm  
sorry you had to pay for it.

SHUI

Of course. You have to understand,  
your father was a very... confident  
man. That confidence was incredibly  
useful in his tactics most of the  
time. And when that confidence  
failed him... I hated to see him  
broken like that. And then watching  
you grow up, seeing the way you  
looked up to his memory... I didn't  
want to cause you further pain.

CHENG

He was human. I understand that  
now.

Cheng furrows his brow, thinking hard.

CHENG (CONT'D)

I don't want to press, but I need  
to understand something. Jin blamed  
my father for your wife's death.  
What exactly happened to her?

Shui looks at Cheng carefully.

(CONTINUED)

CHENG (CONT'D)

Please. It seemed very painful to her.

Shui sighs and looks down.

SHUI

My wife and I came out here following your father. I feared for him, how he was going to take care of himself... and, to a certain extent, I feared he would go mad. We had Jin, and then a few years later my wife became pregnant. Jin was very excited, she would constantly fantasize how she would groom her younger sister's hair, or finally have a friend to play with in her brother, whichever one it may be.

Shui looks stoically at Cheng.

SHUI (CONT'D)

When my wife gave birth, there were... complications. There was nothing anyone could do, it's just one of those tragedies the Gods send to test us. It was hard for the both of us, but for Jin especially. For a child to lose her mother and her prospective sibling....

Shui clears his throat.

CHENG, A MIXTURE OF PAIN AND MATURITY.

CHENG

I understand now. I'm sorry.

EXT. SHUI'S HOME - DUSK

As Shui slides the door closed, Cheng turns and looks up at the towering mountain.

EXT. MOUNTAIN FACE - DUSK

Cheng climbs up the jagged face of the mountain.

He glances down and sees the tiny village below.

Cheng clings to the rock and shuts his eyes. His breathing increases rapidly. Slowly, he opens his eyes and continues his ascent.

He grabs a handhold which breaks off. Half of Cheng sways in the air as he desperately clings to the rock.

Cheng pushes himself up with his foot and grabs on to a smoother hold. He freezes, his eyes closed tight.

WIND THROUGH FABRIC.

Cheng opens his eyes at the sound. He peers upward to see a torn piece of a dress wrapped around a jutting edge. The rock drips crimson.

With determination in his eyes, Cheng reaches for the next hold.

EXT. MOUNTAIN TOP - NIGHT

Cheng pulls himself up over the ledge. He lies on his back, breathing heavily.

Cheng's breathing slows as he takes a moment to admire the stars. They seem so close from up here....

His eyes follow a constellation across the sky, leading towards the opposite edge of the mountain.

Cheng slowly climbs to his feet and takes a step towards the edge, looking out across miles and miles....

Hundreds of lights dot the ground: villages, camps, cities. They seem to mirror the plethora of stars in the sky.

Cheng feels around behind him for a place to sit down, his eyes glued to the sight. He slowly sits down, still entranced.

EXT. WOODS - DAY

Cheng walks through the woods, his eyes jumping from detail to detail: the branches, the leaves, the sticks crunching underfoot, the newly appearing grass growing through the path.

EXT. BUSTLING TOWN - DAY

Cheng hesitantly stands on the outskirts of the town. A FARMER (40s) leads a donkey into town, brushing past Cheng.

The donkey strays from the path to munch on bright green grass. The Farmer yanks it back onto the path.

FARMER  
Ah, get back here you stupid  
animal.

Cheng glances away from the donkey, back to the town.

EXT. BUSTLING TOWN MARKET - DUSK

Cheng stops in front of a female RICE VENDOR (40s). Behind her are bags of rice and in front of her is a pot of boiling rice.

CHENG  
Uh, hi.

The Rice Vendor stares at him.

CHENG (CONT'D)  
A bowl, please.

The Rice Vendor fills up a bowl of rice.

RICE VENDOR  
Two coppers.

Cheng reaches into a pouch and hands two coins to her.

CHENG (CONT'D)  
Thank you.

She nods and looks over to another customer behind him.

CHENG (CONT'D)  
Um. You wouldn't-

(CONTINUED)

RICE VENDOR  
Make it quick, there's other people  
in line.

CHENG  
(mumbling)  
Oh, yeah. Well, OK.

Cheng looks down and heads out of the line. He sits a short distance away and begins eating his rice.

The line empties. Cheng walks back up to the Rice Vendor.

RICE VENDOR  
What, you want more?

CHENG  
No. I mean, not that it was bad,  
or-

RICE VENDOR  
What do you want?

CHENG  
Have you seen a girl, uh, woman,  
passing through here? She's about  
my age, long dark hair, green eyes?

She shakes her head.

CHENG (CONT'D)  
Oh. Ok. Um....

Cheng glances at the setting sun.

CHENG (CONT'D)  
Is there any place that puts  
travellers up for the night?

RICE VENDOR  
There's a bar that has spare rooms.

CHENG  
How much?

Rice Vendor shrugs.

RICE VENDOR  
Four, five copper coins?

CHENG  
Four?

RICE VENDOR  
Could be higher.

CHENG  
I see.

EXT. BUSTLING TOWN ALLEY - DUSK

Cheng steps into a tiny alley between two large buildings. Cheng grunts, planting his back to the wall, sliding down to the ground. He balls his hand into a fist and taps his forehead with it.

CHENG  
(murmured)  
You're as dumb as that ass, Cheng.

Cheng looks up at the darkening sky and lets out a long frustrated sigh. His eyes begin to close...

EXT. BUSTLING TOWN ALLEY - NIGHT

Cheng lies against the wall, his mouth open slightly. A STICK comes from out of frame. It wavers in front of him for a moment.

It inches forward, softly tapping his mouth. Cheng's eyes shoot open and he jerks away, toppling to the ground.

A BOY (7) holds the stick, giggling.

CHENG  
Why'd you do that?

BOY  
To see if you were dead.

CHENG  
Oh.

Beat.

CHENG (CONT'D)  
Well, I'm not.

The Boy laughs and runs away. Cheng smirks slightly at the encounter. He leans back against the wall again. He tilts his head towards the street: drums.

Cheng rises and steps out of the alley.

EXT. BUSTLING TOWN MARKET - NIGHT

Cheng peers out across the row of vendors. Large crimson lanterns illuminate the town, and the flames of a pyre flicker in the village square. Cheng makes his way over.

EXT. BUSTLING TOWN SQUARE - NIGHT

The burning body of a donkey is barely visible amidst the flames. An Old Man (60s) in a white robe fans the flames while tens of Drummers pound on tanggu drums. Occasionally, a few shout and leap into the air.

A crowd of Townspeople kneel in front of the sight. Cheng hangs back, taking in the sight. He notices the Boy sitting towards the back of the crowd.

The Boy glances back and smiles. Cheng cautiously makes his way over.

CHENG

What's this for?

BOY

The Gods, of course.

CHENG

But why *this* ritual? What's the story?

The Boy shrugs.

BOY

I dunno.

Cheng stares incredulously at the Boy.

CHENG

C'mon, there's got to be something.

BOY

Something about disobeying the Gods' orders.

CHENG

Yeah?

BOY

Who knows, this has been going on for longer than one of Grandfather's speeches.

(CONTINUED)

The music concludes with a drummer banging on a large golden gong and the dancers kneeling to the ground. The Townspeople start to get up and walk away.

Cheng's eyes land from person to person. He takes a sharp intake of breath before rising.

CHENG  
(voice cracking nervously)  
Men and women of this village....

A couple Townspeople turn, but nobody else seems to notice. Cheng clears his throat.

CHENG (CONT'D)  
(stronger)  
Good people of this village, in  
this ritual you show your devotion  
to the Gods as well as your skill,  
and although I'm simply passing  
through, I'm honored by what I see.

Some bow their heads out of appreciation, but he's still losing them.

The Boy looks up at him. Then he looks over at

THE GONG.

The Boy runs up and uses one of the mallets to bang on the gong.

All the Townspeople turn around.

Cheng, shocked, turns to the Boy.

BOY  
Well? You wanted to talk to them,  
didn't you?

Cheng hurries up the gong: he's at the center of attention.

CHENG  
Forgive me if I'm intruding, but  
when I saw your ritual I remembered  
an old story from my village, far  
away where the sun sets. And I  
think this story may shed some  
light on the meaning of tonight's  
celebration.

Murmurs from the Townspeople, interested.

(CONTINUED)

Cheng glances down at the Boy for support. The Boy smiles up at him.

CHENG (CONT'D)

Long ago, when we were first molded by the Gods, we lived in peace alongside our animal brethren. Except for one, who commanded our total respect and ruled with authority. And that was, of course, the donkey.

A huge laugh from the Townspeople. The Boy giggles along with them.

CHENG (CONT'D)

This may seem funny now, but in the past we could think of no image that conveyed power, courage, intelligence, and beauty better... than the ass.

And even bigger laugh from the Townspeople. Cheng smiles to see him entertain them.

CHENG (CONT'D)

One day the Gods came down and spoke to the creature: "Great lord, servant only to the divine powers, we grant you this palace with over a thousand rooms for you and your many wives."

The Boy snickers.

CHENG (CONT'D)

"But we do so under one condition: never to enter the one room at the very top of the highest tower of the structure. Obey this one command, and you will never know hardship or suffering." But if there's one thing that hasn't changed about the donkey in all these years, it is its selfishness and disobedience.

CHUCKLES MIXED WITH MURMURED AGREEMENTS.

CHENG (CONT'D)

So it will come as no surprise to you that the donkey became utterly tempted to see what exactly was

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

CHENG (CONT'D) (cont'd)  
 hidden in that room. What if  
 further riches were stored away  
 there, or perhaps it was less  
 material and more Godly in nature,  
 the power that gave the Gods their  
 omnipotence or even the secret of  
 immortality. The donkey had to  
 know. And so he climbed to the very  
 top of his palace, and at the  
 highest point in the highest tower  
 there was a single door. The donkey  
 extended his hand out....

Cheng mimics the motion, but glances down at his head. His face lights up red in embarrassment.

CHENG (CONT'D)  
 Well, uh, he couldn't actually do  
 that because he realized that he  
 had hooves, and couldn't open the  
 door.

The Townspeople break out laughing once more. Cheng seems disraught for the moment, until....

The Boy lies on the floor, laughing his head off. Cheng stands up straighter: they think it's part of the act.

CHENG (CONT'D)  
 So instead of sliding it open, he  
 turned around, raised his two back  
 feet, and slammed them against the  
 door, knocking it down. He stepped  
 into the room and what he saw shook  
 him to his core.

Cheng eyes the audience: the crowd is still and silent. The Boy's eyes are wide with awe. Cheng glances down at the ground, his brow furrowed: where does this go now?

Eyes back on the crowd: they're waiting.

A small smile plays on Cheng's lips as an idea hits him.

CHENG  
 (breaking character)  
 Well, it is getting late, and I  
 should probably go set up camp in  
 the woods, seeing as I don't have  
 any food or bedding for the night-

The Townspeople roar in frustration. An INNKEPER (50s) steps out of the crowd.

(CONTINUED)

INNKEEPER

Listen, young man, I'll put you up for the night.

CHENG

You misunderstand, I don't have the money.

INNKEEPER

Free of charge.

CHENG

A generous offer. But I should go out and find some food, so I won't go to bed with a stomachache-

The Rice Vendor steps forward.

RICE VENDOR

I would be more than happy to boil you dinner and breakfast if you finish your story, traveller.

SHOUTS OF AGREEMENT.

CHENG

Ok, Ok. Thank you for your kindness. Now, where was I?

INNKEEPER

The room at the top of the tower!

CHENG

Ah, yes, of course. So he climbs to the top, slides open the door-

BOY

He knocks it down!

CHENG

Yes, he destroys it, and inside the room he sees....

THE TOWNSPEOPLE.

THE BOY.

Cheng, furrowing his brow again. It raises as it finally hits him.

CHENG (CONT'D)

He sees it, exactly what the Gods told him.

(CONTINUED)

RICE VENDOR

What, what?

Cheng looks back at the Townspeople, his expression melancholy.

CHENG

Knowledge, a very special type of knowledge. The future. His future. How one day he will lose everything he has, his power, his respect, his intelligence. The donkey may modestly refer to his royal position as a "servant to the people," but that name will become incredibly true in a way he could not imagine. He will become a slave for the people he once ruled, and will forever know hardship and suffering because of his disobedience to the Gods.

The Townspeople are silent once more. They look at each other mysteriously, their emotions confused and uncertain.

CHENG (CONT'D)

That's, um... that's the story.

The Townspeople linger for another moment before dissipating, quietly talking to themselves and giving Cheng strange looks.

Cheng looks to the Boy, who looks into the middle distance in introspection.

The Innkeeper approaches Cheng. He opens his mouth.

INNKEEPER

That....

(beat)

Let's get you to your room.

Cheng nods, his excitement gone. As he follows the innkeeper, his steps become heavier as exhaustion hits him.

INT. INN BEDROOM - DAWN

Cheng rolls onto the side of his mat. He opens his eyes slowly. His face fills with surprise, then calms once he remembers the night before.

The night before...

(CONTINUED)

Disappointment hits Cheng like a truck. Cheng rolls onto his face, and thuds his head against the floor. He lets out a long groan of defeat.

Cheng climbs to his feet and walks over to the nearest window. He opens it and...

All the Townspeople, including the Boy and the Rice Vendor are gathered outside waiting for him. They immediately clamor at his sight.

BOY

I stayed up all night thinking  
about the story!

RICE VENDOR

Do you have any more tales from  
your village?

Off Cheng's expression.

MONTAGE SEQUENCE

EXT. BUSTLING TOWN MARKET - DAY

-Cheng gestures as he tells another story, the townspeople forming a large circle around him.

-The Townspeople offer him gifts, including food and coins.

EXT. BUSTLING TOWN - DAY

-Cheng waves goodbye to the Townspeople behind him as he leaves the village.

EXT. FOREST - DUSK

-Cheng is ambushed by a group of Bandits. They eye his bag of coins.

EXT. BANDIT CAMPFIRE - NIGHT

-The Bandits gape at Cheng like children as Cheng tells a story around the campfire.

EXT. GREAT CITY GATE - DAY

-Cheng, now sprouting wispy facial hair, stares upward at the massive gate protecting the city. Around him, tens of Traders, Soldiers, and livestock travel in and out of the city. Cheng stands amidst the chaos, fascinated.

EXT. GREAT CITY MARKET - DAY

-Cheng entertains Traders and their Customers. They toss coins into his sack as he completes another story.

EXT. GREAT CITY STREETS - DAY

-From a parallel street, we see Cheng walking through the city. He briefly disappears as he passes by large building. When he reappears on the other end, his wispy facial hair has transformed into a goatee. Cheng is in his late 20s now.

EXT. SNOWY HILLS - DUSK

-Cheng huddles his robe as he trudges through the snow. An Armored Horseman rides to him, and points his spear at him.

EXT. MILITARY CAMP - NIGHT

-Cheng struts in front of a group of Soldiers, confidently mimicing the characters of his stories. The Armored Horseman reclines, trying to hide his laughter. Cheng catches him and flashes him a smile.

EXT. MILITARY CAMP - DAWN

-An arrow hits the pole of a tent. Cheng awakens to see the Soldiers battleing Huns. Lying on the ground is the Armored Horseman, dead.

EXT. SNOWY HILLS - DAWN

-Cheng glances over his shoulder at the encampment before pressing forward towards the rising sun.

EXT. PALACE DINING ROOM - NIGHT

-Cheng, sporting a thick yet trimmed beard and wearing elegant robes, performs for the Lord of the palace. His movements are less wild and more controlled and subtle, but still retains his previous confidence. He's in his mid 30s now.

END MONTAGE.

EXT. BEACH - DUSK

Cheng's foot delicately eases onto the sand. It stays there, its toes wiggling slightly as it feels every individual pebble.

Cheng looks down at the sand.

CHENG

Hm.

Cheng tilts up at the endless blue sea. He moves towards the water with the same delicate reservedness.

Cheng stands on the wet sand where the tide comes in. As the water approaches, he unconsciously takes a step back with his right foot.

The water rushes onto his left foot. A look that's a mixture of surprise and comfort plays on Cheng's face.

Cheng eases down onto the sand and lets the water flow around him. He smiles.

He gazes at the crystal blue sea. He closes his eyes, feeling the sea breeze and the flow of water...

For a brief moment, the image of Young Jin's first conversation with Cheng flashes on screen.

Cheng's eyes open as the memory hits him. He smiles and his body relaxes further.

Another flash of a previous scene: Jin's face in anger.

Cheng's smile falters. Cheng clutches a handful of sand in his right hand. As the tide rushes in and out, it carries the sand away.

Cheng looks to his right: no villages, no castles, nothing.

Cheng looks to his left: nothing.

(CONTINUED)

Cheng's fingers stroke his beard as he thinks, but this only troubles him further.

Cheng looks back at the setting sun, at the direction he came from.

Back to Jin: She's dabbing the dirt off Cheng's face. She giggles.

Cheng lets out a determined breath and begins heading west.

FADE TO BLACK

EXT. DESERT - DAY

FADE IN:

A speck stands on the horizon in the middle of the desert. It is unclear whether it is human, animal, or even a living thing.

We're close, uncomfortably close. The figure breathes heavily, its rasp betraying its dehydration.

His robes are tattered, with colors, patterns, and symbols that transcend cultures.

This is OLD CHENG (80s).

He stops, attempting to catch his breath. His hand shakes as he reaches for his canteen. Using his other hand, he pulls it open. He lifts the canteen over his head, arching his head towards the sky:

Nothing. The canteen is empty.

Old Cheng doesn't want to accept it. He wriggles the canteen furiously.

Nothing.

A deep inhale from Cheng. He hacks uncontrollably.

His coughing stops as he sees something in the distance.

Jin. Clear as day. Just as he last saw her, but with a smile on her face. Just a few steps away....

Old Cheng reaches out his hand helplessly.

(CONTINUED)

OLD CHENG  
(quivering)  
Jin.

Old Cheng collapses. Jin is nowhere to be found.

Old Cheng is completely motionless.

In the distance, sand kicks up. A sandstorm coming in?

No. A horse, pale as milk.

INT. ASIM'S HOME - DAY

Old Cheng lies on a mat. The wrinkles on his face tell a story unto itself.

A tan hand enters the frame, and gently pats Old Cheng.

ASIM (O.S.)  
(in Egyptian)  
Wake up, old man.

Old Cheng groans, but doesn't wake.

ASIM (O.S.)  
Come now.

Old Cheng stirs. As his eyes slowly open, sand tumbles off.

A tanned face smiles warmly down at Cheng. This is ASIM (30s, handsome).

ASIM  
I was starting to worry I brought  
home a corpse.

OLD CHENG  
Water....

Old Cheng raises up his hands. Asim nods and reaches behind him. He produces a canteen and puts it to Old Cheng's lips.

Old Cheng gulps it down desperately, only for the canteen to be pulled away.

ASIM  
No! Too much is bad, old man.

He reaches the canteen out to Old Cheng. Old Cheng grabs for it but Asim pulls it back.

(CONTINUED)

ASIM

Slow. Slow.

Old Cheng doesn't understand in his dehydrated state. Asim studies his face for a moment.

ASIM (CONT'D)

(in English)

Slow.

Old Cheng's hands fall back down.

OLD CHENG

You... you speak....

Old Cheng starts to drift into unconsciousness.

ASIM

No, no, drink.

Asim puts the canteen to Old Cheng's lips. Old Cheng begins to drink, controlling his swallows. He slowly revives himself.

ASIM (CONT'D)

There we go. Guess this is your first time in the desert?

OLD CHENG

No... once before. Told myself I'd never do it again.

Asim chuckles.

ASIM

You're a tough old buzzard, aren't you?

Old Cheng slowly rises into a sitting position. His head lurches forward but Asim catches him.

ASIM (CONT'D)

You're alright, you got it.

OLD CHENG

Thank you... thank you. Who do I owe my thanks?

ASIM

I am Asim, I am the lord of this house.

(CONTINUED)

OLD CHENG

Ah.

ASIM

You're from that land far to the east, aren't you?

OLD CHENG

Yes. Yes, I am.

Old Cheng's more awake now.

ASIM

(laughing)

Well, what are you doing all the way out here?

OLD CHENG

I've been... telling stories.

Asim laughs a booming laugh.

ASIM

Stories? You came all the way out here to tell stories?

OLD CHENG

And to collect them, if there are any.

ASIM

And that's what you do, eh? How do you survive?

OLD CHENG

Off the kindness of my audience. Sometimes they feed me, sometimes they shelter me, other times they give me nothing but their attention.

ASIM

And that's enough for you?

Old Cheng nods. Asim sits back. He ponders for a moment.

ASIM (CONT'D)

Why?

Old Cheng shrugs.

(CONTINUED)

OLD CHENG

I enjoy it.

Asim laughs.

ASIM

Yes. But why?

OLD CHENG

I've come to believe that everything in this world has a story, and by listening to those stories we learn. We learn about people, we learn about emotions, we learn about our own humanity, and sometimes we even learn about the cosmos. When I travel to somewhere I've never been before and meet people I never knew existed, I learn about life. And when I tell my own stories, they're no longer the fantasies I dreamt up in my youth, but tales filled with truths I've experienced.

ASIM

And what have you experienced?

Old Cheng chuckles.

OLD CHENG

I'm afraid the answer to that question is shockingly simpler than what you'd think. I've seen the kindness in people and their cruelty, I've felt love and I've felt hatred. I've met people who are as shallow as a stream and others as deep as an ocean. But the truth is there's too much to see in a single life, and that what you do see will be completely different than what others see. The land I've walked is a single grain on a stalk in a field of crops, and I'm grateful for the experiences I've had because if I had stayed where I was I wouldn't have realized just how small I am. And when I tell my stories, I like to think that I'm teaching my audience about the world as well as entertaining them.

Asim leans back, mulling over his words.

(CONTINUED)

ASIM

I see.

A realization dawns on Old Cheng.

OLD CHENG

How do you speak my language?

ASIM

I had a servant from your land.

Old Cheng's eyes brighten.

OLD CHENG

You did?

ASIM

A woman, with eyes like I've never seen.

Old Cheng leans forward.

OLD CHENG

Green?

Asim looks surprised.

ASIM

Yes. We called her Nebu, but before then she called herself-

OLD CHENG

Jin.

Asim tilts his head to the side.

ASIM

You knew her?

OLD CHENG

(faster, almost frantic)

A long time ago, she's the one who finally woke me up. Where is she?

Asim shakes his head sadly.

ASIM

She passed away last night.

Old Cheng looks like he was hit by a freight train.

(CONTINUED)

OLD CHENG

Oh.

ASIM

I'm sorry.

Old Cheng looks introapective. Asim's words don't register with him.

ASIM (CONT'D)

For what it's worth, she seemed content here. She had a traveled a lot like you, and she was glad she seen what she had, and when we found her she was ready to settle.

Old Cheng comes out of his trance. He smiles weakly.

OLD CHENG

I should have known better.

Old Cheng gets up.

ASIM

Where are you going? You're more than welcome to stay.

OLD CHENG

I've realized that if I stay somewhere for too long, I grow roots and never want to leave.

ASIM

To be frank, your time for adventure has passed.

Old Cheng chuckles.

OLD CHENG

Perhaps you're right. I guess I always figured that if I were to settle down, I'd want it to be with my best friend.

EXT. ASIM'S HOME - DAY

Cheng steps out. Asim's home sits on the outskirts of an Egyptian town. Cheng looks at the town, then turns behind him.

The desert, its golden sands stretching forward endlessly.

Old Cheng heads toward the desert.

(CONTINUED)

Asim comes out of the house.

ASIM

Old man! The town is that way!

Old Cheng waves behind him but doesn't respond.

EXT. DESERT - DAY

Old Cheng stumbles forward. Around him the wind picks up, blowing sand around him.

Eventually, Old Cheng stops. He looks to his left and gazes at the sight with awe:

A sandstorm as tall as a mountain is coming right towards him.

Old Cheng kneels down and watches it approach.

OLD CHENG

There was once a foolish boy who didn't understand a thing.

THE SANDSTORM MOVES CLOSER.

OLD CHENG (CONT'D)

And one day, he met someone who made him realize his ignorance. And he embarked on a journey to overcome that ignorance and to find the one who had shown him the truth, and thank her with every fiber of his being.

The sandstorm hits him. Old Cheng closes his eyes and turns his head towards the sand.

THE HOWLING OF THE WIND.

OLD CHENG'S FACE.

JIN (O.S.)

And he did.

The howl of the wind disappears. Old Cheng looks up...

There she is.

Jin stands amidst the storm, but the sand flies slowly around them, shining gold.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

90.

She smiles and reaches down to him. His wrinkled hand takes hers...

Cheng rises, his face young. He smiles at her.

The sand around them turns to a blinding white...

FADE OUT.

THE END