



BLOODLIST 2009



BLOODLIST 2010



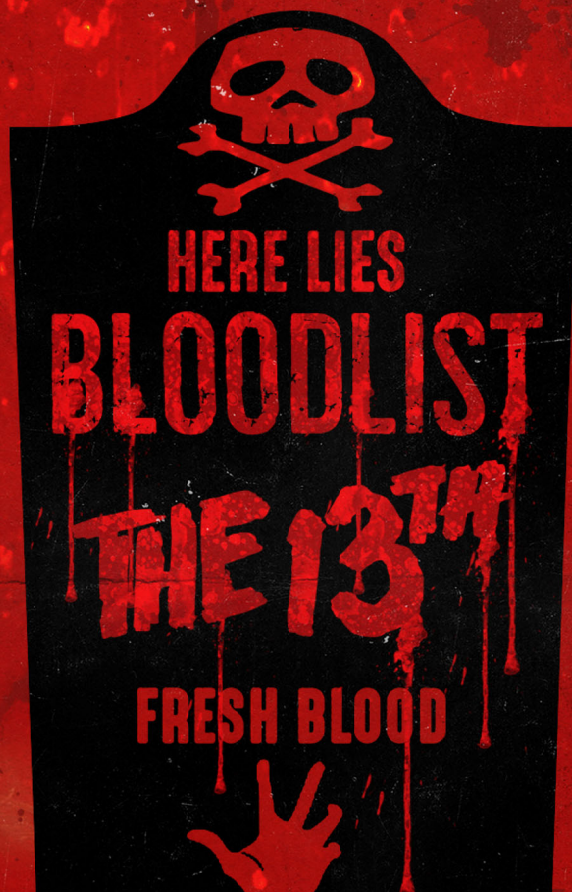
BLOODLIST 2011



BLOODLIST 2012



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BLOODLIST 2019



BLOODLIST 2020

GODDESS OF MERCY

Written by

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DARKNESS

Red light flickers in a stygian void, getting brighter. Over time, the crimson orb takes shape: a paper lantern slathered in Taiwanese brush strokes. It sways in the breeze, a candle swallowed in its folds.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. JIUFEN - NIGHT

A bucolic village nestles into the Taiwanese mountains. More red lanterns dangle from overhead canopies of wire and twine.

The town is a place out of time. Hardwood structures, mostly cafes and shops, dot its rolling hills -- so fragile, like a porcelain vase balanced on the crook of a windowsill.

Overlooking the sea.

JIUFEN, TAIWAN

Thunder rumbles above.

Rain beats against the hillside.

INT. KONGBU'S HOUSE - KITCHEN - NIGHT

A CUP OF TEA

Sits on a table. Lukewarm. Cigarette ash smears its saucer.

A HACKSAW

Settles at the table's edge. Blotches of rust and dried blood decay its crooked teeth, and haggard bits of tape entwine its handle. A shadow looms nearby.

LI KONGBU (35) relaxes at the table. Smoking a cigarette, he stares at his demonic instrument. Pensive, handsome, he is a flat presence, a man so stoic that he threatens to evaporate.

Kongbu lifts the tea to his lips. He drinks. He returns the empty cup to its saucer and dashes his cigarette on its rim.

OUT THE KITCHEN WINDOW

Rain wails behind an overgrown wall of Oolong trees. The storm billows, and lightning flares. A cringe of thunder.

His hacksaw quakes.

Kongbu looks to a broken clock above his stove. Its slender hands quiver back and forth, locked in a permanent midnight.

Back and forth...

Kongbu emerges from his torpor. Stands.

He unbuttons his shirt. Takes it off. Without a sound, he removes his pants, his underwear, his socks.

Naked, completely naked, he lifts the hacksaw from his table and goes upstairs.

As he goes, we see deep scars faded into his back. Old scars.

INT. KONGBU'S HOUSE - BATHROOM - NIGHT

Kongbu stands in the doorway, clutching his hacksaw. In front of him --

A DEAD WOMAN

Lies tangled in the bathtub. Her skin is pale; her tongue is swollen. Little bruises dot her neck. Death by strangulation.

The plastic shower curtain muffles a look of absolute horror burrowed in her lifeless eyes.

Kongbu puts his hacksaw in the sink. He crouches before the dead woman and unbuttons her collared shirt, peeling it off like butterfly wings.

A GOLD NECKLACE

Drapes around the woman's neck. Its heart-shaped charm tucks into the notch of her collar bone.

Kongbu removes her necklace. Its charm lies crumpled in his palm, fragile. His gaze then lifts, inevitably, back to the woman. He runs the shower. Water flecks her bare torso, her bloated corpse.

Hanging the necklace from his sink faucet, Kongbu retrieves his hacksaw and vanishes behind that plastic shower curtain.

We see nothing.

We hear everything: a distinct cadence of SHREDDING FLESH.

EXT. WOODS - NIGHT

A FLASHLIGHT glints in the storm.

It sweeps through a maze of rotten trees.

Kongbu plods down the flooding hillside, a black canvas sack draped over his shoulder. He dips his flashlight low. Hidden.

EXT. SEASIDE - NIGHT

Kongbu carries the canvas sack out to a rocky shoreline. A steep cavalcade leads down to the water, a ceaseless empty.

He flings his sack into the ocean.

SPLASH.

The sack floats in the ocean, undulating with the frothing tide, before a wave sweeps down and shoves it out of sight.

Kongbu turns off his flashlight. Clad in darkness, he climbs the hillside. Soon, he's a vague shape in the gnarled forest.

Scaling higher.

CREDITS ROLL as he ascends, and we --

CUT TO:

INSERT

A DEAD DOVE lies crumpled on the ground, its neck snapped, its wings folded in an awkward angle. It's been strangled.

INSERT

A TEENAGE BOY'S HANDS -- bound with dishrags -- hang from a brass bedpost. The rags dig deep into his wrists.

INSERT

A LEATHER BELT lies, like a snake, on the hardwood floor. Blood licks its buckle.

CUT TO:

EXT. JIUFEN - OLD TOWN - DAY

The rain has stopped, and water mattes the doused lanterns.

Mist floods the forest. Our rustic village emerges from the white haze like spilled tea soaked through a canvas blanket.

DOWN BELOW

KONGBU muddles down the cobblestone street, bundled in a tan trench-coat, packed as tight as an overstuffed shopping bag.

He carries a violin in a leather case.

No cars. Everyone walks. Kongbu squeezes through the crowd and scuttles into a low-lit alley. As he goes, END CREDITS.

INT. MASK SHOP - DAY

A CLAY MASK

Hangs on a wooden post. It's a grotesque depiction -- a human face, pock-marked with fifty grinning mouths. Utter insanity.

Countless other strange masks speckle the wall.

Demons. And monsters.

And Kongbu. He waits in front of the register, avoiding eye-contact with the ominous masks.

The shopkeep -- WU SHUZHEN (22) -- stands at the counter. She wears a smock, smeared with red paint, and her polite, gentle face hides a sweet desperation to be liked.

She inspects the necklace stolen from last night's corpse -- oblivious to its origins.

SHUZHEN

How much did this cost?

KONGBU

Maybe I found it.

SHUZHEN

One of your walks?

KONGBU

Reminded me of you.

Shuzhen gives a smile. She wraps the stolen necklace around her neck and fiddles with its clasp.

SHUZHEN

Could you?

Shuzhen faces the wall. Trusting.

Kongbu fastens the necklace around her throat.

She checks her reflection in a mirror, splaying the heart-shaped charm across her chest.

SHUZHEN
What do you think?

No answer.

SHUZHEN
Kongbu?

KONGBU
... Beautiful.

EXT. TEMPLE - DAY

A rural Buddhist temple. It's built in the style of classic Chinese architecture: sweeping tile roofs and floral motifs.

Kongbu -- continuing his morning -- passes through a curtain of incense smoke and ducks inside.

INT. TEMPLE - VIHARN - DAY

Worshippers crowd the ornate sermon hall. They bow to statues of the Four Heavenly Kings. Some tourists amble near the back of the temple, forgetting to take off their shoes.

KONGBU

Kneels with the worshippers, pressing his palms and forehead to the floor. He does this for each statue, overflowing with reverence. Drawing a breath, he collects his shoes and exits.

INT. MASK SHOP - WORKSHOP - DAY

Shuzhen paints a row of stitches onto a freshly baked mask.

Withdrawing from her work, she steals a look at --

THE GOLD NECKLACE

Sitting in a nearby jewelry box. It lies in a pile of stolen knickknacks -- pearls, broaches, bracelets and diamond rings.

All gifts from her lover.

Shuzhen beams, lost in the jeweled shimmer. Off her face --

CUT TO:

A BEGGAR

Plodding outside, on the outskirts of Jiufen. He's haggard, muddy. Scars and wrinkles carve into his sun-bleached skin.

This man's name -- if he has one -- is WUHAI (50). He carries a cardboard sign, blanketed with sloppy Mandarin:

MAITREYA IS HERE

HAVE WE FORGOTTEN?

END TIMES ARE HERE

Wuhai passes a --

EXT. DOCKYARD - DAY

POLICE LIGHTS flare against the trees.

Nosey dockworkers jostle around a stone path leading down to the oceanfront, all rubbernecking at a crime scene.

A local detective -- CHEN GUANLIN (50) -- waits at the taped line, sipping coffee. He's a large man -- barrel-chested and gruff -- but soft at heart.

ON THE STREET

DETECTIVE LEE MEILING (35) walks past a cavalcade of police cars and mopeds. Lights sculpt her steely face. Cold to the bone, she approaches Guanlin, clipping a badge to her coat.

Wherever she goes, she's clouded by a distinct aura, a vibe that extends from her high heels to the austere look on her face: She doesn't belong here.

GUANLIN

'Morning, partner.

MEILING

When was it found?

Guanlin sighs, giving up on social niceties.

GUANLIN

Dawn. Dock workers found her. Must have washed down the coast.

MEILING

Like the others.

GUANLIN

You can smell it from the street.

DOWN THE ROCKY SHORE

Local police have gathered around a black canvas sack, the same sack that Kongbu dropped in the sea.

MEILING

No sense waiting.

Guanlin shows Meiling down the stairwell. They arrive at the canvas sack. She pulls a pair of cotton gloves from her coat, kneels, and opens the bag.

Guanlin spits coffee into the water.

Everyone blanches...

... Except for her.

GUANLIN

What do you think?

Meiling glances up at --

THE HORIZON

Sharp, black rocks spike behind a dewy malaise.

Suddenly, laughter splits the air. Meiling turns. THE VAGRANT -- WUHAI -- cackles down at her from the railing, a toothless laugh. Meiling watches him for a moment, staring at his sign.

And back to Guanlin:

MEILING

Clear the area.

GUANLIN

(to his men)

You heard her. Get to work.

MEILING

And it's detective. We're not partners anymore.

Sober, Guanlin buries his gaze in his coffee cup.

The beat officers all snap into action. Meiling ignores them. She stays crouched beside the canvas sack.

INT. TEA HOUSE - DAY

An upscale tea house. Local businessmen squeeze together at the tables -- gabbing, working. The place boils with chatter.

ON A STAGE

Kongbu -- wearing a dapper suit -- sits before the guests, tuning his violin. His fingers work tightly, mechanically.

Strings tighten. Wood strains.

Kongbu rests the violin over his shoulder. He starts to play.

The chatter melts away. Soon, he can only hear the sounds of weeping strings, the notes he's playing. He can hear himself.

EXT. TEA HOUSE - ROOFTOP - DAY

Sunset. A purple mirth seeps through Jiufen's narrow alleys and winding streets. Locals fill the walkways, heading home.

KONGBU

Relaxes on the rooftop patio.

He sips tea and smokes a cigarette. Finished with his shift, he watches the commuters. He's silent. Forlorn. Maybe bored.

Then someone catches his eye.

DOWN BELOW

A WOMAN ambles through the neighborhood with a handbag slung around her shoulder. She window-shops at the various stores.

Kongbu can't see her face -- only the top of her head. Long black hair swoops down one side of her neck. Like a serpent.

Or a noose.

The woman glances up, as if sensing his gaze. Her big brown eyes echo up from the street. Lanterns ignite overhead. Red light radiates down to her face, swimming in her white skin.

And to Kongbu, it's as if heaven itself has illuminated her.

We'll later know this woman as YU TIANSHI (20).

For a second, their eyes meet.

Kongbu glances away, discreet, and sips his tea.

When he looks back down at the street, Tianshi has vanished.

Panicking, Kongbu scans the crowd. He finally spots Tianshi walking at the far end of the sidewalk. She rounds a corner.

Struck by a sick inspiration, he downs his drink, grabs his violin, and hurries out.

SERIES - AROUND OLD TOWN

Kongbu emerges from the tea house. He hustles down the street and catches up to Tianshi. Keeping a safe distance, he stalks her through the neighborhood.

EXT. DIVE BAR - NIGHT

Kongbu huddles in the alley outside a sleazy dive bar. Drunks spill over its deck, laughing, fighting. Kongbu ignores them.

Fixated on --

THE WINDOW

Tianshi drinks baijiu (a grain alcohol) at the bar. She's alone. The village moves around her, but she's overlooked.

Overlooked: her chiaroscuro hair.

Overlooked: her flowing white sundress.

She reads a book at the bar -- an old book, leather-bound -- leafing about its dusty pages.

EXT. OLD TOWN - BACKSTREET - NIGHT

The stalking continues.

Tianshi walks home. Jiufen is dark around her, aside from its red lanterns and their oppressive hue.

Down the street, Kongbu follows. His pace slackens, drifting further and further away. Walking in silence.

CRASH.

Tianshi whips around.

Kongbu ducks into a nearby alley, hiding in shadows.

TIANSHI
Someone there?

No answer.

Tianshi clutches her purse.

TIANSHI

Hello?

A PIGEON comes fluttering out of the alley. Mud clings to its feathers. It soars past.

Relaxing, Tianshi approaches her brick apartment building, scrounges some keys from her handbag, and vanishes inside.

Alone now, Kongbu lingers back in the alley.

He exhales a cloud of smoke, watching the door bang shut, wheels twisting in his head.

EXT. MASK SHOP - NIGHT

The mask shop is a two-story building overlooking the vacant cobblestone. Lights are on upstairs. Movement in the windows.

INT. MASK SHOP - LOFT - NIGHT

The bed is small. Kongbu sits -- nude -- at the edge of its mattress. A floor lamp glows against his sweat-soaked torso.

Shuzhen lies behind him. She strokes his back with one hand. Her other holds the heart-shaped necklace to the lamp-light.

SHUZHEN

Seriously. Where'd you get this?

KONGBU

You like it, don't you?

SHUZHEN

There's writing on it.

KONGBU

What's it say?

SHUZHEN

I don't speak English.

KONGBU

Neither do I.

SHUZHEN

Kongbu? Do I make you happy?

Kongbu rises from bed and gets dressed. The building creaks with his every movement. Sounds like it's about to collapse.

SHUZHEN

My friends think you don't exist.

KONGBU

Everyone's invisible here.

SHUZHEN

Invisible?

KONGBU

To themselves.

SHUZHEN

I like the necklace. I do.

KONGBU

Then put it on.

Shuzhen puts on the necklace, allowing its charm to dangle over her bare chest.

SHUZHEN

What, now?

Kongbu looks at her.

Something shifts in his gaze. He's turned on. As he climbs back into bed --

EXT. OLD TOWN - MORNING

Dawn. A PAPER BOY bicycles through Jiufen's coiling streets and alleys. He tosses bundled newspapers onto each doorstep.

A NEWSPAPER

Lands in a puddle. Its front page headline:

JIUFEN WOLF CLAIMS FIFTH VICTIM

EXT. TEMPLE - MORNING

DETECTIVE MEILING waits outside the temple, coat folded in her arms, and watches worshippers file through its entrance.

Shifting from toe to toe, eager to move on, she steels her face under a red umbrella with a patterned canopy.

Checking her watch. Impatient.

Finally GUANLIN steps outside the temple. He meets her on the steps, putting on his shoes.

GUANLIN
'Morning, detective.

MEILING
See the paper?

GUANLIN
People talk.

MEILING
And you're quoted. When did you
speak to the press?

GUANLIN
You might get away with anonymity
in a city like Taipei.

MEILING
But not here?

GUANLIN
People are scared, that's all.

MEILING
The papers aren't helping.

Guanlin lets it go.

GUANLIN
Jiayu said you should come for
dinner sometime.

MEILING
Jiayu?

GUANLIN
My wife.
(then)
You can say no.

MEILING
Maybe.

GUANLIN
Well, think it over, I guess.

MEILING
A little modesty never hurt.

Meiling scowls back at the temple. She can barely hide her contempt. Guanlin follows her eyes.

GUANLIN
Still worship?

MEILING
They're waiting for us.

Meiling slings the red umbrella over her shoulder and walks away. Guanlin strides after her.

GUANLIN
Whatever you say...

INT. CLINIC - AUTOPSY ROOM - DAY

A SEVERED HEAD

Sits on a scale. We recognize the face: It's the woman from Kongbu's bathroom. Her mouth slacks open.

Meiling and Guanlin inspect her head from afar. Guanlin keeps his eyes at his feet. He's not used to something so horrible.

Beyond the head --

The dead woman's severed body lies on a steel gurney. Kongbu chopped her into pieces. Her arms. Her legs. Her wrists and knees. Her neck. It's a sordid, wet mess.

A LOCAL MORTICIAN washes his hands, talking about anything, anything except the atrocity before them:

MORTICIAN
It's the season. They say it'll
rain all week. All month, really.
And how long have you been back,
Meiling?

Meiling says nothing. She stares at the corpse until Guanlin nudges her back to reality.

MEILING
A week.

GUANLIN
Two.

MEILING
Right. Two.

MORTICIAN
Are we any different?

MEILING

Some new faces. Here and there.

MORTICIAN

Say hello to your mother for me,
okay? We've missed her at church.

MEILING

Let's catch up some other time.

MORTICIAN

Ah. Right.

The Mortician, sinking, returns to the dead woman.

MORTICIAN

I recognized her: Tai Yahui. Her
folks live down the road from me.

GUANLIN

Small world.

MORTICIAN

Small town. Checked the lacerations
on her neck. Just like the others.
He uses a hacksaw. No prints. And
the ocean washes away any evidence.

GUANLIN

(to MEILING)

What do you think?

MEILING

We're still waiting.

MORTICIAN

For what?

MEILING

A mistake.

EXT. OLD TOWN - TIANSHI'S BUILDING - DAY

Kongbu looms outside of the nondescript apartment building.
He yawns, bleary-eyed from last night. He's waiting. For...

TIANSHI

She emerges from the apartment building and walks off down
the sidewalk. Strangely, the locals all seem to ignore her.

But not Kongbu. He shoves off and follows her into town.

EXT. OLD TOWN - STREET CAFE - DAY

TIANSHI eats lunch at a bohemian cafe. She skims through her book, tracking its pages with her black-painted fingernails.

A diamond ring shines on her hand. Its gem depicts an eyeball with dark lashes.

OVER HER SHOULDER

Kongbu sips tea inside the cafe. He spies on her through the window -- unnoticed.

Tianshi, finished with her meal, closes her book and gets up. She leaves the cafe. Kongbu starts after her. But he lingers over her table on his way out.

An empty plate. An empty glass.

And a forgotten receipt, Tianshi's receipt, with a lottery number printed above its barcode. He takes it.

EXT. SHADY BUILDING - DAY

WHITE DOVES flutter in the overhead wiring.

Down below, Kongbu keeps stalking Tianshi through Jiufen.

She reaches a weathered building on the village outskirts. It sinks in the mud, darkness cradled in its fragmented windows.

A strand of beads -- adorned with bells and chimes -- hangs on the door. Beneath them is a textile depicting THE NEIJING TU (a Daoist symbol of the human body, or "inner landscape.")

Tianshi slips into the building. The door slams; chimes cast an eerie cacophony out to the street. Kongbu keeps watching.

AN HOUR OR SO LATER

Tianshi ducks out of the building, hands stained black with charcoal. She heads down the sidewalk.

Kongbu follows her.

EXT. OUTSKIRTS - SEASIDE - DAY

Middle of nowhere.

Tianshi sits on a bluff, facing the sea. Her raven-black hair tousles in the wind. It billows and flails around her throat.

IN THE WOODS

Kongbu crouches in a thicket, hidden. He picks at the stolen receipt in his hands, destroying it with a hundred tiny rips.

INT. HOTEL - MEILING'S ROOM - NIGHT

A stuffy village inn.

Meiling lies in bed, alone, legs crossed, combing through a file of photocopied police reports. Her pen runs out of ink.

She roots around her suitcase, searching for a replacement, but fails to find anything. Propping against the headboard, she lets out a dour sigh.

There's no sleeping tonight.

INT. HOTEL - LOBBY - NIGHT

Meiling plods downstairs. She passes the front desk and sits at an old chair, facing the window.

THE CONCIERGE glances up.

CONCIERGE
Everything okay?

MEILING
May I sit down here?

CONCIERGE
Of course. Need anything?

No answer.

CONCIERGE
Ma'am? You're the detective, right?
From Taipan. You're investigating
the killings?

MEILING
I don't need anything. Thank you.

CONCIERGE
I hope you catch him.

Meiling looks at him.

A moment.

MEILING

You from around town?

CONCIERGE

Yes ma'am. Born and raised.

She returns to the window.

MEILING

Me too.

EXT. TIANSHI'S BUILDING - NIGHT

Kongbu huddles back outside Tianshi's building, alone on the sidewalk, as the red lanterns float overhead. He leers at --

AN UPSTAIRS WINDOW

The lights are on. Tianshi moves behind the curtain, her silhouette wisping through a warm glow. Ready for bed.

The lights turn off inside Tianshi's apartment. Darkness spreads in her window, and night unfurls on Kongbu's face.

INT. KONGBU'S HOUSE - BEDROOM - NIGHT

Much later. Kongbu comes in, wet from a shower, and surveys his sparse bedroom.

He roots around in his nightstand and comes up with a razor. Folding his foot over his thigh, Kongbu digs the blade into the flat of his heel, deep enough to hurt.

Blood drip...

Drip...

Drips on the floor...

The blade wedges deeper into Kongbu's foot. He appears to feel nothing, indifferent to agony.

Kongbu knots the bath towel around his foot, soaking up the blood, obscuring a row of identical scars.

The marks string up and down his heel, tidy, like years tallied on a prison cell wall.

EXT. OLD TOWN - DAY

Meiling, exhausted from a long night with no sleep, purchases a bun from a street vendor.

She turns away from the cart when something catches her eye.

DOWN THE ROAD

A crumbling statue settles into the lush hillside. Old stone. It depicts the Pixiu -- a winged lion from ancient mythology.

Meiling watches a butterfly land on its nose.

INT. TEA HOUSE - DAY

Meiling sips a cup of tea and skims the newspaper, reading a recent article about THE JIUFEN WOLF. Upon hearing the sweep of violin strings, she looks up and sees --

KONGBU

Playing a lovely tune on stage.

Kongbu finishes the song, and his shift, and starts packing up his violin case. He's in a hurry -- distracted, occupied.

MEILING

"The fabric of existence weaves
itself whole."

Kongbu, confused.

KONGBU

Sorry?

MEILING

Charles Ives. That was one of his
songs.

KONGBU

Didn't know I was performing for a
connoisseur.

MEILING

I used to play.

KONGBU

Violin?

MEILING

A century ago.

KONGBU

It's a beautiful song. I didn't
write it.

Kongbu starts out. He hesitates and glances back at Meiling,
taking her in for the first time. He flashes a polite smile.

KONGBU

I like your necklace.

Meiling looks down at a silvery necklace wrapped around her
throat, a slender thing, easy not to notice. But he notices.

On that, Kongbu exits the tea-house, a man on a mission.

INT. DIVE BAR - NIGHT

Drunken chatter floods the bar. A PROSTITUTE sashays through
the crowd, searching for a fresh-faced customer. Beads jangle
around her neck. She keeps on strutting, but we stop beside --

KONGBU

Rain-soaked, he sips from a glass of whiskey, puffs on a
cigarette, gazes over at --

TIANSHI

She drinks alone at the bar, paging through her leather-bound
book. A cocktail straw twiddles in her thin fingers. Finished
with drink, she starts out.

Kongbu watches Tianshi draw closer, Tianshi as he sees her:
as an angel, or a dream, or a wash of vapor.

He deliberately raises his glass and --

BUMP.

She knocks his elbow.

Kongbu allows the rocks glass to slip free from his hand. It
shatters on the floor. A puddle of whiskey. Everyone freezes.

TIANSHI

Oh, I'm sorry --

KONGBU

It's okay. I'm fine.

TIANSHI

It was my mistake. I...

She stares at him.

TIANSHI

Sorry. Do I know you?

KONGBU

Ever been to the tea house on
Jishan? I play there.

TIANSHI

No, it's not that. This is silly,
but it feels like I've seen you
before.

KONGBU

Reminds me of something someone
told me today.

TIANSHI

What's that?

KONGBU

"The fabric of existence weaves
itself whole."

TIANSHI

You've got some very thoughtful
friends.

KONGBU

And you?

TIANSHI

I travel. Around.

KONGBU

I've been around.

TIANSHI

It's late.

Kongbu smiles, relaxed, cigarette ember glowing in his eyes,
a lighthouse in the storm. He now possesses a magnetic sort
of calm. He's wearing a mask.

KONGBU

Buy you a drink?

TIANSHI

I've been warned about taking candy
from strangers.

KONGBU

Hey, suit yourself.

After a moment, Tianshi nods.

TIANSHI

A drink.

Kongbu places an order with the busser and slides his violin case onto the floor, making room. Tianshi sits down with him.

KONGBU

So. What do you do?

TIANSHI

Something of a historian.

KONGBU

That's why you're in Jiufen?

TIANSHI

Not quite. I just have a habit of putting myself into bad situations.

KONGBU

Like what?

TIANSHI

Like this.

KONGBU

This?

TIANSHI

Talking to you, a stranger, more or less, in the middle of the night...

KONGBU

But I'm not a stranger. At least, not anymore. Right?

They look at each other. A bar tender delivers two fresh drinks to the table. Kongbu takes his glass and raises it.

KONGBU

Cheers.

They drink.

Tianshi points down at the violin case.

TIANSHI

You should play something.

KONGBU

Here?

TIANSHI

Why not?

KONGBU

I'm not at work.

TIANSHI

Don't you like it? Playing.

KONGBU

Of course I like it.

TIANSHI

Then show me.

KONGBU

Maybe some other time.

TIANSHI

You mean somewhere else.

Kongbu draws back, surprised at her forwardness. This is too easy, but he can't resist. A thin smile creeps over his face.

EXT. KONGBU'S HOUSE - LATER THAT NIGHT

Running in the rain. Kongbu leads Tianshi down the street. The road floods. Dirty. Old Town sinks into the distance.

Kongbu's house rises in the woods. It's an unassuming cottage with a stone-shingled roof. The forest shines in its windows.

Kongbu guides Tianshi, a little drunk, to the doorstep. They laugh, fleeing the storm. He digs for his keys. She screams:

TIANSHI

Hurry!

INT. KONGBU'S HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

Kongbu shows Tianshi into his home. She shakes water from her hair and looks around.

TIANSHI

You live alone?

KONGBU

My folks aren't around anymore --
so, yes. It's my family's house.

TIANSHI

Is it haunted?

KONGBU
Take your coat?

Tianshi allows Kongbu to remove her coat. He hangs it on a rack and walks to the kitchen.

TIANSHI
I still owe you a drink.

KONGBU
It was on me.

TIANSHI
Not that one. The other one.

KONGBU
Get comfortable.

TIANSHI
Will you play?

KONGBU
Play what?

Tianshi points to the violin.

TIANSHI
Maybe something romantic.

KONGBU
One second.

Kongbu vanishes into the kitchen. Meanwhile, Tianshi kicks off her shoes and inspects his house.

The place shoulders a burden of meticulous organization. But the furniture is old, and dust coats the bookshelves, and it all betrays the slightest hint of foreboding.

INT. KONGBU'S HOUSE - KITCHEN - NIGHT

Hidden from view, Kongbu opens a drawer and fetches a pair of leather gloves. He puts them on with great ceremony.

As he stretches his fingers --

TIANSHI (O.S.)
What're you doing in there?

Kongbu sweats. He faces the doorway, resting his hands at his side. It's time: It's now or never.

TIANSHI (O.S.)

Kongbu?

Tianshi's shadow nudges through the doorway.

She enters.

TIANSHI

Hey. What're you...

Tianshi lays eyes on the leather gloves. She looks up at --

KONGBU'S FACE

Gone is his charisma. His joy. His romance. Overhead lights cast deep shadows beneath his brow. His face calcifies with an unrestrained malevolence; this is the gaping maw of Satan.

TIANSHI

What's going on?

No answer.

TIANSHI

Kongbu? Kongbu, what is this?
What're you doing?

No answer.

TIANSHI

This isn't funny.

Still, no answer.

TIANSHI

Fine. I'll go.

Before Tianshi can react --

Kongbu dives and grabs her by the neck. Tianshi thrashes in his arms. She tries to scream, but his hands clamp down her throat. Her voice withers.

He pins her against the wall, strangling her.

Tianshi's legs lift off the floor. She kicks.

Nothing works. He's done this many times. He holds her tight, crushing her neck, drinking in every... last... gasp of life.

Her eyes roll back.

She spasms.

Kongbu blushes red with ecstasy. He lowers her to the ground, removes his gloves, and catches his breath.

Turning away from her, he fills a tea kettle and places it over the stove -- all part of his ritual. Kongbu pulls a teacup from the shelf and drops a hibiscus bundle inside.

He lights a cigarette, waiting for the kettle to sing.

OVER HIS SHOULDER

Tianshi splays on the kitchen tile.

But then... after a moment... she starts to MOVE.

Kongbu doesn't notice.

Tianshi -- her windpipe cracked -- nudges to her feet. She pulls a frying pan off the wall and teeters towards Kongbu.

CRACK.

Tianshi drives the frying pan -- hard -- into his face. Kongbu drops to his knees, spitting blood. She attacks.

KONGBU'S CIGARETTE

Hits the tile and rolls into the shadows.

Kongbu collects himself on the floor. He blitzes to his feet and tackles Tianshi. They both slam onto the kitchen counter.

He holds her down, forcing her head into the sink.

Tianshi writhes.

Behind them, THE KETTLE WHISTLES.

Kongbu runs the faucet. Water splashes Tianshi's face. She screams over it, voice warping through her broken windpipe:

TIANSHI
FING ZEI TAIPING QUAN. FING ZEI
TAIPING QUAN. FING ZEI TAIPING --

Kongbu watches her -- confused. He doesn't recognize these words. They're the script of some dead language, long lost.

Tianshi chants them as the water rises around her head.

Kongbu keeps her pressed in the sink. Soon the water eclipses her face, spilling into her mouth. The words cease. Her head warps beneath the water -- drowning.

Her mouth keeps moving.

TIANSHI
*FING ZEI TAIPING QUAN. FING ZEI
 TAIPING QUAN. FING ZEI --*

Tianshi stops.

Dead.

Kongbu releases his grip.

Tianshi slips out of the sink and slides to the floor, face sopping. The water overflows and lands on her lifeless back.

Kongbu finally registers his WHISTLING TEA KETTLE. He pulls it off the stove-top and pours a cup.

HIS CIGARETTE

Still lies in the shadows. The water overtakes it, snuffing out its ember.

INT. KONGBU'S HOUSE - BATHROOM - NIGHT

Kongbu places Tianshi in the bathtub. His ritual proceeds as normal: He removes his clothes and tosses them into the hall.

He retrieves his hacksaw.

And he descends on Tianshi, enveloping himself in the plastic shower curtain.

THE HACKSAW

Grinds into Tianshi's bare leg, ripping through her skin and separating her knee at its ligament. Blood. Blood everywhere.

EXT. WOODS - SEASIDE - NIGHT

Kongbu arrives at the edge of the forest. He hurls a canvas bag -- filled with Tianshi's defiled remains -- into the sea.

SPLASH.

Kongbu hangs back, watching the canvas bag sink.

TIANSHI'S RING

Is cradled in his palm. Its eye gazes up at him, penetrating.

Kongbu turns off his flashlight. He returns into the forest, due back for his house.

INT. KONGBU'S HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

Kongbu comes in. He closes the door. He locks it. He drops his flashlight on the mantle and checks his watch: **3:40 AM.**

INT. KONGBU'S HOUSE - KITCHEN - NIGHT

Kongbu gazes at the massive puddle of water spread across the kitchen floor. Time for work. He throws down some rags.

Mopping up.

EXT. WOODS - NIGHT

We creep, unmoored, through the forest behind Kongbu's house. Rain flecks the withered branches. It's dark. And it's foggy.

IN THE BACKGROUND

A dark shape rises from the mud -- a massive, shadowy figure.

But it's too far away -- too vague -- for us to decipher. It simply stands there.

INT. KONGBU'S HOUSE - BATHROOM - NIGHT

KONGBU'S HACKSAW

Lies in the sink. Fresh blood drenches its rusty teeth.

Beyond it, Kongbu kneels before the tub. Blood and viscera paint his walls. He scrubs down the porcelain tub, working through the night. Tireless.

As he cleans the bathroom --

SIGH...

Kongbu stops. A strange whisper echoes in his house. Doesn't sound like lightning. Or rain. Maybe a trick of the ears. He returns to scrubbing.

SIGHHH...

Kongbu squints out the doorway, into his pitch-black hall. The house is silent. Until...

SIGHHHHHH...

Kongbu stands. He pulls his hacksaw from the sink and walks out into the --

INT. KONGBU'S HOUSE - UPSTAIRS HALLWAY - NIGHT

Kongbu lingers in the hallway. His blue latex gloves pierce the darkness. He goes to the edge of the stairs and peers --

INTO THE KITCHEN

A shadow creeps across the floor. It sways back and forth.

Back and forth...

KONGBU
Who's there?

INT. KONGBU'S HOUSE - KITCHEN - NIGHT

Kongbu steps into his kitchen.

It's empty. False alarm. He starts back upstairs, back to work, when something catches his eye.

A PENDANT LAMP

Swings over the dining table as if tapped. Kongbu stares at the lamp, a bad feeling churning in his gut. Can't place it.

He returns upstairs.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. TEMPLE - VIHARN - DAY

A light rain tap-taps against the temple roof. Kongbu kneels before the Four Heavenly Kings. Worshippers crowd around him.

Kongbu -- finished with his prayer -- stands up. He offers one final bow to the statues and starts out. Then he stops.

ACROSS THE VIHARN

Worshippers spill through the vestibule. A SHAPE waits among them. It wears frayed black robes and a crimson Hannya mask.

ITS MASK

Eyes wrench into a hateful glare.

SIGH...

Kongbu gazes at the strange entity. The other worshippers seem not to notice. They pour past, moving into the temple.

A whoosh of incense sweeps through the room.

When it clears, the apparition has vanished. Into thin air.

Kongbu gazes at the spot where the entity once stood. Then a guest brushes past, pulling him back to reality. Kongbu bows his head and exits.

INSERT - DREAM

The ocean. Moonlight ripples in the sea. The water appears pristine, reflecting overhead cosmos, reflecting emptiness.

Slowly the sea starts to part, as if birthing something. As the water spreads --

INT. HOTEL - LOBBY - DAY

Meiling -- having spent another night in the lobby -- jolts awake in her chair.

THE CONCIERGE looms above her. Frenetic.

CONCIERGE

Ma'am?

MEILING

What time is it?

CONCIERGE

The station called. They found another one.

Meiling looks at the Concierge -- awake now. She rises from her chair and hurries upstairs, thinking fast, moving faster.

The Concierge calls after her:

CONCIERGE

What should I tell them?

MEILING

Don't touch anything.

EXT. POLICE STATION - DAY

The beggar -- WUHAI -- ambles down the sidewalk, scrounging coins from the gutter. Rain rattles against his exposed ribs.

He mutters to himself, passing --

A TINY POLICE PRECINCT

Smaller than a coffee shop. It looks more like a fire-watch outpost than a real police station.

INT. POLICE STATION - DAY

KONGBU'S BLACK BAG

Sits on a desk. An overhead ceiling fan ripples through its frayed canvas lining. Lumps and bulges echo inside the bag.

Tianshi's severed limbs, head, and torso.

Guanlin looks down at the bag. The other police officers -- a milieu of podunk locals -- gather around him.

Meiling stands with Guanlin. She wears yesterday's clothes. Her hair is still wet from a quick shower -- tied in a bun.

GUANLIN

Wanna do the honors?

Meiling dons her cotton gloves. She unties the canvas bag's drawstrings and tugs it open.

Nothing at first.

Then...

A WHITE DOVE

Bursts out of the bag.

Meiling and Guanlin flinch and stagger backwards.

The dove is completely dry, despite having been found in the ocean. It flaps across the room and lands on an opened door, looking down at the Jiufen police force. Inquisitive. Silent.

Nobody moves.

Nobody knows what to do.

GUANLIN

Is that --

Before Guanlin can finish, a SWARM OF DOVES explodes out of the canvas bag. Hundreds of them. They bluster around the room, squawking, panicking, tearing at the walls and windows.

Everyone hits the deck.

Meiling shields herself from the onslaught.

MEILING

Open a door!

Guanlin takes Meiling's lead. He crawls with her across the station -- through the chaos -- and they reach the entrance.

Opening the door.

Daylight pours into the station. The doves -- sensing it -- all charge towards the opened doorway. They rocket outside.

EXT. POLICE STATION - DAY

The doves soar from Jiufen's police station and arc towards the sky. They blend together into an swirling, white column.

Meiling and Guanlin stagger out.

They watch the bevy rise higher into the sky. Soon the birds mix with grey clouds, looming above the village. Flying away.

Gone.

Meiling lets out a breath. She sits on the sidewalk, dabbing blood off her cheek.

Guanlin stays standing.

GUANLIN

What was that?

MEILING

I don't know.

They stop talking. Guanlin returns into the station, checking on his men. Meiling hangs back. She watches the bevy fly off.

DOWN THE SIDEWALK

Wuhai catches a white feather between his hands. He holds it up and laughs -- childlike glee.

INT. TEA HOUSE - DAY

Kongbu plays his violin to the tea house guests. He scans the room as his bow glides through the strings.

There's a dark bruise on his forehead from where the frying pan struck his skull. Kongbu ignores its throbbing presence.

THROUGH A WINDOW

Kongbu spots his reflection in the glass. Looking past it. He spots a YOUNG WOMAN hustling in the rain. She's pretty. Prim.

Soft skin. His type: a new victim.

As Kongbu tracks her down the sidewalk --

SILENCE.

Kongbu looks down at his violin. He slides his bow over the strings, but they make no noise.

The tea house has become silent. Its guests laugh and go about their lives, but no sound accompanies them. Just a subtle hum -- like sounds of the sea.

KONGBU

Hello?

Nobody notices Kongbu.

Nobody hears him.

KONGBU

What's going on?

Nothing. Kongbu nervously climbs down from the stage and walks among the silent tables. The guests all ignore him.

Kongbu approaches TWO BUSINESSMEN.

KONGBU

Can you hear me? Can either of you
hear me? Hello?

The Businessmen keep talking.

Kongbu puts his hand between them and flails it around. The men don't notice. It's as if Kongbu's invisible. Or a ghost.

Starting to panic, he raises his voice:

KONGBU

Listen to me. LISTEN.

Nothing. Kongbu yanks a hot kettle off the table and empties it into a Businessman's lap. Steam rises in the boiled water.

But the Businessman still doesn't notice. He continues talking with his partner, laughing at some silent joke.

EXT. TEA HOUSE - DAY

Kongbu staggers outside in a daze. He moves through the locals and grabs them by the shoulders.

KONGBU
Hello? Can you hear me? Please.
Please tell me. Please. Please!

The locals all ignore Kongbu. And the village is dead silent aside from the uncanny sounds of crashing waves. White noise.

KONGBU
CAN ANYBODY HEAR ME?

Kongbu spots a WHITE DOVE at the edge of the sidewalk. It watches him -- tilting its head left and right -- curious.

KONGBU
Can... Can...

The dove spreads its wings and flies off.

As it vaults overhead -- vanishing into a cat's cradle of clotheslines -- the ocean noise dithers away.

... And sound returns to the neighborhood.

Kongbu mutters to himself, disoriented, and squints through the clotheslines. He backpedals.

A PASSERBY bumps past him.

PASSERBY
Watch out.

KONGBU
Uh. Sorry.

A SCREAM splits the air.

Kongbu whirls and faces the tea house. Through its window, the BUSINESSMAN writhes in agony. He's scalded by the tea.

EXT. TEA HOUSE - ROOFTOP - DAY

End of the shift.

Kongbu sits on the roof, sipping tea. He rolls Tianshi's ring between his fingertips as waning sunlight glistens its facet.

As he looks at the ring, a nauseating sensation sweeps over him, a vision passing in his mind --

HIS VISION

The ocean. Moonlight ripples in the sea. The water appears pristine, reflecting overhead cosmos. Reflecting emptiness.

Slowly the sea starts to part, as if birthing something.

His vision is identical to Meiling's nightmare.

BACK TO REALITY

Kongbu emerges from his daydream. He closes his fist around Tianshi's ring and stows it in his pocket. Finishing his tea.

JIAYU (PRE-LAP)

And you two were...

INT. GUANLIN'S HOUSE - DINING ROOM - NIGHT

Inside a rowhouse in downtown Jiufen. It's cramped, but the antique furniture and tacky wallpaper carry a certain charm.

Meiling joins Guanlin and his wife -- JIAYU (40) -- for dinner. Jiayu is a kind soul. She's a simple person with simpler needs.

MEILING

Partners. We were partners.

GUANLIN

She came aboard when the last guy quit. It was a natural pairing.

JIAYU

Guanlin always has such nice things to say about you. About back then.

GUANLIN

Good times.

MEILING
Good times, right.

JIAYU
Why'd you leave?

MEILING
It's a long story.

GUANLIN
Not really. She got promoted.

MEILING
I was offered a spot in Taipei,
homicide.

GUANLIN
She was clicking her heels when she
walked out the door.

MEILING
It was a job you take.

GUANLIN
You see, Meiling never cared much
for Jiufen.

JIAYU
Funny. I couldn't imagine life
anywhere else in the universe.

MEILING
Statistically speaking, it's highly
probable.

JIAYU
I'm not sure what you mean.

MEILING
Forget it.

Everyone finishes their dinner in an awkward silence.

EXT. GUANLIN'S HOUSE - PORCH - NIGHT

Cheap furniture assorts the miniature porch. Empty bottles
string along its guardrail.

Guanlin and Meiling drink on the deck. Neon signs blink at
them from the street, casting a red hue across their faces.

Dishes clatter inside the house. They're alone out here.

MEILING

She's adorable, your wife. You did well for yourself.

GUANLIN

Sometimes I miss when you're rude.

MEILING

I'm honest. And I'm being honest: She's a good fit. You were always meant to be with a local.

GUANLIN

And what about you?

MEILING

Maybe I was meant to keep asking what I was meant for.

GUANLIN

You sleeping?

MEILING

Are you?

Guanlin takes a drink.

GUANLIN

What we're seeing. Think of it: We found that bag in the ocean. How'd he get those doves...

MEILING

I don't know.

GUANLIN

What does it mean?

MEILING

Guanlin, I don't know.

Sensing her frustration, Guanlin offers a fatherly smile.

GUANLIN

I don't know, either.

Meiling returns to her shell. She sets down her bottle.

MEILING

I should be going.

GUANLIN

How's your mom?

MEILING

Beats me.

GUANLIN

You have talked to her since coming home, right?

MEILING

The past is the past.

They both fall silent and watch the night spread through Jiufen. Passersby. Innocent locals.

MEILING

God, it's quiet.

GUANLIN

Why do I feel like you're expecting an apology?

MEILING

So much quieter than Taipei. I'm not used to it -- not anymore. I can hear the ocean from my room. When I was a kid, it didn't bother me. But now...

GUANLIN

You miss it?

MEILING

The water?

GUANLIN

The town.

For once in her life, she smiles.

MEILING

Nice try, partner.

Meiling starts down from the porch. Guanlin sits back, still drinking, while the sink runs in his rowhouse.

Under his breath:

GUANLIN

Hang in there, kid.

EXT. OLD TOWN - STREET - DAY

Carrying his violin case, Kongbu tracks the YOUNG WOMAN from the tea house through town. Again, he keeps a safe distance.

INT. CLOTHING STORE - DAY

Kongbu follows the woman through a family-owned store. Cats doze on the counter. Knockoff Disney shirts line the walls.

He hides near a shelf, watching --

THE YOUNG WOMAN

She hoists a miniskirt from a carousel rack. Pleated lines run through its orange corduroy. She takes it to check out.

EXT. BUS STATION - DAY

Outside of town.

Bundled in his trench coat, Kongbu crunches down the dirt street. He keeps his eyes glued --

UP AHEAD

The Young Woman huddles under a lonesome bus depot. Shopping bags crowd the bench around her. She skims a Manhua magazine.

Kongbu perches at a nearby gas station, hiding behind a phone booth. He lights a cigarette.

SIGH...

A gust of wind rolls through the trees. It blows through the woman's magazine and dusts a flyer from its pages. The flyer dances across the street and snags in the phone booth's door.

Kongbu picks it up. Idle, he starts to tear at the flyer.

SIGHHH...

Kongbu feels someone watching him. He turns.

DOWN THE ROAD

THE SHAPE stands behind a chasm of dead trees. Its red Hannya mask splits through the gnarled grotto. A sword is buckled to its robes, sheathed, black.

Kongbu staggers away from the booth.

KONGBU

Who are you?

The entity watches him.

KONGBU

Why are you following me? What do
you want? Hear me? Do you hear me?!

A HAND grabs Kongbu's shoulder.

He whips around. The Young Woman stands before him, a
concerned expression on her face.

YOUNG WOMAN

Is everything okay?

Kongbu stammers. He turns back towards the woods. Alas, the
entity has vanished. The dead trees rustle in a frigid wind.

YOUNG WOMAN

Sir?

KONGBU

Get away from me.

YOUNG WOMAN

What's wrong?

KONGBU

I said get away!

Kongbu crumples the flyer and stomps away, abandoning the
young woman at the bus stop.

She watches, miffed, as he returns to town.

INT. KONGBU'S HOUSE - BEDROOM - DAY

Kongbu sits at the edge of his bed, digging the razor blade
into the sole of his foot. He grits his teeth. Going deeper.

Blood wets his fingertips.

Kongbu rips the blade from his foot and -- exhausted -- whips
it at the wall. He puts his head into his hands and trembles.

EXT. SEASIDE NEIGHBORHOOD - DAY

Meiling walks on the outskirts of town. Around her, beach
grass sways in the wind. She plods along a row of rundown
houses -- sunken roofs, broken windows, and chipped paint.

The ocean froths at her back.

Meiling stops at a house near the end of the neighborhood.

It's a dingy shack, painted bright green. It looks like all the others, but not to her. She gazes at the house. Thinking.

Finally, Meiling takes a tentative step towards the shack. Something smacks her forehead -- something small and hard.

Meiling rubs her head. She finds some dried roots and twigs matted to her fingers.

IN THE SKY

From the clouds, a DELUGE OF DRIED ROOTS comes raining down on the street. They envelop Meiling like a swarm of locusts.

She screams, abandons the house, and runs for cover.

INT. POLICE STATION - DAY

Guanlin refills his Styrofoam coffee cup, when he hears a scraping sound in the ceiling. He sees some confused cops gathered at a nearby window.

COP

Sir? Take a look at this.

Guanlin approaches the window.

His eyes bulge.

EXT. POLICE STATION - DAY

Guanlin blusters out of the police station. He's met by the rainstorm of twigs and roots. They wail against the street.

Like a hail storm.

Confused locals race past, searching for refuge. Cars screech down the road, skidding over the pouring roots.

Guanlin holds out his hand, catches some of the strange debris in his palm, and inspects it. He looks to his men.

GUANLIN

It's... It's tea.

Back to the street.

GUANLIN

It's raining tea.

A MAELSTROM OF TEA LEAVES billows through Jiufen.

EXT. SEASIDE NEIGHBORHOOD - DAY

Meiling -- covered in scrapes -- shields herself with her coat. She flees down the street, as the storm rattles the landscape. Skidding downhill, she reaches the rocky shore.

She takes cover in a concrete culvert. Splattered in mud, she watches the bizarre storm.

EXT. KONGBU'S HOUSE - DAY

Kongbu staggers out of his house. He watches wilted tea leaves fall from the sky.

Confused. Disoriented.

He glances over his shoulder. Bloody footprints trail him outside, from where he sliced into his heel.

KONGBU
What is happening?

No answer. He calls out to the trees:

KONGBU
What is happening?

As the weird storm rages --

CUT TO:

A RED LANTERN

Glowing in the night. Little rips -- from the fallen tea -- riddle its paper frame. The rain has stopped, and Jiufen is eerily quiet. PULL BACK to --

EXT. OLD TOWN - NIGHT

The sidewalks are empty. Everyone hides indoors.

Cleaning trucks move through the narrow streets. They sweep fallen tea into the gutters, whisking away the twiggy brume.

INT. MASK SHOP - LOFT - NIGHT

TIANSHI'S RING

Glimmers in Shuzhen's hand. Tiny jewels dance in its black pupil, gazing up from her palm. Mysterious and unknowable.

Shuzhen lies in bed, inspecting the ring.

Kongbu sits across from her in a chair, wearing only his underwear, watching the street.

SHUZHEN
It's strange.

KONGBU
The ring?

SHUZHEN
Where'd you find it?

KONGBU
You always ask.

Shuzhen sets the ring on her mantle.

SHUZHEN
Time to get going?

KONGBU
I could stay.

SHUZHEN
Where? Here?

KONGBU
For the night.

SHUZHEN
It was so bizarre, that storm. I
can't blame you for being scared.

KONGBU
I'm not scared. Understand?

SHUZHEN
I was kidding.

KONGBU
Say you understand.

SHUZHEN
You can stay. You can.

Shuzhen climbs out of bed and sits in Kongbu's lap, draping her arms around his shoulder. Speaking softly into his ear:

SHUZHEN

I know that you're into something,
something bad, I don't know what,
but if you wanted to tell me, if
you ever wanted to tell me, I could
forgive you. Sometimes that's all
we need. Right?

Kongbu, unsettled, lights a cigarette to distract himself.

His vulnerability dries up, all at once.

KONGBU

I'm tired.

Shuzhen releases him and climbs back into bed.

LATER

Kongbu sleeps beside Shuzhen. Tianshi's ring observes them
from its perch on the mantle. Its jewel shines in the dark.

SIGH...

Shuzhen starts.

She sits up, hearing noises downstairs.

SHUZHEN

Kongbu?

The noises stop.

Kongbu rolls over -- still asleep.

Shuzhen looks at Tianshi's ring. She gets an uneasy feeling.
She rolls out of bed, wrapping a robe around her bare torso.

She snatches the ring and heads downstairs.

INT. MASK SHOP - WORKSHOP - NIGHT

Shuzhen descends into her workshop. She surveys the dark
room. Movement swirls in the shadows, but nobody's there.

SHUZHEN

Hello?

No answer.

Shuzhen pulls a cord on a floorlamp. Light blooms.

She releases her anxiety and goes to place Tianshi's ring into her jewelry box.

Suddenly, the temperature plummets.

A cold shiver shoots up Shuzhen's back. She stops -- white fog escaping her mouth -- and looks down at Tianshi's ring.

OVER HER SHOULDER

A SHADOWY FIGURE takes shape. Recognize its red Hannya mask. It's the mysterious entity Kongbu had spotted in the temple.

Shuzhen senses its spiteful gaze.

She takes a shuddering breath and slowly turns. The entity's red mask reflects onto her skin. Fear consumes her face. She staggers back, gripping the strange ring, opening her mouth.

And finally...

... SHE SCREAMS.

EXT. MASK SHOP - NIGHT

SHUZHEN'S CRIES splinter the night. They echo through her neighborhood. Lights switch on in the surrounding houses.

Jiufen awakens to her cries.

INT. MASK SHOP - APARTMENT - NIGHT

Kongbu snaps up.

KONGBU

Shuzhen?

Her cries muffle.

Kongbu -- disturbed -- jumps out of bed. He gets dressed and hurries downstairs.

INT. MASK SHOP - WORKSHOP - NIGHT

A BEADED CORD sways on the floorlamp. Shuzhen's blood paints its flowery shade, tinting the workshop with a deep red aura.

Swaying.

Back and forth...

Kongbu comes downstairs and freezes. He gazes into the room, a look of unadulterated fear in his eyes.

IN FRONT OF HIM

Shuzhen stands over her jewelry box. Her bathrobe drapes open, exposing her torso. She's been vivisected. Her insides spill out of the wound, gathering on the floor, at her feet.

Somehow she stays upright.

And the entity -- whatever killed her -- has vanished.

Kongbu takes a tentative step towards Shuzhen, reaching out to her blood-smeared shoulder.

SIRENS WAIL.

Police lights shine into the windows.

Kongbu wells with panic, hearing cars approach the shop.

EXT. MASK SHOP - NIGHT

POLICE CARS squeeze down the narrow street and gather outside the mask shop. LOCAL COPS jump out. They convene at the door.

INT. MASK SHOP - WORKSHOP - NIGHT

Kongbu snaps into action.

He goes to the jewelry box, filled with trophies from his previous killings. Taking it, he starts out.

But then he pauses.

TIANSHI'S RING

Is still gripped in Shuzhen's bloody fist. Its black iris glimmers at him through her fingers.

KONGBU

Shit...

Kongbu goes to Shuzhen. He tries to peel the ring from her hand, but it's stuck, locked tight in her clenched fingers.

As Kongbu wrestles with her fist --

POUNDING ECHOES into the mask shop.

POLICE (O.S.)

Open up!

Kongbu tugs at Shuzhen's fingers, trying to free his ring.

It won't budge.

Kongbu has to act fast. He crouches before Shuzhen's corpse, soaking his feet in her pool of entrails, and grabs her fist.

He pushes on her thumb until BONES CRACK. The thumb bends back, broken. Shuzhen's grip slackens. Kongbu keeps going, breaking her fingers one by one, trying to free the ring.

The room is quiet, aside from the snapping bones, and the pounding on the door:

POLICE (O.S.)

I said open the door!

Sweat beads on Kongbu's forehead. He wrings Shuzhen's middle finger and pulls it back. The digit snaps. Her grip loosens.

The ring jostles, tantalizingly close.

Kongbu moves to the next finger.

Suddenly -- a GUNSHOT.

Chaos sounds outside the room. The front door bursts open.

Police file into Shuzhen's mask shop, and their flashlights glow through the beaded curtain. Getting closer.

WHOOSH.

The beaded curtain rips back.

TWO LOCAL COPS come charging into the workshop, guns drawn. They both stop in the doorway.

SHUZHEN'S CORPSE

Teeters before them. Her entrails glisten in the lamplight. Her fingers are bent in sickening angles.

Tianshi's ring is missing...

... And Kongbu is nowhere to be found.

COP 1

My God.

COP 2

Hey. Look.

Cop 2 points down at a trail of bloody footprints -- Kongbu's footprints -- leading back upstairs.

COP 1

What the --

CRASH.

GLASS SHATTERS in the bedroom.

EXT. MASK SHOP - BACK ALLEY - NIGHT

Kongbu jumps out of an upstairs window and lands behind the mask shop. He gets up. He nabs Tianshi's ring and Shuzhen's jewelry box from the pavement.

Pumping raw adrenaline, ignoring the pain, he runs.

EXT. MASK SHOP - NIGHT

Police officers come pouring out of the mask shop, and more cars come squealing down the street. The police fan out into Jiufen's alleys and walkways, everyone searching for Kongbu.

It's a full-blown manhunt.

POLICE

Find him! / Split up!

INT. HOTEL - LOBBY - NIGHT

Meiling, dozing in her antique chair, stirs awake in the lobby. A police car rips down the street, sirens blazing.

She watches it.

And behind her:

CONCIERGE

What's going on?

Meiling says nothing. She already knows.

EXT. HOTEL - NIGHT

Meiling emerges from the hotel, still wearing bed clothes. Carrying her sidearm, she takes off and joins the manhunt.

SERIES - AROUND OLD TOWN

Kongbu sprints through the dark alleys, cradling the jewelry box in his arms.

Meiling races through the labyrinthine neighborhood. She passes endless rows of shops and cafes.

And the rest of Jiufen's podunk police force canvases the village, sirens rocketing between the buildings.

EXT. OLD TOWN - STREET - NIGHT

Kongbu blusters out of the alley and starts down a cobblestone slope.

His foot, soaked in Shuzhen's viscera, slips on the pavement. His ankle twists. He tumbles forward and slams on the ground.

The jewelry box squeezes loose from his arms and bursts open on the pavement. Its glittery bowels scatter the cobblestone.

Kongbu goes to scoop them up.

A POLICE CAR

Crests over the hill. Sirens flash; its side-mirrors scrape against the walls of the tight street. The car rolls closer.

Kongbu rises slowly. He knows he's caught.

But the car doesn't stop. It gains speed, approaching him.

And its sirens make no sounds.

Kongbu realizes the world has fallen silent. He's invisible.

The car rips closer. Kongbu dives out of the way. It soars past, speeding out of sight.

Kongbu stands. He glances down the hill, taking in the utter silence. Old Jiufen basks in a white noise of crashing waves.

As wind blows through the lanterns --

MEILING

Walks out of an alley, pace slowing, and freezes on the road. She whirls her gun around the street.

The overhead lanterns sway -- *back and forth* -- and their red spotlight dances in her face.

Kongbu pauses, recognizing Meiling from the tea house.

Drawn to her.

Intoxicated, he approaches Meiling and watches her eyes scan the neighborhood. She looks past him.

Kongbu orbits her, breathing down her neck. Entranced.

Finally, Meiling takes off down the hill.

Kongbu hangs back and watches her descend into the village.

The world keeps turning in silence. Kongbu starts to collect his jewelry. He feels eyes. On him. Glancing up, he spots --

A DOVE

Perched on a phone-line, staring down at him. The bird takes flight. With its flapping wings, all sounds return to Jiufen.

Reality restores. Kongbu takes one final look at Meiling, as she sinks into the distance. He lets out a breath. Jogs away.

EXT. OLD TOWN - OUTSKIRTS - DAWN

Meiling reaches the foot of the hill. Old Town burns red against her neck. She looks out at the Pacific shoreline.

The sun rises over the ocean.

Meiling wipes rain out of her face and catches her breath. Defeated, she start back up the hill -- returning to town.

EXT. RURAL SHORELINE - DAY

Forested village outskirts.

Kongbu stops by the side of the road. He hurls Shuzhen's jewelry box into the sea.

He pulls Tianshi's ring from his pocket and hesitates, gazing into its black eye. Its gaze. Kongbu throws the ring into the ocean. He watches it twinkle out of sight.

Kongbu steps back. Cars prattle along behind him on the muddy streets; Jiufen yawns to life. As he flees from the ocean --

INT. MASK SHOP - WORKSHOP - DAY

CAMERAS FLASH around the grisly crime scene, capturing every nook and cranny of Shuzhen's mangled corpse.

WITH A POP OF WHITE LIGHT --

INT. COFFEE SHOP - DAY

Meiling stirs cream into her coffee.

Her wrist quakes. Guanlin eyes her. Together, they huddle at the window -- truly shaken, and not wanting to talk about it.

GUANLIN

Guess our Wolf has learned some new tricks, huh?

MEILING

He's showing off, at least.

Guanlin notices a YOUNG MAN discarding a coffee cup on the side of the street.

He jumps up.

GUANLIN

Son of a bitch...

MEILING

What're you --

Before she can finish...

EXT. COFFEE SHOP - DAY

Guanlin storms out into the rain, fists clenched, and shouts to the YOUNG MAN before he can round a corner.

GUANLIN

Excuse me. Hey!

YOUNG MAN

Yessir?

Guanlin points to the littered coffee cup.

GUANLIN

Pick that up.

YOUNG MAN

What?

GUANLIN

You can't just leave your trash on
the sidewalk. People live here.
Pick it up.

YOUNG MAN

Who the hell are --

Guanlin flashes his badge.

GUANLIN

People live here.

The Young Man looks around, alarmed.

Meiling follows Guanlin out of the coffee house and watches
the scene unfold. She gives the Young Man a nod: *You better
do it.*

So he does. He collects his trash and stuffs it into the
nearest waste bin.

YOUNG MAN

Happy?

GUANLIN

Move along, asshole.

The Young Man walks off, muttering under his breath. Guanlin
turns back to Meiling. He's already blushing at his outburst.

GUANLIN

What's this place coming to?

Meiling unclasps her umbrella.

MEILING

C'mon. Let's go.

INT. KONGBU'S HOUSE - KITCHEN - DAY

Kongbu, unshaven, lights a cigarette and empties TIANSHI'S
PURSE on the kitchen table.

Sifting through her things.

Mostly benign possessions. Money. Lipstick.

At the bottom of the pile, Kongbu uncovers her book. It's a
ragged thing. No cover. Its spine bears the faded emblem of
an ouroboros -- symbol of impermanence.

Kongbu opens the book and rifles through pages of esoteric religious text. Scribbled annotations flood in its margins.

ON THE BACK PAGE

Tianshi's slapdash handwriting sinks into the paper. Like a vampire's kiss:

FING ZEI TAIPING QUAN

Kongbu softly rolls the words around on his tongue.

SIGH...

The walls creak. Kongbu glances up -- nervous. The cigarette dangles from his lips. He's alone. Upset, he closes the book.

INT. TEA HOUSE - DAY

Kongbu plays his violin to the tea house guests. He looks awful. Hasn't slept. Stubble scratches his rumpled collar.

His hand spasms.

The bow strikes an awful note.

Kongbu snaps up from his violin. Everyone is looking at him. He blushes a bit, resetting.

KONGBU

Excuse me.

EXT. TEA HOUSE - ROOFTOP - DAY

End of his shift. Kongbu sips tea on the patio, overlooking the streets. He rifles through Tianshi's book at his table.

IN THE BOOK

Between two paragraphs, an etching spreads across the page, depicting a moonlit ocean. TWO GIGANTIC HANDS rise from the water, their index fingers pointed straight to the heavens.

Uneasy, Kongbu closes the book.

MEILING (O.S.)

Excuse me.

He looks up. Meiling and Guanlin approach on the rooftop, brandishing their badges.

MEILING

Li Kongbu?

Kongbu stares at them.

GUANLIN

Detective Chen. This is my partner.

MEILING

Detective Lee.

KONGBU

What's this about?

Meiling sits across from him. Guanlin pulls up a chair from the nearest table.

MEILING

We need to talk to you about a woman, Wu Shuzhen.

GUANLIN

Her friends mentioned you were seeing each other.

KONGBU

What happened?

GUANLIN

She was killed. Last night.

Kongbu searches inside himself, conjuring a sadness.

KONGBU

Killed...

MEILING

We need to know the precise nature of your relationship with Shuzhen.

KONGBU

Sometimes people get lonely.

MEILING

You play here. I've seen you. Do you play on weekends?

KONGBU

In the afternoon.

GUANLIN

So where were you last night?

KONGBU

Home.

GUANLIN

Can you prove it?

KONGBU

Do I need to?

Meiling nods to the bruise on Kongbu's forehead.

MEILING

What happened?

KONGBU

It rained sticks last weekend.

Kongbu stares flatly at her. After a moment, Guanlin points to Tianshi's leather-bound book, the ouroboros on its spine.

GUANLIN

You worship?

KONGBU

How'd she die?

Meiling stands.

MEILING

We'll be in touch.

She exits. Guanlin lingers for a moment.

GUANLIN

I'm sorry. For your loss.

KONGBU

People... People get lonely.

Guanlin returns his chair to its table and follows Meiling down to the street.

Kongbu exhales, peering over the railing.

ON THE STREET BELOW

Guanlin and Meiling walk into a spittle of rain. She extends her umbrella, its patterned canopy obscuring her face.

Kongbu gazes at the shadow of her head as it dithers inside the umbrella, magnetized to her. He lights another cigarette.

EXT. TIANSHI'S APARTMENT BUILDING - DAY

Kongbu crosses the street leading towards Tianshi's building, launching an investigation of his own.

He carries a key-ring taken from her handbag and tests each key in the lock. Eventually...

CLICK. The door opens.

Kongbu looks both ways on the street. Paranoid.

Unnoticed, he slips inside the scummy tenement building.

INT. TIANSHI'S APARTMENT BUILDING - HALL - DAY

Kongbu walks down a cramped hallway. He sifts through the key-ring. One of the keys has a number printed over its bow: **216**.

INT. TIANSHI'S APARTMENT - LIVING ROOM - DAY

A door swings open.

With it: a cough of dust.

Kongbu steps into an abandoned apartment. No furniture. No sign of humanity. Debris dances in blurry columns of light, spilling through the blinds.

The door creaks shut, clapping through the quiet apartment.

Kongbu shudders.

KONGBU

Hello?

His voice echoes off the walls. The place is frozen in that peculiar way; it feels as if the shadows might come to life any second now. And attack.

BZZZ. BZZZ.

Kongbu notices a smattering of houseflies buzzing around the bedroom door. Their wings beat in an unrelenting drone: BZZZ.

INT. TIANSHI'S APARTMENT - BATHROOM - DAY

Kongbu flips on the lights to reveal a shower painted black with scum and mold. Knots of hair cling to the rusted drain.

He catches his reflection in the mirror.

... Only his reflection. Nobody else.

Uneasy, he moves on.

INT. TIANSHI'S APARTMENT - BEDROOM - DAY

Kongbu pokes his head into the bedroom. Stops.

A DEAD GOAT

Lies over the hardwood floor. Its throat has been slit. A puddle of dried blood surrounds its body. And beneath the blood is a faint smear of charcoal, the TAIJI TUSHUO symbol.

A black spiral.

EXT. OLD TOWN - DAY

Kongbu plods down the village street, lost in thought.

Retracing Tianshi's steps.

INT. POLICE STATION - NIGHT

Lights out. The station is empty.

INSIDE A CAGE

A dove flutters about, seized from the earlier incident. Its cage overlooks a messy desk buried under old police reports.

Guanlin works at the desk. He sips a beer and combs through some old files.

Meiling passes Guanlin on her way out, resting her umbrella on her shoulder. She stops at his desk and watches him work.

MEILING

Hey. Go home.

Guanlin holds up a file.

GUANLIN

Wanna know the last violent crime reported in Jiufen?

MEILING

Call me stumped.

GUANLIN

2008. A bar fight. I remember the whole incident: Poor bastard fell on his own knife.

MEILING

In my experience, the worst crimes go unreported.

GUANLIN

Want a beer?

Before Meiling can answer, Guanlin opens a mini-fridge beneath his desk. He slides her a bottle of cheap beer.

MEILING

Strange to think. He's living out there somewhere -- our killer. And whoever he is, nobody suspects him.

GUANLIN

We want to see the best in each other.

MEILING

We overlook the worst. That's what we do; that's faith.

GUANLIN

You're discouraged.

MEILING

What'd you make of Li Kongbu?

GUANLIN

No criminal record, no priors, no nothing. He's a ghost.

MEILING

Seemed lonely.

GUANLIN

Deep analysis. They teach you that in Taipei?

MEILING

Settle down.

GUANLIN

It's good for you. You always needed a big brother.

MEILING

And you always needed a little
sister.

Guanlin laughs a little. Meiling sits on the edge of his desk
and surveys the office.

GUANLIN

You said you'd come back.

MEILING

I know.

GUANLIN

When you quit --

MEILING

I didn't quit. I was promoted.
Anyone would've taken it.

GUANLIN

Not me.

MEILING

Then you're an idiot.

Meiling catches herself. She crossed a line, and she can see
she wounded him.

MEILING

Sorry, I am. I...

She searches for the words.

MEILING

It's hard not to get nostalgic.

GUANLIN

When did you stop being you?

MEILING

When I realized Jiufen would never
stop being Jiufen.

Dropping her bottle in the trash, Meiling starts out. Guanlin
says nothing. He watches his dove in its cage.

EXT. SHADY BUILDING - NIGHT

Kongbu pauses outside the weathered building. He listens to
the wind blowing through chimes on its door.

Flicking his cigarette into the gutter, he starts inside.

INT. SHADY BUILDING - VESTIBULE - NIGHT

Cobwebs. Dust. The building feels impossibly old, like the tomb of some ancient king.

Kongbu passes through the doorway. He looks around, brushing spider webs from his face. An ornate mantle, filled with lit candles, is propped against the wall. It's made of pure gold.

Wooden doors stand over the vestibule.

CHANTING echoes behind them.

Kongbu shoves them open and descends...

INT. SHADY BUILDING - CHURCH - NIGHT

Inside a basement cathedral.

A golden statue of MAZU -- an ancient sea goddess -- scrapes against the ceiling. It's impossibly huge. Candlelight glows in her gentle face, etching the silhouette of her robed body.

Beneath the statue...

WORSHIPERS -- naked men and women -- gather around the floor, chanting prayers. Nobody looks up.

Kongbu nervously comes forward. He approaches the statue. He arcs towards Mazu's shadow -- drinking in her mystical aura.

Adrift in her image.

A MALFORMED HAND shoots out of the darkness and grabs Kongbu by the shoulder.

He whips around and sees --

AN OLD PRIEST

Thin skin clings to his skeletal face. The priest wears a black bear hide around his naked body, his toothpick legs.

This is DAOSHI HEPING (80).

INT. SHADY BUILDING - HEPING'S CHAMBER - NIGHT

Incense pours in through a crack in the walls, coating the room in an otherworldly haze.

Heping stands with his back to the door, rubbing charcoal on his hands. Kongbu watches from afar.

KONGBU
What is this place?

HEPING
A house of worship.

KONGBU
Worshipping what?

HEPING
There are old things. And then
there are things, special things,
so old that we've forgotten them.

KONGBU
I need to talk. About a girl. She
used to visit this place. Tianshi.

HEPING
What became of her?

KONGBU
She's gone now.

HEPING
And you're left behind.

Kongbu opens Tianshi's book. He flips to the back page.

KONGBU
Fing Zei Taiping Quan. Do you know
what that means?

Heping turns -- hands coated in charcoal -- and faces Kongbu
in the chamber. Licking his dry lips.

HEPING
Again. Say them.

KONGBU
Fing Zei Taiping Quan.

HEPING
Have you blasphemed?

KONGBU
What do you mean?

HEPING
Have you defiled a grave?

Kongbu closes the book.

KONGBU
I... I should go.

Heping comes forward into a smear of candlelight. He presses his thumb against Kongbu's forehead, squeezes his eyes shut, and whispers a chant. Kongbu watches him -- growing agitated.

INSERT

A DEAD DOVE lies crumpled on the ground, its neck snapped, its wings folded at an awkward angle. It's been strangled.

INSERT

A YOUNG BOY'S HANDS -- bound with dishrags -- hang from a brass bedpost. The rags bind deep into his wrists.

Looking down, we realize the teenage boy is a YOUNG KONGBU (16). Tears stain his cheeks. He crouches on his knees, at the foot of the bed. The rags bind deeper into his wrists.

INSERT

A LEATHER BELT lies, like a snake, on the hardwood floor. Blood licks its buckle.

BACK TO SCENE

Heping lowers his hand. Kongbu -- stained with charcoal -- takes a shallow breath.

HEPING
Little monster, what have you done?

KONGBU
What did you see?

HEPING
Listen to me. The woman you encountered was no woman at all. Lived she did, in the twilight of our reality and a spirit world. Those words are a curse. To you and me, they mean nothing. But, spoken through the teeth of a spirit, they mean eternity. A demon. It's following you.

HEPING

It will bring violence and downfall
to you, and anyone close to you,
and all of Jiufen. The hands of God
will rise and pull you to the
depths of hell.

KONGBU

This is madness.

Daoshi Heping goes to a shelf full of mason jars. He pulls
one off. Inside, shriveled eyeballs float in a green broth.

HEPING

Dried eyes of sinners. Take them,
burn them. Burn all of them in your
fireplace, and as you do, confess
your crimes. To God confess, and
her curse will lift. Maybe we can
still be saved.

Kongbu takes the mason jar. He watches beady eyeballs rise
and fall in the preservative solution.

HEPING

And please forgive her.

KONGBU

Tianshi?

HEPING

You don't belong here, little
monster. Go.

Kongbu wraps the mason jar in his arms, concealing it in his
raincoat. He hurries out.

EXT. DOCKYARD - NIGHT

WUHAI, the beggar we've seen around Jiufen, meanders along a
vacant dock. He mutters nonsense as he goes. The apocalyptic
sign drapes over his shoulders.

Something catches his eye.

A DOVE

Hops around at the edge of the wooden dock.

WUHAI

Hi.

The dove cocks its head.

WUHAI
Itty bitty birdy.

Wuhai hears a SIGH, carried over the wind. He looks up from the bird and gazes at the sea. Light blooms under the water.

Whatever's happening, it isn't of this Earth.

Spiritual ecstasy, terror and awe, pours over Wuhai's face.

LIGHT strikes him from the ocean. He drops to his knees. The bird takes flight and soars into the moonbeams.

Wuhai gazes into this vision, this guiding light...

CUT TO:

FIRE

Billowing in a hearth.

Flames crackle and knot together, a blinding orange glow.
PULL OUT to reveal --

INT. KONGBU'S HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

Kongbu stoops in front of his fireplace. He watches, as the flames crawl up into his chimney. Light flickers in his eyes.

He sets the jar in front of him. Shriveled eyeballs float -- like black olives -- in the solution. Kongbu removes its cap.

A rancid stench.

Kongbu chokes back vomit. He covers his face with the lapel of his trench-coat and plucks an eyeball from the solution.

THE EYEBALL

Wet. Soggy. Ridges of a blue iris cave into its veiny bulb.

The pupil has collapsed, spreading a sickly ooze through its peeled skin. After a moment, Kongbu tosses it into the fire.

The eyeball lands in the inferno and -- of all things -- POPS like a tiny firecracker.

Kongbu twitches. He grabs a second eye from the jar and holds it up, uneasy, returning to the fire.

Confess your sins...

KONGBU

My father left when I was young.
Very young. Apparently he was a
bastard. When I'd cry, he would
force me down onto a pillow until I
passed out. Could have killed me.
At least that's the story. Mother
raised me. She was always with me.

He tosses the second eyeball into the fire. It POPS.

KONGBU

She'd punish me. Hit me. And did
other things.

Kongbu tosses a few more eyeballs into the hearth. They POP.
Getting louder now. The fire swells like a lit frag grenade.

Walls creak. The house unsettles.

Kongbu sees a slender shadow, matted against the wall. But
he's alone in the room. He closes his eyes and keeps going:

KONGBU

One day, I was walking home from
school, and a bird flew down from
our roof. Landed right in front of
me. There was something about it,
the bird. I wanted it. So I took
it, squeezed it, and broke its
neck. Cradling it in my hands, I
could hear a voice calling my name.
Mother. She saw the whole thing.
She yanked me inside, tied me to
the bed, and started whipping me.
Whipping me with a belt. It was his
belt, my father's. So you could say
he was never really gone.

(then)

And she isn't either. Mother. I can
still hear her, talking to me,
calling my name, when I...

Kongbu trembles, weak.

KONGBU

I'm not even sure if you're here.
If any of this is real. But if it
is real -- and if you are here --
know this: When you died, Tianshi,
I felt so close to you.

Kongbu swallows the urge to cry, to cave in. He pours the
rest of his eyes into the flames. Each one lands and pops.

Louder. Louder.

The tiny explosions converge, growing frighteningly bright.

Kongbu flails backwards as the flames expand. But then, all at once, the fire ceases -- the blaze contracts into a lone, orange speck fluttering above the charred wood. The fire is out. Smoke rolls.

Awestruck, Kongbu bows his head in prayer.

IN THE FIREPLACE

Wood crumbles into blackened ash. A SINGLE EYEBALL lies among the embers, covered in debris. It's untarnished -- preserved.

Left behind.

EXT. KONGBU'S HOUSE - NIGHT

MEILING stows in the forest behind Kongbu's house, staking him out. She watches a plume of black smoke rise from his chimney. It unfurls into the sky, an endless stream of dark.

Then something happens:

The smoke molds into a pained face. Tianshi. She contorts in a silent scream, before dissipating.

Nothingness remains.

Meiling watches the vanishing smoke. And past the trees, she sees a fleeting glimpse of the ocean, of a merciless horizon.

She stammers. Confused.

INT. KONGBU'S HOUSE - KITCHEN - DAY

Kongbu -- run ragged from the previous night -- brews a tea kettle over his stove. As he waits for the water to boil, a ticking sound reverberates in his ears.

He turns.

THE CLOCK

Ticks on the wall. Its hands move around in circles -- *around in circles* -- as if they had never broken. A low-key miracle.

Kongbu gives a little smile. He looks down at his bare foot, at the tiny scars tallied under his heel. Years of suffering.

He lets out a relieved breath. Cleansed.

EXT. DOCKYARD - DAY

Meiling kneels at the oceanfront and gazes into the flat, blue horizon. Reflective. Sad. She's seen so many things.

EXT. SEASIDE NEIGHBORHOOD - DAY

Once again, Meiling drifts through the village outskirts.

She passes mounds of tea leaves -- remnants of the weird storm -- piled by the side of the road. She ignores them.

Meiling stops at the green shack. She gazes at it.

MEILING

Fine. Okay.

Meiling approaches the shack. She climbs up to its porch and, running on muscle memory, nabs a key from a loose floorboard.

INT. OLD HOUSE - KITCHEN - DAY

A miniature television plays on the counter. A game show strobes on its screen. Bright, cheery colors. Washed out.

YIRU (65) -- a disheveled elderly woman -- sits at the table, sipping coffee, watching the game show. Stray cats mill about her house. She neglects them. Neglects everything.

Meiling, nervous, inches into the kitchen.

Yiru doesn't both looking up.

YIRU

You're back.

MEILING

Hi, Mom.

YIRU

Been waiting. Over a month now -- isn't that right?

MEILING

You're drowning in fur.

YIRU

And I'm allergic, too. But a woman needs company, and TV gets boring.

MEILING
How've you been?

YIRU
You're getting older. Starting to
look like your dad.

MEILING
(*sarcastic*)
Thanks.

YIRU
Folks talk about you -- the ones
who can remember you, that is.
Places are forgetful. Even Jiufen.

MEILING
Doesn't feel like it.

YIRU
You sound like him, too.

MEILING
Staying sober?

YIRU
You quit going to church.

MEILING
So did you.

YIRU
The door's unlocked; you unlocked
it. You're free to leave whenever.

Meiling scans Yiru's face, searching for some semblance of
love, searching for her mother.

At last, the old woman breaks the silence:

YIRU
And Taipei?

MEILING
It's like you imagined.

YIRU
A city's no place for someone like
you. A girl gets swallowed up.

MEILING
We're swallowed up wherever we go.

YIRU
You're wallowing.

MEILING
Maybe.

Meiling thinks.

MEILING
We had this case back in the city.
Sixteen year old girl, suspected
runaway. Never got ahold of her
name. A garbage man found her along
his route. In a dumpster. Whoever
killed her, discarded her.

Meiling removes her necklace. Holds it up.

MEILING
She was wearing this.

YIRU
And now it's yours.

MEILING
Swiped it from the crime scene. I
don't know why -- I just wanted to
take it, so I took it.

YIRU
Who killed her?

MEILING
We never found out, but we will.
We're waiting. That's our job,
waiting -- waiting for a trail of
bodies to crop up. I found that
girl two, three years ago.

YIRU
Meiling --

MEILING
How many is he up to by now? Ten?
Fifteen? Twenty? Maybe it's worse:
Maybe she was his only victim, and
he was an average person like you
or me. After he did what he did, he
went back to boring, drab, daily
life. Maybe he's everybody, us.

Yiru watches TV, her face resolute.

YIRU

You shouldn't tell these stories.

MEILING

Since coming back, it feels like the world's trying to send me a message. Dunno. Guess I needed to talk to someone.

YIRU

Talk to someone else. It cuts both ways, dear: You can't just leave, and you can't just come home.

MEILING

But it is home, Isn't it?

No answer.

MEILING

Isn't it?

Still nothing.

Meiling relents. She puts her necklace on the table.

MEILING

Bye, Mom.

Yiru offers only a meager glance from the corner of her eye, barely enough to register her own daughter's existence.

At a loss for words, Meiling slips out of the house.

A cat takes her spot on the floor, and it's as if she were never there in the first place.

EXT. POLICE STATION - DAY

Meiling walks to work, chewing on her visit with her mother. She finds a crowd of people gathered at the station.

Reporters. Locals.

Pushing through them, Meiling finds a POLICE OFFICER at the door. He barks at the reporters:

OFFICER

Stay out. We have no comment. Come back tomorrow.

MEILING

Who are these people?

The officer registers her.

OFFICER
Guanlin didn't call you?

MEILING
I've been running around.

OFFICER
We got him. The killer.

MEILING
The Night Slayer? How?

OFFICER
Damndest thing. He simply turned himself in.

Meiling, dazed, pushes past the officer and hurries inside.

INT. POLICE STATION - JAILHOUSE - DAY

WUHAI rocks in a prison cell. His ragged clothes wilt like feathers, and unrestrained joy hides in his toothless grin.

Guanlin interrogates Wuhai in the cell. Meiling observes them from outside the bars.

GUANLIN
How about Wu Shuzhen?

WUHAI
The mask shop. Yes. Yes. Took her apart, I did, I took her, made pieces out of her.

GUANLIN
I don't get it. Why turn yourself in? Why now?

WUHAI
Spoke to God in the pond. That's where she lives. She told me to do it. Told me to show myself...

Meiling sinks. Something feels off.

INT. POLICE STATION - DAY

The station burns with life. Officers rush about. The phones blare on their hooks. And more reporters gather at the doors.

Meiling follows Guanlin through the station. He's stealing a spare moment to feed the captive dove beside his desk.

MEILING

It doesn't make any sense.

GUANLIN

Maybe it's not supposed to. It's out of our hands, anyway.

MEILING

No, listen. Last night I staked out Li Kongbu. We need to wait. We need to see --

GUANLIN

There's nothing left to see. Wuhai signed a confession.

MEILING

I saw something --

GUANLIN

Come on, Meiling. It's over. Wuhai signed a confession; he's giving us details about the murders only the killer could know.

MEILING

It's not good enough. What about that woman -- the one who called saying a man followed her to bus station? He was wearing a suit.

GUANLIN

Mistaken identity. Too many scary stories, perhaps.

MEILING

No. No, no. Wait.

GUANLIN

There's nothing left, okay? Nothing to argue about. Now will you please stop punishing our town?

MEILING

I'm not punishing anyone -- I'm trying to help you!

GUANLIN

We don't want your help!

Guanlin's voice booms through the office. He feels the other police officers looking at him and faces the window -- upset.

GUANLIN
Taipei called. You're due back
tomorrow morning.

MEILING
Please, just listen to me.

GUANLIN
You don't get to decide this time.

Meiling looks to the surrounding officers. Nobody stands up for her. Nobody wants her. It hits: She doesn't belong here.

MEILING
... Fine.

Meiling pivots around and goes for the door. Guanlin catches his reflection in the glass. The shame hits him, full-force.

GUANLIN
Hey, wait --

Too late.

She's gone. Again.

EXT. SHADY BUILDING - DAY

Kongbu approaches the shrouded building, carrying his violin case. He goes to the door. Pulls at it.

Locked.

Kongbu knocks a few times. Nobody answers.

He leans beside its entrance and squints through the window. The building is dark and empty. Kongbu returns to the street.

A LITTLE BOY plays hopscotch on a nearby sidewalk.

KONGBU
Hey, kid? You live around here?

BOY
Down the road.

Kongbu points to the shady building.

KONGBU
Know anything about that place?

BOY
Abandoned. It's been like that
since we moved here.

KONGBU
... Thanks.

The Boy resumes his game of hopscotch. Kongbu takes one last look at the shady building and backs away, heading for work.

INT. HOTEL - MEILING'S ROOM - DAY

Sunset streaks through the window. Meiling shoves clothes into her suitcase, barely able to contain her frustration.

She pauses as she works. Takes a seat on the bed.

MEILING
Damn it...

Looking up, Meiling watches the sunset over Jiufen. Lanterns ignite on the street.

Slowly, she gets an idea.

EXT. POLICE STATION - DAY

Officers clock out for the evening, finished with their shifts. Guanlin follows them. He carries his bird cage.

Once outside, he unlocks it.

The white dove flaps out and launches into the city.

Guanlin steps back and watches the bird -- his bird -- disappear into the overhead clotheslines.

EXT. TEA HOUSE - NIGHT

No rain. Massive puddles dot the pavement, reflecting the moon and lantern-light like the craters in a live volcano.

Meiling waits outside the tea house, thinking.

She watches --

THROUGH THE WINDOW

Kongbu plays his violin for a modest crowd. His strings warble against the tea house walls -- whispering to her.

She makes a decision. Crosses the street.

INT. TEA HOUSE - NIGHT

Finished with his shift, Kongbu goes to pack his violin case. He feels eyes on him. Looking up.

MEILING

Stands at the foot of the stage, watching him.

KONGBU

What can I do for you, Detective?

MEILING

We got him.

Kongbu turns white.

KONGBU

... The Wolf?

MEILING

Turned himself in this morning.
Thought you should know.

KONGBU

Uh. Thank you.

Kongbu starts off the stage.

She follows.

MEILING

And I wanted to apologize.

KONGBU

For what?

MEILING

How we spoke to your earlier. About Shuzhen. Sometimes, when you're in the doldrums of an investigation, you forget which doors you kick in.

KONGBU

I'm glad you got him.

Meiling gestures to the surrounding cafe.

MEILING

Let me buy you a cup. Least I could do, considering.

Kongbu stares at her. He senses danger, but he's also drawn to her presence. She's his type.

MEILING

It's beautiful. Your music.

KONGBU

One cup.

EXT. TEA HOUSE - ROOFTOP - NIGHT

Meiling and Kongbu are the only couple on the rooftop. They take turns glancing down at the road, at the passing crowd.

MEILING

So quiet up here.

KONGBU

I prefer to be left alone. To think. The silence is helpful.

MEILING

It's growing on me.

KONGBU

You're from Jiufen?

MEILING

In a sense.

Meiling gazes into her cup of Tieguanyin tea, Goddess of Mercy. Her reflection ripples with the murky green water.

She returns to Kongbu, speaking bluntly:

MEILING

To be honest, I couldn't wait to leave. Taipei. Homicide. It was the only way out, so I took it.

KONGBU

And now?

MEILING

I don't know how to come back.

KONGBU

You're back.

MEILING

No, I'm not.

KONGBU

Wish you'd done things differently?

MEILING

I don't know anymore. Nothing makes sense.

KONGBU

And nobody's watching. That's the best and worst thing about life.

Meiling sighs. She watches a boy and girl play tag on the street below, giggling, stalking each other down the thin sidewalks. Their laughter carries up through the alleyway.

MEILING

Is it possible to leave, without resentment?

KONGBU

Resentment's everywhere -- not just Taipei, and not just Jiufen. Can't run from that.

MEILING

I'm not running.

KONGBU

But you aren't standing still.

Kongbu and Meiling lock eyes, each relishing in the other's vulnerability. He nudges his violin case across their table.

KONGBU

You used to play. Right?

MEILING

When I was a kid.

KONGBU

Well?

MEILING

I mean, it was another life.

KONGBU

Fingers have minds of their own. Trust me.

MEILING

No thanks.

KONGBU

Like I said --

MEILING
- Nobody's watching.

Meiling accepts his request. She fetches his violin and lays it across her shoulder, closing her eyes, getting used to it again. Getting used to everything, again. At last, she plays.

Kongbu studies her face as she slides into a delicate melody.

And for a moment, all of Jiufen holds its breath.

Finally, Meiling finishes the song. She sets the violin back down in its case and offers a bashful smile.

MEILING
Guess you were right.

KONGBU
But you'd hate it if I clapped.

Meiling stares into his gaze, studying his face, searching for the monster underneath. All at once, Kongbu hoists his cheeks up into a kind smile, lanterns sizzling in his eyes, and offers her a little applause.

INT. KONGBU'S HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

Late.

Kongbu opens the door and comes inside. Meiling lingers behind him on the doorstep, gazing into his quiet house.

He turns on the lights.

KONGBU
The place is a mess. Wasn't expecting company.

MEILING
It's an old house.

KONGBU
My mother owned it. And her parents -- my grandparents -- before her.

Kongbu looks back at her.

KONGBU
It's freezing out.

Meiling comes inside, closing the door behind her.

KONGBU
Get you anything?

MEILING
A drink?

Kongbu heads for the kitchen. He pauses in the doorway and looks back at her.

KONGBU
That thing you said to me when we first met -- "The fabric of existence weaves itself whole." What's it mean?

MEILING
Just a bit of trivia.

KONGBU
Trivia. Right.

On that, he disappears into the kitchen. Meiling backs off, fighting her nerves, fighting the urge to run. Looking for something, anything, to do, she ambles about the old house.

MEILING
How've you been coping, since Shuzhen?

KONGBU (O.S.)
Been hard to sleep. She was good in a way most people aren't.

MEILING
How's that?

KONGBU (O.S.)
Guess she was real.

Meiling pulls a random book off the shelf. Thumbs through it. It's a field guide -- various birds in Taiwan.

She stops at a glossy print depicting a flock of doves.

Meiling looks up from the book. She can see Kongbu's shadow in the kitchen. He's not moving.

MEILING
Kongbu?

No reply. Meiling unbuttons her coat, revealing the sidearm strapped to her hip. Carefully, she approaches the kitchen.

MEILING

Kongbu?

She braces herself.

Getting closer.

INT. KONGBU'S HOUSE - KITCHEN - NIGHT

Kongbu stands, statuesque in the kitchen, wearing his leather gloves. His hands rest at his side. He stares off into space.

Meiling inches into the room.

MEILING

What're you doing?

KONGBU

The way they look at me towards the end. They think I hate them. But I don't. I love them all.

MEILING

Who?

KONGBU

The last thing they think, the last thing they know, is incorrect. They die wrong.

A fly buzzes in the windowsill.

KONGBU

You're free to scream.

MEILING

I don't want to.

From this soft moment --

Kongbu approaches Meiling. She snaps into action and goes for her sidearm, but he reaches her first. He grabs her wrist and pins it above her head.

Meiling struggles.

HER GUN MISFIRES into the ceiling.

Kongbu bashes Meiling's hand against the wall until she drops her handgun. It goes skipping across the floor, out of reach.

MEILING SCREAMS.

And it doesn't matter.

After a struggle, she elbows Kongbu in the stomach and slips free from his grasp. Cornered, she's forced to run into the --

INT. KONGBU'S HOUSE - STAIRWELL - NIGHT

Meiling scrambles up the stairs.

Kongbu lunges forward and tackles her. Meiling tries to pull herself up, but he keeps her pinned to the steps.

She kicks at him. Nothing doing.

Kongbu holds Meiling down on the wooden steps, wrapping his fingers tightly around her throat. He squeezes.

Her face turns red...

... And white...

She's dying.

Kongbu wrenches her neck, a monstrous expression unfurled across his face, when a thin shadow casts down the stairs.

He looks up.

Terror plunges through his veins.

KONGBU

No...

A LARGE SHAPE stands at the top of the stairwell.

Kongbu loosens his grip. Meiling -- barely alive -- rolls away from him and sputters for breath.

She seizes the moment and rushes back to --

INT. KONGBU'S HOUSE - KITCHEN - NIGHT

Meiling dives for her pistol as Kongbu staggers from the stairwell. Rolling on her back, Meiling takes aim at him.

BLAAAM.

A bullet rips through Kongbu's suitcoat, snapping him back to reality. Blood geysers from his arm and splashes on the wall.

He freaks out and screams like a banshee.

Meiling fires again, terror wrenched in her eyes. Misses. Kongbu -- still wailing -- sprints past her. He flees the house. She chases him.

EXT. KONGBU'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Wild-eyed, frenzied, Kongbu races into the woods behind his house. He pants and moans. Blood soaks his blazer. While he ascends into the trees --

MEILING

Emerges from the house, gun smoking, still disoriented from the strangulation.

SERIES - WOODS

Kongbu, awash in desperation, powers deeper into the forest. The woods thicken. He practically has to crawl through them.

Meiling chases him. Around her, the forest morphs into a baffling labyrinth. She follows the sound of his screams.

The chase continues until --

EXT. SEASIDE BLUFF - NIGHT

Kongbu finds himself on a bluff overlooking the ocean. This was the bluff where Tianshi was seated, all those days ago.

Carefully, he descends towards the --

EXT. BEACH - NIGHT

Tea leaves lap at the shore.

Kongbu plods along a muddy beach. As he stumbles over the rocky shoreline, an eerie sigh whispers across the breeze.

He ignores it. Keeps going.

SIGHHHHHH...

KONGBU
Shut up. Shut up!

Kongbu -- fed up -- looks to the woods.

KONGBU

Enough! Show yourself! Show
yourself, damnit!

Kongbu spins and searches the beach. All sound cuts out. He's isolated with only the crashing waves, as his gaze lands on --

THE OCEAN. Moonlight ripples in the sea. The water appears pristine, reflecting overhead cosmos. Reflecting emptiness.

Slowly the sea starts to part, as if birthing something. As the water spreads --

TWO LARGE HANDS

Rise out of the depths.

Like massive pillars, they reach to the sky, their index fingers, thick like tree trunks, pointed into the heavens.

Kongbu freezes and watches the bizarre visage, an uncanny aura drifting over the wind.

NAKED WOMEN lift out of the water. Shadows weigh under their eyes. Their skin burns incandescent white. Luminous spirits.

Kongbu recognizes them. There's TAI YAHUI -- the dead woman from the beginning. He realizes: These are all his victims.

All at once, the women animate and splash out of the water.

They chase Kongbu along the shoreline. He flees the madness, but he doesn't get far; the women drive him down in the mud.

Kongbu -- panting, wounded -- tries to crawl away, and the spirits keep pushing him down. They giggle at him, mocking.

KONGBU

Please --

Kongbu rolls on his back. He looks up at his victims, their faces all backlit by the moon. The gigantic hands arch down at him, overseeing the assault with a vacuous posture.

The pack of ghastly women part, and...

AN ENTITY steps forward -- the shrouded phantom in its red Hannya mask. It looms over Kongbu. He settles. Losing hope.

Memories rifle through his mind --

INSERT

A DEAD DOVE lies crumpled on the ground, its neck snapped, its wings folded at an awkward angle. It's been strangled.

INSERT

YOUNG KONGBU'S HANDS -- bound with dishrags -- hang from a brass bedpost. The rags bind deep into his wrists.

INSERT

A LEATHER BELT lies, like a snake, on the hardwood floor. Blood licks its buckle.

BACK TO SCENE

Kongbu shuts his eyes and clenches his jaw. Letting go.

KONGBU

Okay.

The entity peels off its mask to reveal --

TIANSHI

Her face is dead, dead calm, dead silent. But it's her: She gazes down at Kongbu with an unknowable indifference -- the indifference of God itself.

Without warning --

HER SWORD SLICES THROUGH THE AIR.

EXT. WOODS - NIGHT

Meiling, lost in the woods, hears Kongbu's cries. Then she hears nothing. The forest untangles --

EXT. SEASIDE BLUFF - NIGHT

Meiling steps onto the rocky bluff.

DOWN BELOW

Kongbu kneels alone on the beach.

His throat has been slashed. The victims have vanished; Tianshi has vanished; the hands are nowhere to be seen.

EXT. BEACH - NIGHT

Meiling stumbles over the rocks, approaching Kongbu.

A repugnant clucking sound wells in his throat. Blood spills from the gash in his gullet and blends with the rising tide.

Meiling crouches beside him. She scans the beach.

MEILING

Is... Is anybody...?

Kongbu spots Meiling from the corner of his eye. He raises his arm to her throat. Meiling lets him. Kongbu clasps his fingers around her neck and tries to squeeze.

Nothing doing. He's too weak.

Rather than stopping him, she allows the pathetic display to unfold, tenderness welling in her heart. In a motion of pity, she takes his hand, cradles it hers, and holds him.

The croaking dwindles.

Kongbu is dead.

EXT. SEASIDE BLUFF - NIGHT

Police lights. Swaying grass. Medics carry Kongbu uphill in a body-bag. Meiling watches them. She sits on the bluff. Alone.

Her gaze. She's a million miles away.

Behind her, Guanlin slips away from the chaos.

GUANLIN

You okay?

MEILING

He was dead when I found him.

GUANLIN

What'd you see?

MEILING

I visited my mother.

GUANLIN

Yiru? When?

MEILING

This morning.

GUANLIN

It's gonna be alright. We'll sort this out, all of it.

MEILING

I'm leaving in the morning.

Guanlin starts to speak, but he stops, finally understanding. He puts his arm around her -- comforting her.

Meiling stares down at the ocean. She searches the tide, the abyss, unsure of what she might find.

And she finds nothing.

After a moment, she lays her head on his shoulder.

EXT. OCEAN - NIGHT

Waves roll into the shore and mop up Kongbu's blood. A crimson cloud dissolves into the sea. Water rolls back.

And something glimmers in the mud. Something, left behind.

TIANSHI'S RING

Sinks into the mire. Its jewel, depicting an all-seeing eye, gleams up from the beach tar, stars reflecting in its pupil.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. HOTEL - DAY

Dawn. More rain.

Meiling emerges from the hotel, dragging a suitcase in her wake. She opens her umbrella and waits out on the sidewalk.

A TAXI pulls down the street and stops at the hotel. A DRIVER jumps out. Using his coat, he shields his head from the rain.

DRIVER

Lee Meiling? Heading to Taipei, right? We should get on.

Meiling gazes up at the hotel.

DRIVER

Ma'am?

Meiling gets an idea. She pulls some cash from her coat and thrusts it into the Driver's hands.

MEILING
Wait here, please.

DRIVER
Hey, it's your money.

Meiling takes off through the rain.

EXT. TEMPLE - DAY

It's early. The storm -- now an otherworldly deluge -- beats against the temple.

Meiling hustles round a bend and stops at its entrance. She squints through a soaked fog of incense. Into the vestibule.

INT. TEMPLE - VIHARN - DAY

The sermon hall is empty. Candles flicker on the walls.

MEILING

Takes off her shoes and shuts her umbrella. She approaches a statue of the FOUR HEAVENLY KINGS -- awestruck and reverent.

And she kneels, pressing her palms and forehead to the floor.

At the end of her prayer, she stops, leaving her head on the floor, and speaks softly. The words come out silent and weak.

But with them, tears come streaming down Meiling's face. She crumples into a fetal position on the floor -- healed, saved.

EXT. TEMPLE - DAY

Meiling exits the temple.

Rain cleanses her face.

She looks out at Jiufen. Lanterns string through the rustic village. Mist floods down from the mountains. The buildings are vague shapes, all half-remembered.

She tries to see them, but she can't.

This is goodbye.

With that, Meiling opens her umbrella and starts back for the taxi. She goes. Darkness encroaches and consumes the town and the storm, and soon her umbrella is all that remains.

The umbrella recedes further into the distance until it's nothing more than a red orb floating in that Stygian void.

But the feeling does linger. For now.

FADE TO BLACK.

THE END