

JOURNEY TO GAO

a Screenplay

by

Celia Brooke

1022 Van Nuys St.  
San Diego, CA 92109  
760 420-3463  
journeytogao@gmail.com

SUPERTITLE: 1899 A.D. SOMEWHERE AT A WRONG TURN OFF THE SILK ROAD . . .

CLOSEUP:

A hammer STRIKES a huge Oriental gong.

INT. A HIDDEN ASIAN KINGDOM - ROYAL PALACE - DAY

In a splendid hall, a throng of almond-eyed Lords and Ladies in silken robes bow in reverent unison towards the front of the hall, where --

-- lovely Maidens bestrew a dais with TIGER LOTUSES, a golden flower shot with brilliant red streaks.

Above the sea of bowed backs, six Bearers of a richly-curtained litter mount the steps towards the dais.

The platform is a mass of gold-and-scarlet.

The Bearers set the litter on the Lotus-covered platform --

Draw aside the curtains --

The Lords and Ladies erupt in screams and panic. Dialogue in <brackets> is in Mandarin.

LADIES AND LORDS

<His Majesty!>

<Murder!>

The LIFELESS FIGURE of the King, dressed in royal yellow robes, topples stiffly out of the litter into the Tiger Lotuses. A knife sticks out of his chest! His face is hidden by the traditional rack of ceremonial rubies.

The King lies dead, folds of gold streaked with scarlet, among the Lotuses -- so many miniature versions of his own stricken image.

FIRE engulfs the scene.

The Lords and Ladies charge about madly.

LADIES AND LORDS

<Flee!>

<Aaaaaah!>

The intense flames shape a large bird.

A PHOENIX, magnificent and colorful, bursts out.

EXT. KINGDOM OF GAO - DAY

The phoenix skims a crystalline sky over steep mountains that surround the lush valley of GAO -- a hidden land unknown to time and intruders.

NARRATOR (VO)

One hundred years and more they've waited.

The bird skims through the skies --

-- over the heads of Gao Townsmen in Mandarin-style gowns, Ladies in flowing silks. They gossip, play chess.

-- over the heads of Gao Townsmen who ply smooth roads to lively markets and stately pavilions.

-- over a clear river dotted with boats for commerce and pleasure.

NARRATOR (VO)

One hundred years of patient magic, drifting towards its end.

The bird dips through plantations covering green hills studded with shrines and towers.

NARRATOR (VO)

And Two, destined to finish its story, to know its cities, streets, and townsmen . . .

The bird reaches the head of the valley, where, overlooking all:

THE PALACE OF THE CELESTIAL GATE, both fortress and royal seat, thrusts up amidst the glacial mountains. Its mighty granite walls deny all comers -- and keep in all stayers.

A detail of GUARDS on horseback gallops urgently out of the Palace towards the mountains.

NARRATOR (VO)

And its peril . . .

The bird flies up the side of the highest mountain.

NARRATOR (VO)

Only Two, destined to write their sorrow . . .

It crests the ridge --

NARRATOR (VO)  
 . . . to summon their will and  
 mold their strenuous triumph . . .

-- plunges downward on the other side, to --

NARRATOR (VO)  
 . . . if only they can.

-- New York City! Present day. All scenes in New York are B&W. Only the Bird is shown in color.

SUPERTITLE: SATURDAY

EXT. MANHATTAN - SUNSET

A high aerial view of the city. The bird dives into the frame.

It soars among the tops of gleaming skyscrapers to a Greenwich Village brownstone.

INT. LI'S LOFT - CONTINUOUS

A man and a woman, both Asian, glare daggers at each other. SHUANG TING, the woman, age 40, satiny and sleek, aims a manicured finger like a dart.

The dart is pointed at a swath of silk (the front of which we never see) that's stretched in a frame, which rests on the work table of a busy artist.

Planted assertively beside the unseen work-in-progress is LI SHAN-XUE, the man, age 42. He is keen of eye, taut of movement and muscle, cold of face.

SHUANG  
 If not you, then who?

LI  
 The question is prosaic and beside  
 the point, Shuang Ting.

SHUANG  
 Half this painting is missing. You  
 don't know what story you're  
 telling.

LI  
 The painting is complete!

SHUANG

You'll have to get another agent if you want it to go to The Antiquity next week. Someone with a duller eye than Shuang Ting. Someone who understands you the way I do.

(threatening)

Or, you can take it there yourself.

She gets out of his face as Li simmers at her.

SHUANG (CONT)

It'd be the first false stroke of your career, and it'd broadside both our reputations. Show me that other piece you have.

Li points his upturned nose at the unseen canvas.

LI

This is what I have.

SHUANG

What has gotten into you, Li? Look at your technique, your muscle control; they're inimitable! But that's not where your greatness lies; it lies in your . . .

LI

Say it.

SHUANG

You're the one who makes it hard to say. Your SOUL. That's what's changed.

LI

You always said it could only improve.

SHUANG

Whatever you've done to it, you can't finish a painting anymore. Li, you're the Master of Shangri-la.

She pulls a large catalog out of her massive Birkin bag:  
"CONTEMPORARY ASIAN ART."

SHUANG (CONT)

Read it! They say you've captured  
infinity in the beat of a  
hummingbird's wings! What could be  
impossible for you?

LI

Satisfying critics of my soul -- a  
feat I do not mean to attempt.

Shuang slips a business card into the middle of the book.

SHUANG

I'll be back from Hong Kong in a  
week, and I want something for The  
Antiquity. Get a muse, get a  
clue -- whatever you need to finish  
that thing.

At the door, she shoots a look of deadly threat at Li.

SHUANG (CONT)

As your agent, I'm warning you:  
don't go improving your soul  
without talking to me first!

SLAM.

Li is alone in the apartment.

Arranged neatly before him on the work desk are his tools: a  
washer, a water-jar, a pitcher, an ink stone, swathes of silk  
and rice paper.

He plucks up a weasel-hair brush --

Sits before the canvas, arm tense, teeth gritted, sweat  
beading on brow, face creased in concentration --

And slams the brush down.

LI

I cannot!

Outside, a colorful bird flutters to his window sill -- the  
same colorful bird we saw in Gao. Li looks up.

He thrusts himself out the window and stares incredulously.  
The bird wheels over the street.

LI (CONT)

Am I the only one who sees it?

He grabs a jacket and dashes out.

The loft is empty. On a shelf is another painting in an antique frame.

ZOOM IN:

In color: The painting, polychrome on silk, shows a bird perched on a branch -- the very bird that was flying outside.

EXT. LI'S BUILDING - MOMENTS LATER

Li dashes into the street outside his building, still staring upward in astonishment. The bird glides overhead.

He follows below, trampling indignant PASSERSBY as he fixates on the wonder overhead, which only he seems to see.

PASSERSBY

Hey, dude!

Yo, watch it!

EXT. UPTOWN - SOON AFTER

Further uptown, a possessed Li still follows the phoenix, which glides along unseen by all but him.

INT. UPSCALE RESTAURANT - DINING ROOM - SOON AFTER

Chic young diners eat, drink, and laugh. In the foreground, a single, brilliant FEATHER -- shown in color -- floats over the scene in a beam of smoky light.

The feather skims high over trendy coifs and bare shoulders, towards a staircase at the back of the room.

It dances up the staircase on a current of air, and into:

A GILDED BALLROOM - CONTINUOUS

Skims through the vast empty air, over the polished floor, towards a pair of French windows that are cracked open.

Drifts out the French windows, where:

EXT. BALCONY - CONTINUOUS

CHERIZE DODD, 28, pale and pretty, dressed in a floral silk frock, grips the rail of the balcony and looks over the street below.

Her fragile face is full of innocence -- and despair.

CHERIZE

Someone. Push me!

A single tear falls from her eye, and splashes against a huge diamond set in a ring on her left hand.

A pair of bright WINGS (in color) brushes by her head . . .

CHERIZE

Wha--?

The colorful bird wheels just in front of her. She leans towards it in amazement, and FALLS!

She SLAMS, unconscious, onto an awning one story above the street. Her limp body lies just at the edge.

The feather floats downward, and lands softly on Cherize, adding the laaaaast molecule of unsustainable weight.

Cherize rolls to the edge and FALLS through the air unconscious --

-- into the arms of a stunned Li, who has just wandered up on the sidewalk below.

Li holds the unconscious Cherize in his arms and looks up, astonished.

The bird perches on the balcony and looks straight down at him.

It spreads its wings in a shimmering fan of light, and VANISHES.

SUPERTITLE: SUNDAY

INT. LI'S BUILDING - HALLWAY - MORNING

Li tosses a bag into a garbage chute. Next to the chute is a stack of gossip rags, THE EAST VILLAGE EAVESDROPPER.

Over Cherize's picture, the front page blares a headline: "HEIRESS MISSING."

INT. LI'S LOFT - CONTINUOUS

Li saunters in and tosses the Eavesdropper on a table. Cherize sleeps on a tatami mat, a delicate wreck in her silk frock.

She opens her eyes and sits up woozily . . .

CHERIZE

Ooohhhh.



. . . and finds herself under the calm, curious gaze of Li, who relaxes against a window ledge.

CHERIZE (CONT)

Oh! Who are you? H-how did I get here?

LI

You shot from the sky and fell into my arms. You are the most bizarre meteorite I have ever seen.

He leans towards her -- she coils protectively.

LI (CONT)

I found you outside last night and brought you here. If I had wanted to sample your charms I could have, easily. Green tea?

He leans closer, and pours tea from a pot. Cherize touches her temples, fog lifting . . .

CHERIZE

Last night. I fell. I could have died.

LI

Did I interrupt a plan?

Cherize is surprised -- not pleasantly.

CHERIZE

Who are you?

LI

Look around.

Cherize makes a quick sweep around the loft with her eyes: art supplies, Chinese chests and cabinets, tatami mats, shelves groaning with books and curios.

CHERIZE

An artist. Do you want something from me?

LI

Perhaps the answer to a mystery.

Cherize warily slips into a pair of strappy sandals (hers, evidently removed by Li) set near the tatami mat.

CHERIZE

I . . . have to go.

Li doesn't stop her as she wobbles quickly toward the door.

She stops in her tracks as she passes the painting of the colorful bird.

CHERIZE (CONT)

What mystery?

LI

The offer of tea is still good.

Cherize picks up the painting and pores over the textures of leaves, twigs, feathers, the translucent eye of the bird.

CHERIZE

What is this?

LI

A favorite of mine, from the old world. I chose not to part with it.

CHERIZE

Is it real?

LI

Have you ever seen anything like it?

CHERIZE

Did I hit the ground last night? Am I dead or in a coma? I saw that thing.

LI

Divinity, fate, magic, madness -- any of them is possible.

CHERIZE

For you too, then.

Cherize accepts a cup of tea from Li's hand as a tear gathers in her eye.

CHERIZE (CONT)

I can't go back out there yet.

LI

Stay as long as you like. Your footprint is small --

He unfurls the Eavesdropper in Cherize's face.

LI (CONT)

-- and you are doubtless good for  
the rent.

Cherize drops her teacup and grabs the Eavesdropper.

CHERIZE

It certainly didn't take them long!

CLOSE-UP on the Eavesdropper. Below the fold, another, smaller, picture shows a handsome blonde pinstriper with the caption: FIANCÉ CONCERNED.

CHERIZE (CONT)

Ex-fiancé. Ohhh, Stephenson! How  
could you throw me back to them?

She whips the Eavesdropper open. A series of photos tells the story:

- Dominating the center of the page, a heart-shaped cutout frames Cherize and Stephenson as they show her ring, smiling and embracing for the camera.
- Cherize and Stephenson at a charity event. A faded glamour-queen forces herself between them and smiles boozily at the camera.
- Cherize and Stephenson sit in a theater box, separated now by two people: the faded glamour-queen and an even more faded and shriveled queen dowager.
- Cherize looks up resignedly as she sits in an ornate chair, surrounded by a half-dozen old-money fops and hags.
- Stephenson sits unsmiling at a table at the MOVERS AND SHAKERS BANQUET. Next to him is an empty seat.

CHERIZE (CONT)

He said they own me. He said I  
can't follow him to the places he  
needs to go.

She looks around the loft, her eyes twinkling.

CHERIZE (CONT)

I wonder what he'd think of my  
being here?  
(to Li)

You've really never heard of me?

He shrugs a "Nope."

CHERIZE (CONT)

Fine. As long as we'll only know each other fifteen minutes, we can both be anonymous.

LI

That is exactly who I have been -- "Anonymous." Also the Master of Shangri-la. Also the Mad Monk. Also the Painter of -- Lilies, Lotuses, something.

CHERIZE

Why are you telling me this?

LI

I hope we shall know each other longer than fifteen minutes. Let us not miss the point of our encounter, whatever it is.

CHERIZE

Encounter? Listen, I just happened to be on a balcony, and --

LI

No shame; I myself was there only because the alternative was to suffer the torment of a malicious spirit that lacks the mercy to kill me.

Cherize is frozen, clueless.

CHERIZE

I don't know what the point of our encounter is.

She attempts to pass Li, but he bars her. His hand lifts the cloth from the work-in-progress.

Once again, Cherize halts before the canvas, entranced.

LI

This is the first work of Li Shan-xue -- my name. My first work in five years, by any name.

CHERIZE

It's you.

LI

The likeness.

CHERIZE

It's beautiful. When are you going to finish it?

Li snarls and covers the canvas back up.

LI

The work is complete!

CHERIZE

Why are you showing it to me? Is this the point of our encounter?

LI

Perhaps so. What is missing?

CHERIZE

I don't know. I'm out of tea.  
I --

LI

Wash up. I will make us something to eat.

He casually tidies up a low table.

CHERIZE

I'm out of tea and I have to go. I fell off a balcony last night! And you're mad.

LI

Correct.

CHERIZE

The longer I stay, the worse they'll . . .

LI

They?

CHERIZE

You must have some of them -- except good ones. Mine are all bad.

LI

Ahhh. Owners. Not I; there can be none good. I give myself to principles of truth and beauty which can be served only by the focused mind and the still, uncluttered heart.

CHERIZE

The poet who wrote about truth and  
beauty didn't live that way.

Li gestures at the bookshelves.

LI

I cannot explain myself further; my  
work speaks for me. Consult my  
critics if you want a lecture.

CHERIZE

I will. You said you were going to  
cook.

LI

So I did. I hope you like fish-  
heads and rice.

Cherize looks sharply at Li's back as he wipes the low table;  
she reaches for the thick book Shuang left behind.

CHERIZE

(muttering)

Let's find out about you.

She opens to the page marked by Shuang's business card, which  
shows Shuang's picture. The page features a print of the  
polychrome phoenix in Li's loft (in color), with descriptive  
text.

CHERIZE (CONT)

(reading softly)

The Master of Shangri-la, Mainland  
artist, depicts natural and  
supernatural objects with an  
austerity and intricacy that belie  
an intense introspection and a  
search for . . .

Cherize looks up from the book, astonished.

CHERIZE (CONT)

You're not "an artist"; you're a  
great one.

She points at the unseen canvas. Li ignores her as he sets  
small bowls and chopsticks on the table.

CHERIZE (CONT)

Why are you signing that one? Your first in five years, you said?

(beat)

Why have you waited so long to get back to work?

(beat)

What's it going to be when it's finished?

(beat)

You're blocked?

(beat)

Where have you been for the last five years?

LI

A monastery.

CHERIZE

Somehow that doesn't surprise me. What's got you blocked?

LI

My subject himself.

CHERIZE

If it's not you, then who is it?

LI

That is King Dahu . . .

EXT. PALACE OF THE CELESTIAL GATE - DAY

Gal is always shown in full color.

We've seen the Palace before, in the Valley of Gao. Now we meet its royal inhabitant:

KING DAHU, 42, erect and sure, plants himself atop a Palace lookout: face set, eyes vigilant, fists on hips. A king's king, he confers fierce dignity on whatever he assumes, be it crown, armor, or scholar's gown. He is a dead ringer for Li.

On a treacherous pass below, camels and horses run, whips fly, Soldiers and Guards WHOOP as they drive a small captured caravan into the Palace.

LI (VO)

. . . lord of the state of Gao, defender of the Palace of the Celestial Gate, unconquered by the Ming and Qing emperors.

SOLDIERS

<Whoop!>

<Yee-ahh!>

The King marches to a Palace entrance. Guards part their spears as he approaches.

INT. PALACE - CONTINUOUS

Torches flicker on high, polished walls. Steps lead to a marble throne that dominates a scattering of benches and pillows covered with the skins of tigers and goats. A huge seal of the House of Gao hangs overhead.

Palace Guards stand at attention as King Dahu places himself before the throne.

At the other end of the entry hall, a giant wooden entrance door GROANS wide, and Guards burst through with a struggling CAPTIVE.

The Guards throw before the feet of the King a white-skinned beauty of 28, roughed up in her leathern traveling clothes -- a dead ringer for Cherize.

CHERIZE (VO)

But his domain was soon to be disturbed by an entirely different type of intruder!

LI (VO)

What!

INT. LI'S LOFT - DAY

Li spins on an animated Cherize.

LI

There is no girl!

CHERIZE

There is now.

LI

Your party trick is serious business for me.

CHERIZE

You don't know me. Maybe I do know what it is to suffer.

LI

I will tell you of that.



Li grips the unfinished canvas and stares at it.

LI (CONT)

This work was engendered by some foreign fascination, not of my character or principles. As powerless as I was to resist its genesis, I am now powerless to go on. A painter, too, must know what story he is telling, like any other artist -- but this story has eluded me. So King Dahu has been standing at that lookout for one hundred years and more, staring at goodness-knows-what.

(to Cherize)

You take a curious interest in him.

CHERIZE

I see something from that lookout. I think your King Dahu needs a lesson in love, or pride.

LI

You are quick and free in your inventions.

Cherize kicks over the little tea-table -- cups, leaves, and hot water fly.

CHERIZE

Yes! And everyone always tells me to drink my tea.

Li fixes her with his lance-like stare.

INT. PALACE - DAY

Dahu fixes Nicolette with his lance-like stare. He raps commands at the Palace Guards.

COMMANDER YING, chief of the Palace Guard, stands forward. Like all of Dahu's men, he is crisp, sharp, able.

DAHU

<What about her guides?>

COMMANDER YING

<Fled, your majesty. We're in hot pursuit. They were West Mountain people.>

DAHU

<West Mountain! When did they  
forget to keep their distance?  
Bring me her effects.>

The Captive speaks up at Dahu while a Guard passes a bundle of papers up to the throne.

CAPTIVE

What is this place? I'm an  
innocent traveler! Can you  
understand me?

Dahu snaps the papers open, scans a passport:

"NICOLETTE LITTON -- b. 1871 -- NEW YORK." It bears a date stamp of 1899.

Nicolette, the Captive, pleads.

NICOLETTE

Can you read it? I'm Nicolette  
Litton, of New York!

Dahu holds a wide sleeve up before his chest and reaches into a fold near his belt, for an item that no one else can see.

With his sleeve still up, he narrows his eyes on Nicolette.

DAHU

<Lock her up.>

Guards haul away a struggling Nicolette.

NICOLETTE

Where are you taking me? Who are  
you? Let me go! Help!

POV DAHU:

Behind his sleeve, his free hand holds a flat silver case. It is open, showing a PHOTO OF NICOLETTE holding a flute.

Dahu's free hand snaps it shut; the cover is engraved with the letters "J E."

INT. LI'S LOFT - DAY

Li watches as an entranced Cherize traces letters in the air with her finger.

CHERIZE

The cover's engraved with the  
letters, J - E.

LI

J - E.

CHERIZE

Are you intrigued?

LI

Ngghh. They speak Mandarin?

CHERIZE

"Unconquered by the Ming and Qing emperors," you said -- but not uninfluenced.

LI

A woman traveling alone in 1899?

CHERIZE

It wouldn't be impossible.

LI

He carries her photograph?

CHERIZE

I'm sure there's a fascinating reason.

LI

Very well, supply it. I cannot make a painting from that little bit.

CHERIZE

What is this, story-telling on demand?

LI

Do you have some pressing obligation that would preclude it?

CHERIZE

What are we doing?!

LI

I have a deadline. You may hide out here for a week and spin tales to your heart's content.

Cherize holds the dazzling engagement ring, still on her hand, before her eyes: the light of the gem, liquid fire, bathes her face like a silvery hope.

She turns to Li.

CHERIZE

I can't make it all up just like that.

She plucks at her dress as if it's a rotten banana peel.

CHERIZE (CONT)

Eh . . .

LI

The door behind you.

INT. BATHROOM - CONTINUOUS

Cherize steps in. She is immediately stopped by her reflection in a mirror of her disheveled, frail self.

She stares into the mirror and raises her hands protectively to her breasts. Frothy dress, bare arms.

CHERIZE

(soft, to herself)

Imagine that lying unconscious on a sidewalk.

(speaking up)

Li. My name is Cherize Dodd.

LI (OFF CAMERA)

Good.

EXT. - MANHATTAN - DAY

Later, on a busy sidewalk outside Li's loft, Cherize pokes her face out from behind the gate.

At the street, Li holds a cab; Cherize scuttles for the back seat.

EXT. LOW-RENT SHOPPING DISTRICT - DAY

An hour later, Cherize sidles out of a store called KRAZY KLOTHES.

CLOSER ON:

Cherize -- on second look, not Cherize, but a young woman with Cherize's hair and figure, in the floral silk frock from the night before.

Behind her, a Slim Girl in cheap, bright clothes holds several big shopping bags.

Cherize (the Slim Girl in the cheap clothes) presses a wad of cash into the Lookalike's hand.

The real Cherize leaps into another cab, which Li holds.

INT. CAB - CONTINUOUS

Inside the cab, Cherize watches out the back window while Li shakes his head.

LI

This is not necessary.

On the street, Passersby and Photographers are already staring and tagging along after the Lookalike. The cab moves away.

CHERIZE

I know the rules of my world. I was last seen in a vintage Nipon silk print.

From outside, close-up on Cherize looking out the cab window, her face bright with anticipation.

CHERIZE (CONT)

Besides . . .

INT. LI'S LOFT - EVENING

Li cooks in the kitchen while Cherize sits near a window with a pen and a leather-bound notebook.

CLOSE-UP of the inside of the notebook: BLANK PAGES. Cherize's pen twiddles at the side.

CHERIZE

How long have you been in this country?

LI

One year.

CHERIZE

Where did you learn English?

LI

In Lanzhou, from missionaries. It was brutal. Two years of arranging my sentences backwards, but I think I have got the hang of it.

CHERIZE

Why did you leave the -- what was it, the monastery?

LI

They kicked me out.

CHERIZE

It's all right, don't tell me why.  
I'd rather make it up.

Cherize writes in the book. Outside the window, the colorful bird soars over the Village streets, Cherize unaware.

CLOSE-UP of her writing in the notebook: JOURNEY TO GAO.

EXT. PALACE OF THE CELESTIAL GATE - DAY

The colorful bird soars high over the Palace.

INT. DUNGEON - CONTINUOUS

In a large cell, Nicolette watches as three young MAIDS plow through her trunk. They hold out her underthings.

MAID 1

<Good for straining yak butter!>

MAID 2

<Do you think she's that color all over?>

MAID 3

<Let's get a look.>

The Maids CACKLE and gang up on Nicolette, pulling at her clothes. A big SPIDER dangles from the ceiling.

NICOLETTE

Stop! I'll give you what you want!  
Were you told to do this?

The spider FALLS and hits Nicolette's bare shoulder.

NICOLETTE (CONT)

Eeeek!

Maid 1 hefts a water jug. The other two Maids jump aside.

MAID 1

<Stand back!>

Maid 1 dashes Nicolette with the water, knocking the spider off and soaking her. The other Maids double over laughing.

NICOLETTE

Oh! Oh!

MAIDS

<Hee hee!>

<Ha ha ha!>

Two Guards appear outside the cell. Suddenly, everyone is quiet.

MAIDS

<Oop?>

INT. THRONE ROOM - MINUTES LATER

The Guards hustle Nicolette, damp and torn, before Dahu.

Dahu scowls at her appearance.

DAHU

<What happened to her?>

GUARD

<The servants, majesty.>

Nicolette spits at Dahu.

NICOLETTE

Savage. You could at least be civil to your captives. I'm glad you can't understand me, whoever you are.

Dahu steps close to Nicolette and answers her assertively in Chinese-accented English

DAHU

I am sorry you were mistreated. It is not our custom at the Palace of the Celestial Gate.

Nicolette stunned.

NICOLETTE

You . . .

DAHU

I am Dahu, King of Gao. You can take it as proof of my civility that I have not had you killed for addressing me as "you" instead of "your majesty."

NICOLETTE

You speak English.

DAHU

I thought it a good idea to learn when I had the opportunity. Now tell me why you have come here.

Nicolette's jaw re-stiffens as Dahu questions her.

NICOLETTE

I was dragged here.

DAHU

You were brought here from a place where you did not belong.

NICOLETTE

I know nothing of that! I believe my fiancé disappeared in this region two years ago. I've followed as best I could from his letters.

DAHU

Ngh. And have you been sending letters home yourself?

NICOLETTE

A few, to friends.

DAHU

Then they will come after you. More and more will come.

NICOLETTE

Not here! I mean to leave the minute you return my things.

DAHU

Thank you for your truthfulness. You can learn what will become of you from someone who was equally truthful.

Dahu marches out a passageway; Nicolette helplessly watches him go.

Behind her, a shadow falls in another passage, from someone approaching --

A heavy masculine boot strides the tiled floor --

In walks JOHN ECHEVERRY, 35, dressed in a mix of the local and western garb. He's the living image of the ex-fiancé seen in the East Village Eavesdropper.



At the sight of Nicolette, he stops in his tracks, stunned --  
Nicolette's eyes leap with shock and elation --

NICOLETTE

John!

INT. MANHATTAN - LI'S LOFT - MORNING

SUPERTITLE: MONDAY

Cherize bolts up from a sound sleep on a tatami mat.

CHERIZE

Stephenson!

Li lies on another mat in another part of the loft, separated from Cherize by screens. He frowns and mumbles.

LI

Stephenson?

EXT. MANHATTAN - STREETS - LATE MORNING

Li's hand lifts a copy of LEADERSHIP magazine off a news stand. The magazine boasts a cover photo of the familiar blonde businessman, boldly captioned: "STEPHENSON WHITMORE HARPER TAKES THE HELM."

LI

He is quite the cover boy.

He waves the magazine under Cherize's nose. She is still "disguised" in her simple hairdo and clothes.

LI (CONT)

Where is the helmsman going? Point A, Point Q, it is all the same.

CHERIZE

Well, yes, if it's just geography -- but it's not.

Li opens the magazine.

ZOOM IN

Dominating the spread is an illustration of Stephenson in his business suit, boldly standing on top of the world. The title reads: "NO LIMITS."

The opposite page shows a photo of Cherize being swallowed by the massive door to a grandiose old Park Avenue apartment building. Li reads the caption.

LI

"Cherize Dodd bides her time until the big day."

CHERIZE

They wanted to interview me for that story.

She snatches at the magazine; Li sets it back down.

CHERIZE (CONT)

My stepmother said no. She said if they wanted to know what was on my mind, they could pull the string on a talking Barbie.

They move on. Cherize's brow is furrowed with determination.

CHERIZE (CONT)

No more of that. That girl is changing. She finds her heart, charts her destiny, crosses the seas! If I can create her, I can be her.

LI

Mrs. Stephenson Whitmore Harper.

CHERIZE

So? It's my story, too.

LI

Then banish these distractions and tell it properly -- or you, too, shall be lost.

CHERIZE

Well, you certainly are adding to them. Don't forget, I wield the power of the pen. I can dash the pride of kings. Crush their might with a stroke!

EXT. GAO ENVIRONS - DAY

Three Gao SOLDIERS ride through a forest on horseback, on the look-out.

SOLDIER 1

<Are you sure they were West Mountain Men?>

SOLDIER 2

<I'd know West Mountain Men.>

SOLDIER 3

<But why would they -->

They crest a hill and spot a trudging West Mountain GUIDE.  
They ride up on him.

SOLDIER 1

<Hey! Hold it there! You're a  
West Mountain man, aren't you?>

The Guide stops under some trees.

WEST MOUNTAIN GUIDE

<Yes.>

SOLDIER 1

<What are you doing off the trail?>

WEST MOUNTAIN GUIDE

<The foreign woman hired me to  
guide her.>

SOLDIER 2

<She overpaid.>

SOLDIER 1

<You know the orders of King Dahu.  
You're not supposed to be here  
yourself, much less bring in a  
foreigner.>

WEST MOUNTAIN GUIDE

<We got lost. What do you Gao-men  
expect if you use mountains and  
cliffs for borders?>

SOLDIER 1

<That you stay on the trails.>

SOLDIER 3

<Who's this "we"?>

Suddenly, the Guide HITS the ground --

The Soldiers, sensing danger, draw SABERS --

Before they can use them, a HAIL OF ARROWS from overhead falls  
them!

They slide from their horses.

GAO SOLDIERS

<Arrrgghhh!>

<Ugghhhhh!>

<Ruuunnhhh!>

Up in the trees, half a dozen WEST MOUNTAIN MEN armed with bows and arrows clamber toward the ground.

WEST MOUNTAIN GUIDE

<Are there any more?>

WEST MOUNTAIN MAN 1

<Not nearby.>

The West Mountain Men grab the horses and drag the dying Gao Soldiers off towards a cave.

INT. CAVE - CONTINUOUS

The West Mountain Men strip the dead Soldiers of their weapons.

A sliver of daylight at the mouth of the cave closes as the West Mountain Men go about their grisly work.

WEST MOUNTAIN MAN 2

<Hey, get out of the -->

SHADOWS stretch into the cave. Sword-points flash as the West Mountain Men aim towards the mouth of the cave.

WEST MOUNTAIN GUIDE

(to West Mountain Man 1)

<You said there weren't any more!>

WEST MOUNTAIN MAN 1

<They're not Gao-men!!>

A rough hand boasting a distinctive TATTOO and wielding a knife appears from behind the Guide and STRIKES his neck. Blood spurts out.

WEST MOUNTAIN GUIDE

<Aaaaahhhhh!>

DARK FIGURES rush on the West Mountain Men from all sides, STABBING their throats and torsos.

WEST MOUNTAIN MEN

<Aaaahhhhh!>

<Grrrrrr!>

<Hhhhhaaaaa!>

INT. MANHATTAN TEA SHOP - LATE AFTERNOON

Li and Cherize share a tiny table set with tea and snacks. He reads the notebook while Cherize nurses a thimble-sized cup.

LI

"Dark figures" . . . so so  
so . . . "stabbing their throats  
and torsos."

He finishes reading.

LI (CONT)

Well! Dahu's plot has thickened.  
Never did I think his story would  
be so . . . fictional.

CHERIZE

His life is more realistic than  
yours, Li. Not all of us keep  
still, uncluttered hearts in the  
service of truth and beauty.

LI

What a pity.

INT. PALACE OF THE CELESTIAL GATE - DAY

Nicolette flings herself on a stiff, hollow-eyed John.

NICOLETTE

John! John, my God, I've come to  
find you! I haven't heard a word  
from you in two long years.

JOHN

Nicolette.

NICOLETTE

Don't you want to kiss me, John?

JOHN

I . . . want . . .

NICOLETTE

John, what's the matter? I've come  
all the way from New York, I've  
left everything for you.

JOHN

I'd given up hope.

NICOLETTE

Dearest, our hope is restored!  
Don't tell me that wicked king has  
hurt you.

JOHN

I would have written, Nicolette,  
but I couldn't. You never knew how  
I came here.

FLASHBACK

EXT. GAO ENVIRONS - DAY

A BLIZZARD swirls over snow-covered trails and hills. John  
struggles to strike camp, aided by local PORTERS.

JOHN (VO)

It was two years ago . . .

The wind whips at a trunk and knocks the lid off. Papers and  
books fly out.

JOHN (VO)

Not far from here . . .

JOHN

<Save my books! My notes!>

John struggles towards the trunk. Porters shout at him.

PORTERS

<Stop!>

<Don't go that way!>

<Get back here!>

A WALL of snow breaks away from the mountainside and crashes  
down on the camp.

The Porters flee the avalanche. John collapses on the trunk.

PORTERS (CONT)

<Aaaghh!>

<Save yourselves!>

EXT. PALACE OF THE CELESTIAL GATE - DAY

In the calm after the storm, Gao Guards bear a half-dead John on a pallet into the Palace of the Celestial Gate. Another detail bears his trunk and camp remnants.

INT. PALACE BEDCHAMBER - DAY

John twists on a fur-covered cot. The growth of his whiskers shows the passage of some days. A Servant lifts a bowl of gruel to his lips.

INT. PALACE RECEIVING ROOM - DAY

Commander Ying presents Dahu with John's captured items: documents, books, a telescope, a magnifying glass, maps.

YING

<He didn't have any heavy weapons.  
Just camping and traveling tools.  
And books.>

Dahu picks something up.

DAHU

<What have we here?>

CLOSE-UP of the item lying in his palm: a silver case engraved with the letters "J E."

INT. PALACE THRONE ROOM - DAY

Days later, John, shaggy but recovered, stands before Dahu, who interrogates John from a throne.

DAHU

<You speak the language of our  
educated. Who are you and what is  
your business in this part of the  
world?>

JOHN

<My name is John Echeverry. I study the societies and cultures of man. I've come to the Orient for scholarly purposes. I'll share my findings with citizens of the West, so they can understand your ways and appreciate the community of mankind.>

DAHU

<You did not know of Gao before you came here?>

JOHN

<No. This place isn't known in the West.>

DAHU

<You must be very happy to find it.>

JOHN

<It's wonderful. If you'll permit me, I'll study here a while before I continue.>

DAHU

<You may study here all you want. But you may not continue.>

JOHN

<Your meaning . . .?>

DAHU

<I cannot afford the smallest chance that you will tell others of this place. I wish you no harm, but you shall never leave.>

JOHN

<What? You can't keep me!>

Dahu rises from his throne matter-of-factly.

DAHU

<I am already doing so.>

JOHN

<But -->



DAHU

<Your life here will be comfortable and respectable. You will teach me your language.>

JOHN

<But my life is in the West. In America! I must write to my friends back home!>

DAHU

<Sending out word is exactly what you must not do.>

He walks off and disappears into a passage as John pleads and rages, mixing English and Mandarin in his frenzy.

JOHN

But it was you who brought me here!  
<I won't breathe a word of this place! Just let me go and I'll never come here again!> This is against all ruth and reason!

INT. DAHU'S APARTMENTS - DAY

Weeks later, a clean-shaven John and Dahu leaf through John's books.

JOHN (VO)

He was true to his word.

INT. LIBRARY - DAY

John explores ancient scrolls.

JOHN (VO)

His libraries are wonderful.

INT. LOUNGING ROOM - EVENING

John, Dahu, and several Scholars drink wine from jade bowls and talk animatedly.

JOHN (VO)

I joined Gao's scholars and artists.

RETURN TO SCENE

INT. LOUNGING ROOM - EVENING

Back in the throne room, Nicolette listens to John tremulously.

JOHN

I never imagined you would find  
your way to this unheard-of place.  
I never dreamed I would see you  
again.

John looks down a passage and lifts a hand to beckon --

Feminine robes and dainty slippers sweep along the passage  
floor --

MING-NA, 29, a woman of evident nobility, enters. She carries  
a BABY BOY about a year old, with Western and Asian features.  
She stands at John's side and regards Nicolette with a cool,  
guarded look.

Nicolette FAINTS.

EXT. BROOKLYN BOTANICAL GARDENS - DAY

SUPERTITLE: TUESDAY

In a grassy area, Cherize lies flat on her back and stares at  
the sky. Li sits nearby.

CHERIZE

I've never been here like this  
before.

LI

Like this?

CHERIZE

Free.

LI

How do you manage to take your  
prison with you wherever you go?

CHERIZE

Here's how. My stepmother's  
friends scout out a place upstate  
for a picnic and we do some all-out  
gourmet affair. Long skirts, big  
hats, silver trays with cream puffs  
and pâté. The men wear straw hats.  
Crystal goblets, pink wine. Card  
games. Gossip. Stepmother gets  
drunk. Humiliates me. I cry.  
Promise to do better next time.  
Beg for her love. Then Stephenson  
calls but my head hurts so that I  
can't see him.

LI

You have a fortune that could free  
you of it all.

CHERIZE

It's easier said than done.

They get up and wander towards a tropical enclosure.

INT. TROPICAL ENCLOSURE - CONTINUOUS

Cherize and Li stop at a stone pot that holds a streaked  
flower.

CHERIZE

What's this one?

LI

A Tiger Lotus, native to my home.

They almost touch foreheads as they look at the flower  
together.

LI (CONT)

I have seen it grow abundantly on  
fertile hillsides. A sudden rain  
drives into it, and its turgid  
membranes burst almost in a moment  
into the flower you see here.

CHERIZE

It's beautiful. When was the last  
time you saw it wild?

LI

Twenty-four years ago. On a  
filthy-humid day while traveling to  
Guilin.

CHERIZE

Twenty-four years ago. I was four  
years old and I couldn't go out my  
front door. I still can't.

LI

Some things are easier when you do  
not have a choice. Which brings me  
to a task I have for you.

CHERIZE

What?

LI

The impossible.

He looks at his reflection in a small stone pool.

CHERIZE

What?

LI

It is no less than I demand of myself.

ON THE POOL:

Li and Cherize's reflections.

LI

Show me how this subject does the impossible.

CHERIZE

The impossible?

LI

Far different cares beckon him sternly . . .

CHERIZE

Yes!

LI

Damn it, why do you insist I use words? The impossible -- you will know it when you see it.

CHERIZE

How can I make him do it unless I can do it myself -- could do it myself?

LI

I will be interested to see your answer. To capture infinity in the beat of a hummingbird's wings was the end of a different quest.

INT. PALACE RECEIVING ROOM - DAY

Commander Ying reports to Dahu. Between them, Nicolette's documents are spread on a table, along with a knife, a compass, and a map.

YING

<Everything else we've returned to her. She's been moved to the Lotus Mansion.>

DAHU

<She has a musical instrument.>

YING

<It seems to have been lost.>

Dahu gives a grimace of dissatisfaction.

INT. LI'S LOFT - EVENING

Cherize chops and mixes in the kitchen while Li watches.

LI

You cook?

CHERIZE

I studied with Monsieur Henri. And I've had it with those twigs and roots you've been feeding me.

LI

Mo-shure On-ree?

CHERIZE

Don't tell anyone; I was supposed to be getting my nails done.

Li ambles towards the bathroom.

LI

The results will show whether it is worth telling about.

CHERIZE

Why do you always have to be so smart? You know, Li, you're not the only one who knows a thing or two. I try to improve my mind. I read books. Did you know that within a solar system, smaller planets are more likely to develop civilizations than larger ones?

LI

Is this what your powers of inquiry have produced?

Li shuts the bathroom door. Cherize shouts on from the kitchen.

CHERIZE

For your information, the large planets block asteroids that might hit the small planets and destroy their nascent life forms. Earth is a perfect example. There's Jupiter and Saturn orbiting out there, and we're one of the smaller --

FLUSSSHHHH!

The bathroom door opens and Li saunters back into the kitchen.

LI

You devote your mental energy to this irrational theorizing?

CHERIZE

I don't think it's so rational to dismiss it just like that.

Li sits on the other side of the counter while Cherize fixes plates.

LI

What about all the empty space around the small planets? There is much more of that than there is total mass of large planets, leaving the asteroids for the most part a clear path to the small planets.

CHERIZE

Well. Now you're theorizing.

LI

I am showing you that scientists make things up.

Cherize sets a plate before him: an artistically molded and garnished Steak Tartare with three raw eggs.

LI

Oh.

Cherize sits next to him, with a smaller steak.

CHERIZE

Enjoy your dinner.

LI

I shall.

Li goes at the steak with bare hands.

LI

And I did not feed you twigs and roots. Those were crickets.

ESTABLISHING SHOT: THE LOTUS MANSION, NEAR THE PALACE - EARLY MORNING

INT. PRIVATE CHAMBER - CONTINUOUS

Nicolette stares at a full breakfast tray with an utter lack of appetite. Early sun fills the room she now occupies, a considerable step up from the dungeon. A small soapstone carving stands on the window ledge.

Enter SHA-SHA, an elegant female attendant of about 40, herself a considerable step up from the Dungeon Maids. She is the very twin of Shuang Ting, Li's agent. Accompanying her is a tidy Girl who carries toiletries and fresh clothes.

SHA-SHA

Young lady! You haven't eaten.

NICOLETTE

I'm not hungry.

Sha-sha shakes her head at the bedraggled Nicolette and takes a comb from the Girl.

SHA-SHA

That's no way to appear before the King.

Sha-sha has a go at Nicolette's hair; Nicolette jerks her head away.

NICOLETTE

I suppose you're the chief wife.

Sha-sha sets the comb back in more gently.

SHA-SHA

My name is Sha-sha. No wives here; the women are paid attendants. In accordance with Gao tradition, the King was raised in a monastery until he ascended the throne. He has an infant nephew. You'll soon know more of our ways.

INT. PALACE THRONE ROOM - LATE MORNING

Dahu slouches in his great chair as Nicolette stands before him, neatened up and angry-looking.

NICOLETTE

How cruel can you be? You've deprived me of my dearest companion, and now you refuse me even the cold comfort of going home alone!

DAHU

I am offering you the best I can. You call it cruel. I must only better the determination of my enemies.

NICOLETTE

Enemies? Do you know them from innocent passers-through?

DAHU

Did your friend not explain this?

NICOLETTE

We didn't get that far. The moment I saw his wife, I --

DAHU

Careful. Lady Ming-na is my sister.

Nicolette's mouth forms an angry, astonished little "O."

DAHU (CONT)

It surprises you. But I know that her first loyalty will always be to me. And her husband's will always be to her. So, you really know nothing of this place?

NICOLETTE

Only that I want to leave it.

DAHU

Then you can make what you will of what I am about to tell you.



FLASHBACK

INT. GAO MANSION - STUDY - ANCIENT TIMES - DAY

The tools and furnishings of a scholar are set about in a large, beautiful room: chests, a desk, ink and brushes. A robed ARTIST (male) stands over an unseen item that GLOWS.

DAHU (VO)

According to legend, there lived in ancient Gao an extremely clever and gifted artist, who one day carved a phoenix of the purest jade.

The Artist spreads his arms, and LIGHT shoots out his fingers. They are aimed at the glowing item.

DAHU (VO)

Being also something of a conjurer, he endowed the phoenix with a wonderful magic: it gathered in and reflected all the wisdom and beauty of mankind.

The Artist flies upward and VANISHES in a beam of light.

DAHU (VO)

But all those who beheld it -- gazed upon it, touched it, heard its song when it was held to the wind --

SAME - ANOTHER DAY

A Monk flies upward and VANISHES in a beam of light.

DAHU (VO)

-- vanished, transported to a place unknown.

SAME - ANOTHER NIGHT

A Woman flies upward and VANISHES in a beam of light.

DAHU (VO)

Presumably some perfect and otherwise unreachable existence.

SAME - ANOTHER DAY

A Man flies upward and VANISHES in a beam of light.

DAHU (VO)

Whatever their doom, a wise king  
saw the danger of such a thing. It  
could draw all who knew of it to  
their ecstatic deaths and put an  
end to Gao.

SAME - ANOTHER DAY

EXT. ARTIST'S MANSION - NIGHT

A Townsman motions along his Son and Wife.

A Bandit leaps out from behind a rock and SLITS the Townsman's  
throat.

TOWNSMAN

<Arghh! Gurgle . . .>

The Wife and Son WAIL and flee.

WIFE

<Flee, my son!>

SON

<Agh, Father!>

DAHU (VO)

Or it could drive his people to  
destroy each other in some mad  
pursuit of it.

EXT. GAO ENVIRONS - DAY

A foreign warlord's Army gathers on the horizon.

DAHU (VO)

Or it could bring greedy  
adventurers to Gao from all corners  
of the earth.

EXT. ARTIST'S MANSION - PASSAGE - DAY

A Gao King points five Monks -- heads covered with hoods, ears  
bound, hands wrapped in fur -- into the study.

DAHU (VO)

So he had the thing hidden in a  
place that no one knows to this  
day.

EXT. ROYAL PALACE - DAY

Outside an ancient palace, engineers and Laborers build a wall. Nearby, the remains of attempted Foreign Invaders hang from trees.

DAHU (VO)

But the legend spread, and from  
time immemorial Gao has been beset  
by fortune-hunters who seek the  
phoenix.

EXT. VALLEY OF GAO - DAY

A river winds through terraced mountains and elegant plantations.

DAHU (VO)

The kings of Gao have tried to  
prevent the spread of the legend,  
and defended Gao with firm policy.

INT. GAO HOUSEHOLD - STUDY - DAY

A Boy and a Girl write Chinese characters under the watchful eye of a Tutor.

DAHU (VO)

Our people are not weakened with  
superstition and poverty --

EXT. GAO ENVIRONS - DAY

On a battlefield, soldiers count dead and wounded as the remnants of a Foreign Army flee. Dahu, sweaty and bloody, sheathes his sword.

DAHU (VO)

-- but strengthened with knowledge  
and spears.

RETURN TO SCENE

INT. PALACE THRONE ROOM - DAY

Dahu's face is dark and resolute. Nicolette hangs on his words in fear and wonder.

DAHU

And no outsiders who come here may leave.

(beat)

Of course the phoenix is nothing but a tale. If I had such a thing, I would easily defeat my enemies by showing it to them and making them disappear.

Nicolette turns to him in genuine puzzlement.

NICOLETTE

Why don't they realize that? Why do they keep coming?

Dahu seizes her question, sincerely curious.

DAHU

Why do you think? I have often pondered this question.

NICOLETTE

People aren't rational.

DAHU

Yes. Coarse and wanton, they flout reason. Why do they not take inspiration from the legend instead, and strive to achieve such wisdom and beauty?

For a split second, his and Nicolette's eyes meet in sympathy. Just as quickly, his eyes harden again.

DAHU (CONT)

Your society can be no different. If you tell them of this, they will come to Gao again and again, to stab its heart and liver.

NICOLETTE

What can I do? What can I do to convince you I won't talk of this place if you let me go?

DAHU

Nothing. I will never let you go.

NICOLETTE

Very well. You may keep me here to the end of my days. But that needn't be long!

Nicolette whips away from him to a window that overlooks a stone courtyard many stories below --

Dahu gestures smartly --

A Guard seizes Nicolette, and spins her to face Dahu.

DAHU

Then I say to you what you already know: self-destruction would be foolish and wrong. Will you hear some advice? Resolve on a happy life, and yield to simple prompts to open your heart. There are some who would envy you your choices.

INT. PALACE WAITING ROOM - LATER

John paces. An untouched tray of fruit and tea is set on a stone table.

Dahu marches in and addresses John with a tense civility.

DAHU

Teacher Jiang. The apples are not to your taste this harvest?

JOHN

Just not this morning.

DAHU

I have an important matter you must see to.

EXT. LI'S ROOFTOP - DAY

SUPERTITLE: WEDNESDAY

Li studies a grasshopper that picks its way over a potted plant. A wrapped book lies on a bench. Nearby, Cherize watches him from behind the East Village Eavesdropper.

LI

A conjurer and his magical phoenix?  
I said the impossible, not the fantastical.

CHERIZE

I'm not finished yet.

CLOSE-UP on the Eavesdropper, open in Cherize's hands. The better part of the page is a wide crowd shot with her own face superimposed. The caption reads: "WHERE'S WEIRDO?" A smaller inset of Stephenson is captioned: "EAVESDROPPER POLL: GIVE HER THE HEAVE, STEVE!"

CHERIZE (CONT)

I'm working through some . . . new perspectives.

LI

Indeed, you seem to be wide of your happy ending. Remember, I must be able to paint this.

CHERIZE

I can only give you what my quest for truth and beauty gives me.

Li picks up the wrapped book and tosses it to Cherize.

LI

Ah, yes -- that poet you admire.

Cherize unwraps the book. The cover reads: JOHN KEATS.

CHERIZE

For me?

LI

Yes.

CHERIZE

Well, the impossible is at hand.

Li goes back to fixating on the insect.

CHERIZE (CONT)

Eh, you didn't happen to see a copy of it in Russian?

LI

Russian? Do not tell me you can read Russian.

CHERIZE

I can't. Aren't you ever curious about me, Li?

LI

You are serving my needs. What interests me about you is that you are mine.

CHERIZE

Yours?

Cherize calls indignantly at Li's back as he turns and walks deeper under the arbor.

CHERIZE (CONT)

Your what?

EXT. GAO FOREST - DAY

Dahu and his HUNTSMEN fowl on horseback. A large, colorful bird -- we've seen it before -- glides in the sky over them.

The bird settles in a tree. The first Huntsman draws his bow.

HUNTSMAN 1

<What's that?>

HUNTSMAN 2

<I've never seen anything like it.>

Dahu raises his hand to stop the Huntsman.

DAHU

<No! Do not kill it. Catch it.>

The second Huntsman climbs a neighboring tree with a snare.

He baits the snare with a grasshopper and steals back down.

The bird hops into the snare, and SWIP! It is caught.

The Huntsman brings the bird in the snare to a marveling Dahu.

DAHU

<Where did this thing come from?>

INT. LOTUS MANSION - NICOLETTE'S CHAMBER - NIGHT

Nicolette sorts her ravaged belongings by the light of a lantern.

A leather-bound journal.

A smashed case for her flute.

She whips her head around at the window in surprise as she hears a crude WHISTLING from far outside.

NICOLETTE

My flute!

POV: NICOLETTE'S WINDOW

EXT. HILLS OUTSIDE THE LOTUS MANSION - CONTINUOUS

TORCHES FLICKER briefly in the distance.

INT. LOTUS MANSION - CONTINUOUS

Nicolette quickly rips out a journal page --

Diagrams the Lotus Mansion, her window, and herself --

Wraps the page around the soapstone carving --

And HURLS it out the window.

INT. LOTUS MANSION - NICOLETTE'S CHAMBER - LATER - NIGHT

Nicolette tosses on her bed. A grappling hook with a rope attached zings through her window and hits the opposite wall.

NICOLETTE

Yes!

Nicolette jumps up and fastens the hook against the stone window ledge.

EXT. LOTUS MANSION - CONTINUOUS

Outside the Lotus Mansion, Nicolette shimmies across the zip line, hundreds of feet above the ground, towards a steep rock formation.

NICOLETTE

Erg!

She reaches:

THE ROCK FORMATION - CONTINUOUS

She is instantly surrounded by half a dozen TRAIL-DWELLERS: toothless, sun-dried, fierce-looking men. Their hands are tattooed like those of the West Mountain men's killers.

[The Trail Dwellers speak In a Turkic dialect]

NICOLETTE

Where are the West Mountain men?  
Who speaks English here? English!

TRAIL-DWELLER

[Gish! Gish!]

The men chortle and drag her off.



NICOLETTE  
 AAAAAAAAAAGHHH!

EXT. GAO ENVIRONS - THE TRAIL-DWELLERS' CAMP - NIGHT

In a clearing, a band of Trail-Dwellers make a camp of skin tents around a BONFIRE.

Nicolette's captors drag her in. The campers THRONG around her and WHOOP.

The Trail-Dwellers haul Nicolette to the biggest tent and poke at her with sticks. Nicolette pleads in terror.

NICOLETTE  
 Xi Shan Ren! Xi Shan Ren!

INT. CHIEF'S TENT - CONTINUOUS

The Trail-Dweller CHIEF lounges on crude pillows and rugs. Two teenaged Slaves (one male, one female) serve him meat and berry wine.

Nicolette's captors haul her in. The Chief barks at the Slaves.

CHIEF  
 [Get away!]

The Slaves jump back. The Chief LEERS at Nicolette.

CHIEF  
 [What's this?]

TRAIL-DWELLER  
 [She escaped the Palace of the  
 Celestial Gate.]

CHIEF  
 [Heh-heh! She won't escape us.]

He strikes his shoulder with his fist. On the back of his hand is the familiar TATTOO.

EXT. CAMP - CONTINUOUS

The Trail-Dwellers lash Nicolette to a stake. DRUMS beat.

NICOLETTE  
 No! No!

The Trail-Dwellers WHOOP and dance around Nicolette. An OLD HAG minces up and yanks Nicolette's blouse off her shoulder.

OLD HAG  
 (in Nicolette's face)  
 [Waaaaanh!]

A Man pulls a glowing brand out of a fire. He creeps at Nicolette with an evil grin.

NICOLETTE  
 No! NO! NOOOOO!

Close-up as the brand sinks into Nicolette's bare shoulder.

NICOLETTE (CONT)  
 AAAAAAAAAAGGHHH!

INT. LOTUS MANSION - MORNING

The next morning, Sha-sha enters Nicolette's chamber with the Girl, who carries breakfast. The place is empty, the rope dangles out the window.

Sha-sha GASPS. The Girl DROPS the tray.

INT. PALACE - DAHU'S CHAMBER - SOON AFTER

Fifteen minutes later, Dahu angrily whips himself into a dressing gown as Commander Ying and Sha-sha await his orders.

DAHU  
 <Search the trails, search the valley. Wherever you find her, tie her like a goat and bring her back to me!>

Sha-sha and Commander Ying bow away.

Dahu glares out the window. Next to him, the colorful bird hops about in a cage.

EXT. TRAIL-DWELLER CAMP - MORNING

A YOUNG HAG creeps to a tent.

INT. TENT - CONTINUOUS

Inside the tent, Nicolette MOANS as she lies on a pile of rugs.

The Young Hag crawls in.

NICOLETTE  
 Please. Help me.

An evil smile spreads across the Young Hag's face. She pulls a KNIFE from her belt and creeps towards Nicolette.

NICOLETTE (CONT)

No. Please.

The Young Hag lifts a chunk of Nicolette's hair. Nicolette winces and tries to roll aside.

The Old Hag from the campfire tromps in and KICKS the knife away.

YOUNG HAG

[What!]

OLD HAG

[Don't make her ugly yet, you idiot.]

YOUNG HAG

[I was making her pretty!]

The Old Hag drags the Young Hag out by the hair.

YOUNG HAG

[Eeiyy!]

OLD HAG

[I'll get in trouble if you ruin her.]

Nicolette sags in relief -- and then spots the dropped KNIFE. She grabs it and painfully STABS through the back of the tent.

EXT. TENT - CONTINUOUS

Nicolette limps out unseen and makes for the edge of the camp.

EXT. GAO ENVIRONS - MORNING

Nicolette flees through rocky hills.

EXT. ELSEWHERE IN THE GAO ENVIRONS - LATER

Nicolette reaches a Palace wall. She FALLS six feet to the inside.

Two Gao Guards seize her and haul her to her feet.

GUARD

<What have we here!>

Nicolette looks at them in fear and relief.

NICOLETTE

Dahu.

INT. PALACE THRONE ROOM - DAY

Later, a tattered and dirty Nicolette shivers on her knees before Dahu. Sha-sha, Commander Ying, and Guards stand by.

DAHU

Stop sniveling. Miserable girl. My only concern was that you not escape altogether. But you have ensured that yourself. You are branded with the Chief's mark. You do not know the Trail-Dwellers' custom?

A miserable Nicolette shakes her head.

DAHU (CONT)

You are his property now. After twenty days to heal, you must do you duty as his bride. When he tires of you, he will give you to his men. Is it what you were seeking?

NICOLETTE

N-nuh --

DAHU

I don't hear you.

NICOLETTE

No.

Dahu waves his hand, and Guards haul Nicolette to her feet.

DAHU

Go where you like. Find your way in Gao, look for the West Mountain, join the Trail-Dwellers. I offered you my best and you spurned it.

At the exit, Nicolette halts the Guards and glares at Dahu through her tears.

NICOLETTE

You offered me loneliness and captivity! What strange creature would I be to welcome that?

They drag her out. Dahu's face is FURIOUS.

EXT. PALACE - CONTINUOUS

Guards dump Nicolette outside on the Palace wall. She looks out --

- Over the trails. In the distance, a rock formation marks the Trail-Dweller camp.
- Over the valley of Gao. Distant strangers, ant-like, move through an unknown land.
- Straight below. At the base of the Palace wall, treacherous rocks invite a quick, bloody death.

She looks over her choices through hard, wet eyes.

CLOSE-UP:

The notebook, empty pages.

SUPERTITLE: THURSDAY

PULL BACK TO:

EXT. LI'S ROOFTOP - DAY

Cherize stands at the edge, gazes out over the city. The notebook lies open beside her. A single tear falls from her eye . . .

. . . and splashes against the diamond ring on her left hand. She whimpers.

EXT. BALCONY - NIGHT

Back on the balcony where we first saw Cherize. Pale and pretty, dressed in a floral silk frock, she grips the railing and looks over the street below. Her fragile face is full of innocence -- and despair.

She turns and goes back through the French windows.

INT. BALLROOM - CONTINUOUS

Cherize and Stephenson are alone in the gilded ballroom we glimpsed when we first saw Cherize. She throws herself into his arms.

CHERIZE

No. No! Stephenson, if you leave me I'll never escape my family!  
You were going to take me away!

STEPHENSON

Take you away? Cherize, listen to yourself. I can't do whatever --

CHERIZE

Can't? You? No, Stephenson -- you can do anything! That's why I need you. Everything's going to be different after we get married!

STEPHENSON

Nothing's going to be different. Nothing changed after Silver Beach, nothing changed after we got engaged --

CHERIZE

Everything changed for me. Didn't you see it? I told you every day. For the first time in my life, I had hope.

STEPHENSON

What did you do with it? Cherize, I've poured my hope into you until I was flat on the ground, and you're still empty.

CHERIZE

Stephenson, I'm just doing what I have to do until you take me away from my family. It's just for now. You'll see, it'll all be different. You were going to transform my life.

STEPHENSON

So that was your plan.

CHERIZE

Oh, God, the way you say it --

STEPHENSON

You'll become my possession instead of theirs. Cherize, Cherize . . .

Cherize claps her hands over her ears.

CHERIZE

Don't say my name. Oh my God, it hurts too much! Oh!

## AERIAL VIEW OF MANHATTAN

A beautiful, bustling city, with millions of strangers.

## EXT. UPTOWN - DAY

An ancient, luxury apartment building squats like a giant dragon behind a hedge. We've seen the building before, in LEADERSHIP magazine.

Cherize stands before it.

She looks up, to the building's prickly top. Windows two stories tall, dull curtains.

A dapper SECURITY GUARD steps forward and waves her smoothly towards a great carved door.

SECURITY GUARD

Good day, Miss Dodd.

## INT. LOBBY - CONTINUOUS

Inside a dazzling lobby, Cherize steps to an elevator. A dapper ATTENDANT pushes the button for her.

ELEVATOR ATTENDANT

Good day, Miss Dodd.

## INT. UPPER FLOOR - CONTINUOUS

Cherize tiptoes out of the elevator and continues through an immense, tiled entryway hung with mirrors, sconces, and staid old portraits. No natural light penetrates.

Uniformed Servants smile and wave her towards the end of the hallway . . .

SERVANTS

Good day, Miss Dodd.

. . . where a tall door stands slightly ajar; a ray of feeble light escapes.

Cherize passes a portrait of herself. As she approaches the tall door, a SHADOW fills the opening --

Cherize's face fills with dread --

Her portrait CRASHES to the floor behind her. On the gleaming tiles, her face lies in fragments and shards.

She flees in tears into a huge parlor, towards a window.

CHERIZE

No!

EXT. SIDEWALK BELOW - CONTINUOUS

Stephenson looks up at Cherize's window. Her hands are pressed against it, her face is pleading and sad.

STEPHENSON

You can't follow me to the places I need to go.

Stephenson turns away from the building and walks solemnly away.

RETURN TO SCENE

EXT. LI'S ROOFTOP - DAY

At the edge of the roof, Cherize droops over her notebook. Above her, a single, brilliantly-colored feather floats downward, and touches down on her notebook.

Cherize whips around wide-eyed. The brilliant bird glides high over the roof.

CHERIZE

You are out there.

The brilliant, colorful bird swoops out over the streets.

Cherize stares down at the early foot-traffic below. No one notices! Cherize takes off for the steps --

INT. BUILDING - CONTINUOUS

-- flies down stairs --

EXT. SIDEWALK - CONTINUOUS

-- and runs out of Li's building. The bird glides overhead. She follows along below, wandering, stumbling . . .

EXT. PALACE WALL - DAY

On the wall of the Palace of the Celestial Gate, Nicolette walks apprehensively towards town.

EXT. GAO STREETS - LATER

Nicolette drags along the streets of Gao. Townsfolk gawk at her or avert their eyes.

She approaches a small group of WOMEN.



NICOLETTE  
Excuse me. John Echeverry.

WOMAN 1  
<What is she?>

WOMAN 2  
<I heard there was a foreigner in  
the Palace.>

NICOLETTE  
John. Echeverry.

WOMAN 3  
<"John"? What is -->

NICOLETTE  
Yes! John! John Echeverry! A  
foreigner!

WOMAN 1  
<I wonder if she means that other  
foreigner.>

WOMAN 2  
<Oh, the King's brother-in-law.>

Woman 3 points Nicolette towards a mansion nestled midway up a mountain in the distance.

WOMAN 3  
<Try that place. The other  
foreigner lives there.>

NICOLETTE  
Thank you!

Nicolette hastens down the street.

EXT. UPTOWN MANHATTAN - MORNING

Midmorning shoppers pass before windows that sparkle with jewels, antiques, dresses.

At a sidewalk coffee-and-pastry cart, Cherize munches and sips.

Across the street from her, the colorful bird is perched on a jutting flagpole. No one remarks the thing or seems to notice.

Cherize mutters as she tosses her coffee cup away.

CHERIZE

Fine.

She trots across the street and stands directly below the bird. It flutters gently, and VANISHES.

An astonished Cherize stares upward, then pans down to read the doorway of the shop she's in front of: "THE ANTIQUITY."

A small sign in the window reads, "SATURDAY - ASIAN MASTERS, PAST AND PRESENT."

Cherize pushes the door apprehensively.

INT. THE ANTIQUITY - CONTINUOUS

It's a classy place, filled with old and old-looking objets d'art. Cherize looks around, awed.

FEMALE VOICE

Hello.

Cherize turns to see MAY LING at her side. She's a cool, composed associate -- who looks amazingly like Ming-na.

CHERIZE

H-hello?

MAY

Welcome to The Antiquity.

Unruffled by Cherize's astonished eyes, May inquires calmly.

MAY (CONT)

I'm May Ling. Can I answer any questions for you?

CHERIZE

Eh, you're showing some Asian masters this Saturday?

MAY

Yes. Is there anyone you're interested in?

CHERIZE

The Master of Shangri-la.

MAY

We're not certain yet, but we hope to have his latest work. Are you a collector?

CHERIZE

A follower. In fact I was just contemplating the magical effect of his . . .

MAY

Yes, yes.

CHERIZE

. . . imagery. Hallucinatory.

MAY

Hypnotic.

CHERIZE

He's never depicted the human form.

MAY

Not the human form, but certainly human life. In his empty spaces.

CHERIZE

Empty spaces. Could you show me?

MAY

Come this way.

May Ling leads Cherize out of the main gallery.

INT. OFFICE - CONTINUOUS

Cherize and May enter a small, well-appointed office. Five exquisite painted silk scrolls are arranged on a wall.

MAY

These belong to the gallery owner.

Awed, Cherize gazes at the scrolls:

- A carp leaping from a pond.
- Two ducks quarreling.
- A locust crawling on a leaf.
- A dragon coiling in a sea of clouds.
- Wet branches on a snowy mound.

CHERIZE

His hands. Him.

May Ling talks with a scholar's authority and restraint.

MAY

His hands, certainly. We know one but not the other.

CHERIZE

One of his hands?

MAY

I mean we know his work, but not the man.

CHERIZE

We don't? He lives right in town, doesn't he?

MAY

His agent assures me he exists. But he's very private to say the least.

CHERIZE

As someone who knows him only by his work, could you tell me what these pieces to you?

May Ling steps forward and gestures over the scrolls.

MAY

Well, the Master's nature is uninhabited by man, uninterpreted by man. He places a saturation of blind, pure life against a pure void. I believe it's a reference to something so crucial and yet so excruciatingly unknowable that it thrusts him into a silent and terrible world to seek truth, or beauty.

CHERIZE

Oh. I would have said he painted wild nature because he doesn't care for human nature.

MAY

An easy trap. But if you don't go any further than his subject matter, I'm afraid you're short-changing the Master.

She holds out a flat silver case and pops out an embossed linen card.

MAY (CONT)

My card. I hope we see you at the show.

Cherize takes the card; May shuts the case. The cover is engraved with the letters, "J E."

CHERIZE

J - E ?

MAY

The person who left it to me. Do you know a . . . ?

CHERIZE

Perhaps . . .

MAY

Jerusalem Edgecombe. My mentor.

CHERIZE

I have the feeling that object is going to bring someone very important into your life. Perhaps very soon.

She turns and walks out of the room, a puzzled May behind her.

INT. MAIN GALLERY - CONTINUOUS

Cherize mutters softly to herself.

CHERIZE (CONT)

Divinity, fate, magic, or madness.

EXT. GAO - THE ECHEVERRY MANSION - DAY

Elegant buildings surround a courtyard with fruit trees and wind chimes.

A Porter opens the gate to a bedraggled Nicolette.

INT. ECHEVERRY MANSION - RECEIVING HALL - MINUTES LATER

Nicolette trembles miserably before an imperious Ming-na, who is flanked by a maid named HUA.

NICOLETTE

I hoped I could get help from your husband. I have nowhere else to go.

Ming-na answers crisply.

MING-NA

He is gone to West Mountain.  
(to Hua)

<Hua. Put her in the Ginkgo Tree House. No extras. My brother expelled her for a reason.>

Hua bows; Ming-na turns back to Nicolette.

MING-NA (CONT)

You were branded by the Trail-Dwellers?

NICOLETTE

Yes. I didn't know they --

MING-NA

My home is well-defended, but if they come here for you I will have to risk my householders' blood to save you. Your choice was consequential indeed.

Nicolette weeps wretchedly.

NICOLETTE

Please don't hurt anyone for my sake!

EXT. THE GINGKO TREE HOUSE - DAYS LATER

Hua sits in the doorway of a simple, clean room and sews.

INT. GINGKO TREE HOUSE - CONTINUOUS

Nicolette sleeps in loose pajamas.

She opens her eyes and groans softly. An empty pitcher stands next to her.

Her wound shows several days' healing. It is the same symbol as the Trail-Dwellers' tattoo.

NICOLETTE

Ohhrrr.

EXT. GINGKO TREE HOUSE - CONTINUOUS

She creeps out to Hua and holds out the pitcher.

NICOLETTE

Duibuqi. Qing gei wo kai shui.

HUA

Ah! Kai shui.

Hua scampers to fill the pitcher with water from a well in the courtyard.

INT. ECHEVERRY MANSION - MAIN HOUSE - WORK ROOM - DAYS LATER

Nicolette bites her lip as Ming-na dresses her wound, which has healed further. Hua assists.

HUA

<She doesn't make a sound.>

MING-NA

<Imagine her, going out the window of the Lotus Mansion on a rope. What a stunt.>

Hua snickers.

MING-NA (CONT)

<Right into the hands of the Trail-Dwellers.>

She hands used dressings to Hua.

MING-NA

<I think she'll be ready to do some work in a day or two. She can help with the inspection.>

CHERIZE

Work . . . gong zuo.

Hua laughs as if at a precocious baby. Ming-na arches her eyebrows.

MING-NA

Well, little sister! You've been learning.

CHERIZE

I thought it a good idea.

MING-NA

It is a good idea. Only no more secrets, hm?

EXT. ECHEVERRY MANSION - NEXT DAY

Ming-na leads an inspection of the estate, accompanied by Nicolette and Servants. The Porter takes notes. The Baby, asleep, is strapped to Hua's back.

Ming-na stands on a ladder that's propped against a storage shed. She pulls a rotting broom off the roof.

MING-NA

<What's this doing up here?>

She tosses the broom down. Reflexively, Nicolette catches it, and winces in pain.

NICOLETTE

Ohf!

Ming-na climbs down.

MING-NA

<I could throw a stone through this roof. Keep the door bolted until we can repair it.>

The group moves on. Nicolette nurses her shoulder.

NICOLETTE

Why haven't the kings of Gao crushed those vile Trail-Dwellers?

MING-NA

A common question. Their predations in Gao's outlands make them a tolerable nuisance. They know Gao has no magical phoenix, but they make a living off those who think it does. The relationship works well for both of us. Just not so well for people like you.

NICOLETTE

Why is the capital of Gao so close to its border? Your enemies can knock on the very door of the Palace of the Celestial Gate.

MING-NA

The kings of Gao used to reside in the interior of the land. But for several generations, the House of Gao has been seated in this city. These are the subjects on whom my brother relies most. He will not make them serve as foot-snares for invaders.



NICOLETTE

Can't he let his army defend this place while he lives in safety elsewhere?

MING-NA

Your very practical design is fit for rulers, not leaders.

NICOLETTE

It's not my design. I was merely curious.

The Baby stirs in Hua's backpack --

BABY

Goo goo.

Hua lifts him out of the backpack. Ming-na smiles and claps her hands at him.

MING-NA

Ah, who's awake?

Ming-na dandles him with a laugh that must be utterly captivating to the man who loves her, and opens her robe to give him her breast. Nicolette looks on humbly.

INT. CARTIER - DAY

CLOSE-UP: Cherize's removes her engagement ring from her lovely, manicured hand.

PULL BACK slightly as she sets it on a velvet pillow, which rests on a glass-topped table.

PULL BACK again.

A small interior room, perfectly lit and sealed with leather-padded doors. On one wall, a lighted sign reads "CARTIER." Cherize sits on one side of the glass-topped table, a distinguished ASSOCIATE (male) on the other.

CARTIER ASSOCIATE

Very well. We'll call Mister Harper for you.

CHERIZE

Thank you.

INT. PALACE OF THE CELESTIAL GATE - DAHU'S APARTMENTS - DAY

Dahu looks discontentedly out a window, towards the Echeverry mansion. Near him, the bird hops about in its cage.

He opens the bars of the cage and shakes it gently. The bird takes wing and flies out the window, over the valley. Free.

EXT. WIDE SHOT OF THE ECHEVERRY MANSION - NIGHT

PULL IN to the torchlit rooftop, where the entire household -- Ming-na and the Baby, Hua, the Porter, and other servants -- sits around a carpet, laughing, singing, drinking. Nicolette sits away from the rest, alone.

She wanders to the edge of the rooftop and looks out over the Valley. In the distance, a FULL MOON illuminates the Palace.

EXT. MANHATTAN - NIGHT

A full moon hangs over the Manhattan sky.

PULL IN to:

POV: HOTEL WINDOW

PULL IN to:

A small room in a small Midtown hotel. Cherize watches the moon. She wears only a towel.

CHERIZE

The impossible . . .

The humble room is littered with a few art magazines, leftover pizza, damp undies drying over the back of a chair. A cheap radio plays oldies.

Cherize slips into the narrow bed and opens the notebook.

FADE TO:

THE SAME - LATER

Cherize sleeps. The notebook lies open on her chest. A soft RUMBLING rises . . .

INT. THE GINGKO TREE HOUSE - EARLY MORNING

Nicolette sleeps. The RUMBLING grows louder.

She JOLTS awake, dashes to the door, and looks out.

EXT. COURTYARD - CONTINUOUS

Servants rush around, shuttering buildings and driving animals to shelter. Men grab weapons and climb to the rooftops.

Nicolette DASHES out. Ming-na dashes towards her from the main house.

NICOLETTE  
What's happening?

MING-NA  
Gao is under attack! That is the signal -- they are at the Palace of the Celestial Gate.

NICOLETTE  
Who?

MING-NA  
It does not matter!

Nicolette runs towards the mansion's gate. Ming-na grabs her.

MING-NA (CONT)  
You can't go out there! They may soon be in the streets.

NICOLETTE  
I'm the one who can make them go.

MING-NA  
It is death!

Nicolette shakes off Ming-na and runs. Ming-na starts after her, just as the BABY crawls into the bustling courtyard.

BABY  
Waaa!

Ming-na runs and scoops the Baby in her arms.

EXT. THE MANSION GATE - CONTINUOUS

Nicolette jumps onto a horse and gallops hard for town.

EXT. TOWN - FIFTEEN MINUTES LATER

Nicolette gallops along the main street. Townsman rush about and shutter up.

Bells TOLL over the hubbub.

EXT. HIGH PLAIN - CONTINUOUS

BATTLE SCENE: On a small plain in the Palace environs, the Trail Dwellers ride towards the Palace of the Celestial Gate. The Trail-Dweller Chief leads the attack.

TRAIL-DWELLER CHIEF

[Eat fire!]

TRAIL-DWELLERS

[Agghh!]

[Gurrgggh!]

ROCKY PROMONTORY - CONTINUOUS

Near the Palace, Dahu, on horseback, surveys the exhibition with GENERAL DAI and two OFFICERS.

GENERAL DAI

<This is pitiful.>

General Dai turns to Officer 1.

GENERAL DAI

<Call off the alert.>

Officer 1 rides off.

DAHU

<What has emboldened those flea-bitten bandits?>

GENERAL DAI

<Attacking the very Palace of the Celestial Gate! Shall I wipe them out?>

DAHU

<No. I want to find out what has brought this on. Capture their chief.>

General Dai points to the other side of the Palace in alarm.

GENERAL DAI

<Over there!>

On the other side of the Palace, Nicolette maneuvers her mount to the edge of the city wall.

CITY WALL - CONTINUOUS

Nicolette spots a burned-out FIRE RING in a small clearing. She jumps off the horse, grabs a charred stake from the ring, and runs along a ledge of the wall with it.

She tears her blouse off her shoulder to show the Trail-Dweller brand, then draws a huge version of it in charcoal on the wall.

## BATTLEFIELD - CONTINUOUS

The Chief and his men spot the huge charcoal drawing of the brand and the small figure of Nicolette.

CHIEF  
[There she is!]

## ROCKY PROMONTORY - CONTINUOUS

Dahu barks orders.

DAHU  
<Send archers to the High Trail!>

Dahu rides off towards Nicolette. Dai barks at Officer 2.

GENERAL DAI  
<Six archers after him!>

## CITY WALL - CONTINUOUS

A knot of Trail-Dwellers rides out from the mountains and nears the foot of the wall.

From above, Nicolette watches them.

NICOLETTE  
There you are. Hurry up!

She slides down towards them. Dahu appears at the end of the ledge.

DAHU  
You fool! You are going to your death!

NICOLETTE  
Leave me to them and save yourself!

Dahu jumps off his horse, dashes out to her, and grabs her. She tries to pull away.

THUNK! A Trail-Dweller spear hits the wall an inch from their heads.

DAHU  
Shall we both die here?

Nicolette yields and lets him pull her along.

They run to the edge of the ledge.

He lifts her onto his horse behind him as another spear whistles by their ears. The Trail-Dwellers WHOOP below.

CHASE SCENE: GAO ENVIRONS

Dahu rides with Nicolette into a THICK, ROCKY WOOD.

The Trail-Dwellers ride up from behind the city wall and follow him into the woods.

They all ride hard.

A Trail-Dweller whirls a lasso --

It floats over Dahu and Nicolette --

Dahu lifts his sword and CUTS it --

Nicolette turns back to see --

Trail-Dweller bows drawn.

She unhooks Dahu's shield from the horse's gear and SWINGS it behind her --

THUK THUK THUK! Arrows hit the shield as Dahu CUTS a second lasso.

Dahu gallops the horse out of the woods --

And onto a stone ledge etched into a sheer cliff -- a wall on one side, a drop-off on the other.

A Trail-Dweller draws his bow --

He is hit by an arrow shot downward --

TRAIL-DWELLER

Aagh!

-- from the high trail, where three Gao Archers ride at the head of a cloud of dust.

The High Trail veers away from the cliff-edge; they ride on.

Down below, three more Gao Archers pull onto the ledge and ride hard behind the Trail-Dwellers.

Arrows are drawn on both sides --

Gao arrows hit the Trail-Dwellers' shields from behind.

TWANG TWANG TWANG! Gao arrows fly again.

A Trail-Dweller falls, dangles in his saddle as his horse gallops on --

The ledge runs straight; the Trail-Dwellers appear in a knot with Dahu, impossible for the Archers to shoot at without risking an arrow at their King.

THUK THUK! Gao shields go up as the Trail-Dwellers shoot back at them.

A curve in the cliff-face, and the wounded Trail-Dweller FLIES off and SAILS down the gorge. The horse gallops on riderless.

Dahu rides hard with Nicolette to the top of the ledge and the top of the cliff, where it joins the High Trail. Wilderness and rocks all around.

DAHU

They could be anywhere.

The colorful BIRD, flying overhead, catches his eye.

Dahu rides towards the bird, into a thick and hilly wood, Trail-Dwellers and Archers pursuing --

Dahu rounds A BEND, all pursuing --

When the others round the bend, Dahu is GONE.

INT. CAVE - CONTINUOUS

Dahu gallops through, his sword raised.

He runs the point against a flat FLINT positioned in the cavee roof. A shower of SPARKS ignites a pitch-covered NET full of pitch-covered BURLS suspended overhead --

The Trail-Dwellers ride in --

A FIERY AVALANCHE falls before them, their horses REAR.

Deeper in the cave, Dahu and Nicolette ride forward, the cave walls illuminated by the fire behind them --

The Trail-Dwellers wheel back towards the mouth of the cave --

But it is already dark with the figures of the Gao Archers who are shooting lethal arrows. The Trail-Dwellers FALL.

EXT. CLIFF - CONTINUOUS

Nicolette and Dahu gallop out the other end of the cave --

It opens onto another ledge on the face of the cliff.

EXT. HIGH TRAIL - CONTINUOUS

Far ahead, the ledge rejoins the High Trail.

Another KNOT of four Trail-Dwellers rides towards the High Trail --

TWANG TWANG! Three more Gao Archers swarm in from the surrounding woods and shoot -- two of the Trail-Dwellers FALL.

The remaining two Trail-Dwellers fling out of their saddles and ride clinging to the sides of their mounts, unstriking by the Gao Archers, who pursue.

They all ride into a small clearing -- one Trail-Dweller swings a lasso --

A Gao Archer is PULLED from his mount --

And DRAGGED. The other Trail-Dweller draws an arrow and aims at the bound and defenseless target --

The unhorsed Archer swings his legs up, CUTS the rope with his razored spurs --

And ROLLS to the protection of a clump of rocks as the Trail-Dweller arrow ZINGS by his neck.

Behind the rocks, the Gao Archer quickly frees himself.

He dashes out to recover his mount.

The other Archers are now riding through trees --

On the High Trail, another Trail-Dweller flings his lasso towards the Gao Archers --

And ropes a low stump ahead of their path --

Pulls the tripwire tight --

The Archers halt their steeds well before the tripwire --

The Gao archers' eyes harden as they strain to see something ahead --

RRAAAARRRR!! A TIGER leaps from a rock -- knocks the Trail-Dweller off his mount -- THROTTLES him in its deadly jaws!

Another TIGER leaps from a tree at another Trail-Dweller --

The Trail-Dweller draws a long dagger, points it straight up at the throat of the other pouncing tiger; it'll be a true and lethal wound --



His hand is caught in a LASSO, his arm is whipped back, his entire body exposed --

The second tiger is on him!

TRAIL-DWELLER 2

Raaagghhh!

The Gao Archer who fell behind lets go of the other end of the lasso --

GAO ARCHER

<Circle of life!>

All the Gao Archers ride forward to the fork, where the Gao Archers from the rock strip are just climbing up. The CAPTAIN rallies all.

ARCHER CAPTAIN

<You three, back to the hills to see who's lurking and mop them up. The rest, come forward with me a while.>

Good men, they divide up and ride off.

ROCK WALLS - LATER

Among rock walls far ahead, Dahu climbs the horse upward with Nicolette through huge, jutting rocks, until the terrain is impossible for the animal. He jumps off and pulls Nicolette down.

DAHU

This way.

They run, hop, and climb through a maze of rocks.

The BIRD leads the way. Both of them sweat with exertion.

NICOLETTE

Can't we stop now?

DAHU

We will follow that bird until it rests.

NICOLETTE

Why?

DAHU

It dwells in some secret sanctuary. It should be a safe place for you.

They run after the bird through shadows --  
 Dribbling creeks --  
 And twisted branches of trees that reach out of weird rocks.  
 Finally the bird alights on a ledge. Dahu steps toward it.

DAHU  
 Ah, there. Is that your home?

The ground beneath his foot, a brittle clay shelf, breaks.  
 CRAK! He falls through!

INT. CAVERN - CONTINUOUS

CHUNK! Ten feet below, he hits a mossy patch of earth.

CHUNK! Nicolette lands next to him.

The two roll in pain.

DAHU  
 Aiya!

NICOLETTE  
 Agh, God.

Dahu and Nicolette pull themselves onto their knees.

DAHU AND NICOLETTE  
 (to each other)  
 Are you hurt?

They pick themselves up. Pink and green mosses cover the ground and the rocks. The sun lights the mouth of a cavern leading into the mountain.

Nicolette looks around in wonder.

NICOLETTE  
 How often does the ground in Gao do that?

Dahu scowls his annoyance at this insult to his ground. He examines some rocks that give access to the top.

DAHU  
 At least it will be easy to get out.

NICOLETTE

I'm sure I can be here alone for a while. Your troops must need you.

They face each other from opposite sides of the cavern. Dahu's lip curls.

DAHU

My troops are sound. They will rout the Trail-Dwellers easily. It was not an occasion worthy of your sacrifice.

NICOLETTE

I brought them on you.

DAHU

They have come before and they will come again, on your account or not.

NICOLETTE

All the same . . .  
(contrite)  
I'm sorry I ran away from you.

DAHU

(sincere, softened)  
And I am grateful for your selflessness. You are not to blame. What strange creature would choose captivity and loneliness?

NICOLETTE

You would.

Dahu's eyebrows go up.

NICOLETTE

The loneliness.

DAHU

What strange creature are you?  
Flying your home to such a remote part of the world?

NICOLETTE

(sour)  
It was easy to fly. It would be difficult to return to.

DAHU

I promise I will give you a better life here.

NICOLETTE

Why give me any at all? You have  
the power to end my life. Why did  
you risk yours to save mine?

They stare at each other for a long moment.

DAHU

Let us see where that bird went.

He pulls Nicolette to his side. Hand in hand, they wander  
deeper into the cavern . . .

Swiftly, silently, they fall into each other's arms.

NICOLETTE

Why do I want you? Oh, God, I want  
to love you!

DAHU

You do love me. Say it. Tell me  
you do!

NICOLETTE

I love you.

They KISS.

SUPERTITLE: FRIDAY

INT. LI'S LOFT - DAY

Cherize stands tensely in the window. Li reads the notebook  
attentively.

LI

The impossible. So that is what  
you have been doing.

CHERIZE

In more ways than one.

LI

Eh?

CHERIZE

It gets easier after the first  
feat. Stephenson was right about  
me. I gave myself to people who  
didn't care for me. I was stupid.  
I thought he would be my reward if  
I could do something wonderful.

LI

No human is another's cosmic bribe  
for the labor of self-improvement.  
The results themselves are that  
reward, which you shall keep.

CHERIZE

Li . . . All I wanted was a part  
of you -- for me. Was it wrong?

Li stands at the unfinished canvas.

LI

You know who it is on this canvas.  
You know. Am I not part of your  
truth? Have I not known earthly  
struggles?

CHERIZE

For the longest time I've been  
wanting you to tell me about them.

Li stands among the art-covered walls and groaning  
bookshelves.

LI

I took refuge in art early in  
life -- a solitude forced on me by  
circumstances. For that alone I  
lived and painted. Humanity could  
not thrive in the gardens of  
perfection I conceived and dwelt  
in.

He turns to the unfinished canvas.

LI (CONT)

Until recently, when this specter  
entered, unbidden, to haunt me in  
fragments, outlines, impressions --  
always eluding me, while demanding  
to be set down and immortalized by  
my hand -- and finally casting me  
out of that perfect place. I  
cannot go back. And alone, I  
cannot go forward.

He lifts the drape -- we still don't see it.

LI (CONT)

It is not finished yet, but it may  
be what you have set out to  
describe.

The two of them look on the canvas together. Cherize GASPS.  
Whatever she's looking at changes everything.

INT. GAO ENVIRONS - CAVERN - DAY

Nicolette and Dahu tremble in each other's arms.

NICOLETTE

I've lost everything. Everything I  
was, everything I had, I've given  
it to you! I'm lost, I'm nothing  
if you don't take it!

DAHU

I will never let you go.

NICOLETTE

Don't ever, don't ever!

She buries her face in his chest.

NICOLETTE (CONT)

My God, now I want you to say that.

DAHU

I knew you would not leave Gao when  
I sent you from the Palace.

NICOLETTE

Oh, my shame and misery that day.  
Only you could do that to me.

DAHU

Had I not wronged you before . . .

NICOLETTE

Let's never speak of it again.

DAHU

Never that way again. Only as we  
are now. Ning-lin.

NICOLETTE

Is that your name for me?

DAHU

It means "my most beloved subject."

NICOLETTE

I don't believe it.

DAHU

Believe that you are.

NICOLETTE

Da -- I can't bring myself to call  
you by your name.

DAHU

I will not have you killed.

NICOLETTE

Dahu.

Their lips touch . . .

A FLUTTERING sound startles them.

A faint glow comes from deeper within the cavern. Dahu peers  
at it.

DAHU

Curious thing . . .

Nicolette and Dahu hold hands and walk deeper into the cavern.  
As they wander further in, the glow brightens.

The source is revealed at last. A ray of sunlight pours  
through an opening overhead and illuminates a white jade box  
that sits on a stone pedestal. The box is inlaid with dark  
jade characters. Between the pedestal and the spot where Dahu  
and Nicolette stand is a well of darkness.

Nicolette and Dahu stare, awestruck and mystified. Nicolette  
reaches towards the box.

NICOLETTE

What in heaven --

DAHU

Stop.

He picks up a pebble and tosses it a few feet in front of  
them, into the pit.

DAHU (CONT)

Why is there no sound of its  
hitting the ground?

NICOLETTE

My God, where are we?

DAHU

I have never heard of this place.

NICOLETTE

What does it say on that box?

DAHU

"The golden doom of Gao."

He takes her hand and draws her away.

DAHU (CONT)

I will come back for it later.  
Come, I must be missed.

EXT. PALACE OF THE CELESTIAL GATE - HOURS LATER

Dahu and Nicolette ride in on his horse, gaited at a walk.

NICOLETTE

What are you going to do with that  
chief if he's here?

DAHU

I will find out why he made a weak  
frontal assault on the Palace  
instead of a swift house-raid.

NICOLETTE

A house-raid? It would have been  
so easy for the Trail-Dwellers to  
take me?

DAHU

Of course not. I knew where you  
were. I had my sister's place  
patrolled.

Attendants draw the great Palace doors wide, and Servants and  
Advisors rush out to receive Dahu. He turns to Nicolette.

DAHU

I must leave you here.

Servants hand down the two of them. They have only a quick,  
brief moment of intimacy.

DAHU (CONT)

I will come to you soon.

NICOLETTE

I'm all obedience.

They are drawn off in opposite directions: she by Sha-sha, he  
by clamoring Advisors.

INT. PALACE - PRIVATE CHAMBER - EVENING

Sha-sha examines Nicolette's scar. A DISTANT HOWL of pain  
sounds from deep within the Palace.



VOICE (OFF CAMERA)

Yeeaarrhh!

Nicolette jumps to her feet in alarm. Sha-sha gently restrains her.

SHA-SHA

The king is doing what he must.

INT. DUNGEON - CONTINUOUS

Dahu glares into the defiant eyes of the Trail-Dweller Chief, who is chained and stripped from the waist up. Commander Ying and a Guard stand by. Another Guard wields a whip. The HOWL, very near, dies down.

VOICE (OFF CAMERA)

Yeeaarrhh!

DAHU

[You know the voice.]

CHIEF

[So?]

DAHU

[Tell me why you attacked the Palace of the Celestial Gate.]

The Chief scoffs at the question.

CHIEF

[For your prisoner! Why didn't you toss her to us?]

Commander Ying gives a signal, and Whip lays a stripe on the Chief's bare shoulder. The Chief grits his teeth, but doesn't make a sound.

DAHU

[She was being kept outside the Palace. Do not tell me you did not know.]

CHIEF

[I didn't.]

Commander Ying signals and Whip poises to strike again. A SOUND comes from the passageway.

John marches in with an Aide, both dusty from the trail.

DAHU

Teacher Jiang!

John casts a scornful look at the Chief.

JOHN

<I heard about this rash attack on my way in. It has something to do with the treachery in West Mountain, doesn't it?>

DAHU

<What treachery?>

JOHN

(to the Aide)

<Bring him in.>

(to Dahu)

<I found out on my way there. Lord Kang has had his agents busy for months. I'm sure some of them used Miss Litton as a pretext to trespass.>

DAHU

<Lord Kang? The same --?>

JOHN

<Yes. The bloodthirsty nephew of your good neighbor, King Wen.>

The Aide returns with a Guard, who hauls in a WEST MOUNTAIN SPY in a wooden yoke.

JOHN

<I found this West Mountain traitor before I reached their court.>

FLASHBACK

INT. KING WEN'S PALACE - SPLENDID HALL - DAY

We've seen the scene before: BLOOD flows from a knife wound and streaks the royal yellow robe of KING WEN -- his face is now more visible behind the rack of rubies. A throng of Lords and Ladies cry and rush about.

A MAN marches out of the chaos. He wears an ornate cloak with a distinctive SYMBOL we haven't seen yet; a warrior's mask covers his face.

LORDS AND LADIES

<It's the sign of --!>

<Lord Kang!>

The Man, Lord Kang, plants himself over the body of the king.

The throng cowers with terror as he YANKS the knife out of King Wen's chest --

And raises the DRIPPING BLADE triumphantly over his own head.

JOHN (VO)

<If his confession is true, Lord Kang has murdered King Wen and usurped the throne.>

RETURN TO SCENE

INT. DUNGEON - CONTINUOUS

John finishes speaking.

JOHN

<Gao is flanked by an enemy.>

DAHU

<And our faithful servant Hong?>

JOHN

<The ambassador was slain. I saw his house. Razed.>

The Chief glares at the cowering West Mountain Spy.

CHIEF

[That snake asked for your captive. He said his master would pay a fortune for her.]

JOHN

<That's a falsehood! Miss Litton means nothing to Lord Kang.>

DAHU

(interrogating the Spy)  
<What does your master Lord Kang mean to do with my kingdom?>

SPY

<He . . .>

The Whip coils.

SPY

<He plans to destroy every town and field in his path. He will smash your capital and make your people slaves.>

DAHU  
 <You are in the service of this  
 creature!>

John steps in front of the flinching Spy before the Whip can strike.

JOHN  
 <There's no need. He may be useful  
 later.>

The Spy shivers, terror-struck, behind John as John locks steely eyes with Dahu --

And Dahu backs down. The Spy crumples with relief.

Dahu turns back to the Spy and interrogates him sharply.

DAHU  
 <Lord Kang tricked the Trail-  
 Dwellers into attacking me. Why?>

SPY  
 <He's troubled by them. He doesn't  
 want bandits and rebels in his  
 way.>

DAHU  
 <So I was supposed to solve his  
 bandit problem. Tsh! It happens I  
 would not exert my troops to  
 slaughter a pack of rats.>

He turns to the Chief scornfully.

DAHU (CONT)  
 [There is your fortune.]

The Chief strains at his shackles and shouts at the Spy.

CHIEF  
 [SNAKE! When I catch you I'll boil  
 you in your master's blood!]

Dahu points at the Chief.

DAHU  
 (to Commander Ying)  
 <Let that one go. Lock the other  
 one up.>

He marches out.

INT. PASSAGEWAY - CONTINUOUS

John walks quickly beside Dahu.

JOHN

We should learn more soon. I posted a scout to the Old Capital.

DAHU

Why did you return? You could have continued to West Mountain and sent the spy back under guard.

JOHN

I thought I should speak to you personally. The situation seemed urgent.

Dahu stops as they reach several branching passages.

DAHU

You did the right thing. Take some rest. I will find you shortly.

John goes out one passage.

MING-NA (OFF CAMERA)

<Then I'll interrupt him! I won't wait to -->

Ming-na, wind-blown and bundled up, runs in from another passage with her Boy, the Porter, and Hua.

MING-NA

<Where is my husband! One of his retinue told me he's back from West Mountain, but this battle today -->

John flies back in.

JOHN

Ming-na!

A step, and Ming-na and the Boy are in his arms.

JOHN (CONT)

Oh, my brave little ones. To see you at last.

MING-NA

Why didn't you come to us first?

JOHN

I sent word.

MING-NA

But . . .

John looks over her head at Dahu.

DAHU

Go home. Come back to me in the morning.

John and Ming-na melt into each other's arms.

MING-NA

Two years ago, I would have put Gao before everything. But now . . .

JOHN

I promise, my dear love, that you'll never have to choose.

John gathers his family and orders the Porter and Hua.

JOHN

<Home.>

Alone in the passageway, Dahu signals a Guard.

DAHU

<Where is the foreign guest?>

INT. PRIVATE CHAMBER - NIGHT

Nicolette tries to thread a needle and pricks herself. Blood SPURTS.

NICOLETTE

Agh!

Dahu enters. They fly to each other.

DAHU

I wanted to come to you sooner.

NICOLETTE

I knew you were doing some dire business. I heard.

DAHU

Do not disapprove.

NICOLETTE

What should I disapprove of?

DAHU

You will know everything soon. I cannot share it all with you yet.

NICOLETTE

But you need me, don't you?

DAHU

Gao is in danger. A time may come soon when I will have to take terrible risks to save it.

NICOLETTE

You needn't take them alone. I'm not a delicate possession of yours. I'm not a burden you have to carry.

DAHU

You are at my side?

NICOLETTE

Yes.

Dahu calls out to someone in the passage.

DAHU

<Come in!>

Commander Ying and Sha-sha enter. She carries a long red silken cord and a folded white garment; he carries a scroll.

DAHU

Commander Ying is my trusted friend, and you know Sha-sha.

NICOLETTE

Are we about to . . .?

DAHU

It will not follow your tradition or mine, but it will bind us firmly together.

Reeling a bit, Nicolette turns with Dahu to face the two wedding officiators.

INT. ROYAL BEDCHAMBER - NIGHT

Dahu pulls the loops of the red silk cord, which fastens a Gao bridal gown (the white garment) at Nicolette's shoulders.

The gown falls to the floor, leaving her nude.

She steps, trembling, into his waiting arms.

INT. LI'S LOFT - NIGHT

Cherize toys with a silken cord. Li listens nearby, relaxed but straight-faced.

CHERIZE

So that's a traditional Gao wedding gown.

LI

You should wear your own designs.

CHERIZE

Stop that.

LI

Stop what?

CHERIZE

I don't trust you smiling.

Now Li smiles.

LI

You have done well. But it is not enough to unite these two impossible lovers. United, they must change the world.

CHERIZE

Change the world? My God, what else is there going to be?

LI

Whatever it takes for me to make my final stroke.

CHERIZE

You, always. Does every artist have such an ego?

LI

You wanted a part of me.

CHERIZE

Is that the only part that can get the job done?

LI

I hope Nicolette is not saying that to Dahu.

Cherize glares prettily and snatches up the notebook and a pen.



LI (CONT)

Change the world.

CHERIZE

Change the subject.

INT. PALACE CONSULTATION ROOM - MORNING

Dahu and Generals gesture over a map.

GENERAL DAI

<We can't know how Lord Kang will concentrate his troops. He could bring the entire force straight down the valley. Or he could divide them and sweep down from the heights on either side -- or he could combine them all and sweep down from the High Trail.>

Dahu SLAMS the map impatiently.

DAHU

<So we must wait for him to strike, and fight on his terms!>

A SCOUT, dirty from the trail, runs in.

SCOUT

<Your majesty. My lords.>

GENERAL DAI

<What's the news?>

SCOUT

<Lord Kang is camped just outside the Old Capital. He has about a hundred men with him.>

GENERAL DAI

<A hundred . . .?>

INT. DUNGEON - MINUTES LATER

Guards shove the West Mountain Spy to his knees. Dahu, the Scout, and General Dai look on.

SPY

<It's the One Hundred Faithful. Get ready to die, you Gao sons of bitches. He's at the head of the entire West Mountain army!>

GENERAL DAI

(to Dahu)

<The One Hundred Faithful -- I know of them. They follow the standard of Lord Kang and swear on his eyes. Let me kill every one of them.>

Dahu fairly spits as he looks at the Spy.

DAHU

<Expel this vermin.>

He marches out.

General Dai signals a Guard, who steps to a glowing brazier.

GENERAL DAI

(to the Spy)

<So your people will know where you've been.>

The Guard pulls out a glowing brand with the Gao seal.

He steps to the trembling Spy --

And plants it in the Spy's forehead!

SPY

EEEEEEYIIIII!

EXT. PALACE - NIGHT

Guards throw out the Spy, shackled and freshly branded.

EXT. VALLEY OF GAO - MORNING

General Dai rides down the valley at the head of the Gao army.

EXT. ECHEVERRY MANSION - ROOFTOP - CONTINUOUS

John comforts a nervous Ming-na as they watch the exodus.

MING-NA

The entire army is going.

JOHN

The Palace Guard is still here.

MING-NA

Can they preserve the city?

JOHN

The enemy is outside the city.

INT. PALACE - ROYAL APARTMENTS - EVENING

Dahu paces before Nicolette. In accordance with Gao tradition, she now wears the red bridal cord around her waist.

DAHU

What to do? Such bedeviling choices. Only time will show me which one is right.

Nicolette seizes him.

NICOLETTE

However this choice of yours turns out, you'll do what you have to do next. And then next. Nothing will be the end.

He pulls her into his arms and kisses her passionately.

EXT. PALACE - VERY EARLY MORNING

Beneath the lingering stars, two Trail-Dwellers stagger to the Palace gate and CLANG a bell for entrance.

TRAIL-DWELLERS

[Let us in!]

[Hey in there!]

Above the Trail-Dwellers, a Guard signals the Palace Porter, who opens the gate.

INT. PALACE CONSULTATION ROOM - EARLY MORNING

Shortly after, Dahu and Commander Ying listen to the Trail-Dwellers, surrounded by Guards.

TRAIL-DWELLER 1

[It was yesterday, still morning . . .]

FLASHBACK

EXT. GAO ENVIRONS - CAVE - LATE MORNING

The two Trail-Dwellers hold a horse and wait outside a cave. A curious smoke pattern forms at a distance.

TRAIL-DWELLER 1

[Hey, the Chief is out! King Dahu must have turned him loose.]

TRAIL-DWELLER 2

[I wonder if he tossed the bitch out, too.]

TRAIL-DWELLER 1

[You sure we shouldn't take this one?]

TRAIL-DWELLER 2

[What's he good for? Just a dumb spy who got caught.]

The West Mountain Spy, his brand oozing, crawls out of the cave towards them, holding a leather bag.

The Spy gives them a few jewels from the bag.

SPY

[All right?]

The Trail-Dwellers bare their teeth and touch their daggers.

The Spy scowls and hands over the entire bag; the Trail-Dwellers hand over the horse.

EXT. HIGH PLAIN - DAY

The branded Spy sits mounted on the horse, wearing the ornate cloak with the distinctive symbol of Kang. Three West Mountain Commanders kneel before him.

PULL BACK: On a cliffside overlook, the Trail-Dwellers watch from their mounts, astonished.

TRAIL-DWELLER 1

[Shit, he's Lord Kang! He'll have a whole army.]

TRAIL-DWELLER 2

[Better get everyone into the caves.]

RETURN TO SCENE

INT. PALACE CONSULTATION ROOM - MORNING

The Trail-Dwellers finish their story for Dahu and his men.

TRAIL-DWELLER 1

[We've got no reason to lie to you! Why would we lie?]

DAHU  
 (to Guards)  
 <Go get Teacher Jiang. Lady  
 Ming-na and my nephew as well.>

Dahu marches out. Commander Ying steps forward and interrogates Trail-Dweller 1.

COMMANDER YING  
 [So you helped Lord Kang get away.  
 How'd the Chief take the news?]

Trail-Dweller 1 grits his teeth angrily and holds up his hand. A finger is freshly cut off.

EXT. VALLEY OF GAO - DAY

Outside the Old Capital deep in the Valley of Gao, a train of horsemen rides westward behind a standard with Lord Kang's symbol. Riding at the head is a MASKED WARRIOR wearing a cloak with the familiar symbol of Kang.

Another FAITHFUL pulls next to him.

FAITHFUL  
 <The Gao army's still on our backs.  
 They've fallen for the disguise.>

IMPOSTOR  
 <Keep leading them west. They  
 won't even hear their world end  
 when Lord Kang strikes from the  
 plain.>

Later, in the Gao environs, Lord Kang appears before the West Mountain army, triumphant.

WEST MOUNTAIN SOLDIERS  
 <Hail Lord Kang!>

INT. PALACE - CONSULTATION ROOM - MORNING

Dahu speaks to a shocked Nicolette.

DAHU  
 The West Mountain army is just a  
 few hours away. Perhaps one hour.  
 We are lost.

John dashes in with Commander Ying and a few Guards. At the sight of John, Nicolette steps back.

DAHU (CONT)

<Commander Ying. Take as many men as you need to round up every man, woman and child in the city and bring them into the Palace. Nothing in their hands. Everyone here now!>

Commander Ying bows and exits with the Guards.

DAHU

(to John)

You will watch over them when they arrive.

JOHN

What do you mean?

DAHU

We are deceived. Lord Kang's forces are hard upon the city. If I cannot be saved with my people of Gao, you will lead them to the place I am sending them to.

JOHN

What? The West Mountain forces here? How can you . . . how can you alone . . . ?

DAHU

I must. I am the king of Gao. There is only one way for me. Keep the citizens safe. Get ready, tell your wife, take advice from her -- you have not a moment to lose.

He marches out.

INT. PASSAGEWAY - CONTINUOUS

Dahu walks firmly. Nicolette dashes into the passage and catches him by his sleeve.

DAHU

You know where I am going?

NICOLETTE

You dare to think of leaving me behind?

Dahu stops to face her.

DAHU

I will cease to exist when my kingdom is gone. I might live, but you will have nothing, no one to cling to.

NICOLETTE

Living with the knowledge that I'd left you alone in this hour would be worse.

DAHU

Then you will join me in a fate that neither of us can imagine. We could die hellishly at the hands of our enemies.

NICOLETTE

We'll die at each other's hands before our enemies can take us.

He seizes her elbow and they hasten down the passage.

EXT. TOWN OF GAO - LATE MORNING

Bells CLANG. Palace Guards ride through the thronging streets. They rouse sleepers awake and drive the foot-traffic.

EXT. PALACE COURTYARD - CONTINUOUS

John urgently orders Sha-sha.

JOHN

<Pack everyone into the Palace, inner quarters out. Every space -- the wards, the studies, the stores. Go, tell the household!>

Sha-sha hastens off. Ming-na enters and runs to John.

EXT. HIGH PLAIN - EARLY AFTERNOON

Lord Kang rides at the head of the West Mountain army towards the Palace.

EXT. HILLS OF GAO - CONTINUOUS

Dahu and Nicolette ride horseback through the trails as a cloud of dust rises from the city below.

EXT. TOWN - AFTERNOON

The streets are in full throng, people pouring towards the Palace.

INT. PALACE - CONTINUOUS

People pack in. Attendants wearing bright green sashes direct Gao-men here and there.

ATTENDANTS

<That way!>

<Downward!>

In the courtyard, John peers at the horizon from atop a lookout. A tightly-packed crowd mills anxiously around him.

A cloud of dust gathers on the horizon.

EXT. OUT IN THE HILLS - AFTERNOON

Dahu and Nicolette maneuver on foot up the treacherous rocks and cliffs.

EXT. PALACE COURTYARD - AFTERNOON

John gathers Ming-na and their Boy in his arms.

EXT. PLAIN - CONTINUOUS

The hoofs of the attackers' horses beat the ground --

Gao-people turn their faces up, straining to hear the distant RUMBLE.

Commander Ying looks over the Palace Guard, weapons drawn, in position along the perimeter.

EXT. TOWN - CONTINUOUS

The streets of Gao lie empty, eerie. A GOAT idly munches grass.

EXT. CAVERN - SHORTLY AFTER

Dahu and Nicolette run to the broken floor --

Climb down --

INT. CAVERN - CONTINUOUS

They run in, deeper.



The familiar light appears.

Deep in the cavern, the white jade box floats ahead of them on its pedestal. They stop before the well of darkness.

NICOLETTE

How do we get it?

DAHU

And what do we do with it? Give me your belt. The cord, your belt.

Nicolette unwinds the red bridal cord from her waist.

Dahu fashions a lasso out of it and tosses it around the pedestal.

He PULLS. It doesn't budge.

He slides it up the pedestal to the top and PULLS again. It bobbles, and the box dances on the surface.

EXT. GAO ENVIRONS - CONTINUOUS

The West Mountain army rides towards the Palace. Lord Kang, at the front, gives a mighty YELL.

LORD KANG

<ATTACK!>

INT. CAVERN - CONTINUOUS

Dahu gives a decisive JERK on the cord and the box topples off the pedestal and falls into the pit --

The mountain shakes and RUMBLES. Dahu and Nicolette struggle to keep their footing.

He grabs her hand as they are both PITCHED into the pit!

EXT. THE PALACE - CONTINUOUS

Thousands of Gao-people stand silent as the helmeted profiles of the West Mountain army darken the hilltops rimming the Palace.

The Palace Guards take aim at their final adversary.

Suddenly, a HUM rises over the Palace and the surrounding hills.

HUUUUUMMMMMMM.

Lord Kang's Warriors, the Palace Guard, and the Gao-people look up in awe.

HUUUUUMMMMMMM.

Lord Kang looks around, fierce, confused.

HUUUUUMMMMMMM.

A brilliant gold bird SKIMS towards the Palace, filling the sky behind it with a fan of gold!

HUUUUUMMMMMMM.

The bird dives straight toward the Palace courtyard, the fan of gold wide.

HUUUUUMMMMMMM.

The bird STRIKES the courtyard like a comet. Golden light EXPLODES around it.

The golden light shoots from the courtyard into every room --

- the storerooms.
- the great halls.
- the passages.

In the courtyard, which is bathed in the golden light, Gao-people turn their faces up, transported.

Lord Kang's forces look on in fear and astonishment as the Palace GLOWS and RIPPLES in the light.

A beam of light SHOOTS upward, and a Gao-man disappears.

Another beam, and another disappears.

Suddenly, hundreds of beams --

Thousands of beams.

John disappears in a beam --

Ming-na and the Baby --

Commander Ying --

Sha-sha --

The Guards and Gao-people disappear in thousands of beams of light.

At last, all of them are gone. The Palace of the Celestial Gate stands silent, dolorously empty.

EXT. HILLSIDE NEARBY - CONTINUOUS

Dahu and Nicolette tumble out of a cave. They land softly on a flat patch within shouting distance of Lord Kang's forces.

The two get to their feet and stare down at the empty Palace.

NICOLETTE

We're here. The . . .

DAHU

The phoenix! They are saved.

CLOSE-UP of a bow being drawn --

An arrow arcs high in the air --

Speeds downward --

And pierces its target: the throat of Lord Kang!

LORD KANG

<Gagh!>

Kang slumps on his horse, his face twisted in mortal agony. His Commanders pull him down in confusion and fear.

WEST MOUNTAIN COMMANDER 1

<Lord Kang!>

WEST MOUNTAIN COMMANDER 2

<He's dead!>

CLOSE-UP: A pair of powerful, ragged arms relaxes a bow.

PULL BACK: The Trail-Dweller Chief looks down with a smile of grim satisfaction.

CHIEF

Heh.

KANG'S TROOPS - CONTINUOUS

The Warriors near the lifeless Lord Kang look over to where Dahu stands.

The FIRST COMMANDER removes his helmet and kneels.

FIRST COMMANDER

<King Dahu!>

Other Commanders dismount and kneel.

All Warriors dismount and kneel.

The First Commander remounts his horse and rides to the hill where Dahu stands with Nicolette.

He dismounts and offers his sword to Dahu.

FIRST COMMANDER

<Mercy. The good King Wen is dead. We were acting on the command of an evil successor who is choking our people and killing the state -- was.>

DAHU

<The city is empty. My army is far. Why do you ask for mercy?>

FIRST COMMANDER

<We must meet the Gao army soon. And the great King Wen left no heir worth the noble land and people of West Mountain.>

DAHU

(scornful)

<Noble people, who would serve King Wen's assassin?>

FIRST COMMANDER

<We've seen your power. We'll spend the rest of our days endeavoring to erase our shame and make ourselves worthy of your lead.>

Dahu turns to Nicolette.

DAHU

I am here only because I opened my heart to you. The lord of West Mountain and Gao. We will re-establish the Old Capital and unite the remnants of the two kingdoms. Is it a desirable fate?

NICOLETTE

To turn my back on all that was  
mine and go to Heaven-knows-where?  
To never know what lies beyond each  
step I take -- but to take them all  
with you?

(beaming love)

It's the only fate I desire.

Dahu looks his love back at her, then composes his face for  
the task at hand.

He takes the kneeling West Mountain Commander's sword, mounts  
his horse, and pulls up Nicolette.

DAHU

<To the New Land!>

All rise and shout.

WEST MOUNTAIN TROOPS

<To the New Land!>

With his horse turned towards the Valley of Gao, he rides off,  
at the head of the West Mountain army.

INT. LI'S LOFT - EARLY MORNING

SUPERTITLE: SATURDAY

A BRUSH paints Chinese characters -- "Li Shan Xue" -- on the  
edge of a swath of silk.

PULL BACK: Li steps back and takes a long look at the canvas.  
He is satisfied at last. Across the room, Cherize lies curled  
on a chair, asleep.

Li starts at a sharp voice behind him.

SHUANG

That's mine!

There stands Shuang in the open doorway, eyes ablaze.

LI

Shuang Ting! I did not hear you  
ring.

SHUANG

I didn't; I penetrated the walls.

She homes in on the painting.

SHUANG (CONT)

And not a moment too soon. Once  
The Antiquity sees that, they'll be  
in our power forever.

She stands enraptured before the finished canvas, which we  
still don't see.

SHUANG

Damn it, Li! You've pulled it off.  
This is beyond anything you've ever  
done! How long before it's dry?

LI

It can hang tonight.

SHUANG

I'll be back this afternoon to pick  
it up.

She whips out a digital camera and snaps pictures of it.

SHUANG (CONT)

I have a few hours to get it leaked  
to certain parties. Be fabulous if  
we could get whatsername to come  
in -- that filthy-wealthy drama  
queen with the dysfunctional  
family. She has an amazing  
resemblance to your mod --

She breaks off, looks around. The chair where Cherize was  
curled up is now EMPTY.

SHUANG (CONT)

Say, wasn't your model just here?

Li runs to the open door and calls out.

LI

Cherize? Cherize!

He looks around the room again. The notebook lies open by  
Cherize's empty chair. He grabs it.

Where Cherize's writing runs out, two words are written in an  
elegant script: "THE END."

Shuang shrugs.

SHUANG

I must have spooked her.

LI  
 (growling)  
 "The end"? Provoking girl. I  
 wanted to give her --

Shuang holds up a warning hand.

SHUANG  
 Anything but royalties. We're  
 moving to a whole new level of  
 business after this.

She packs up.

SHUANG (CONT)  
 The Antiquity, eight tonight if you  
 want to come.

LI  
 (distracted)  
 Yes, perhaps, perhaps.

SHUANG  
 The usual sign if you want to be  
 incognito?

LI  
 Top button.

Shuang sweeps out with a little salute.

Li does another quick search of the loft --

Closet --

Bathroom --

Thrusts himself out the window. He looks lonely, fierce.

ESTABLISHING SHOT: UPTOWN MANHATTAN - NIGHT

EXT. THE ANTIQUITY

Passersby meander in the delicate evening, a mellow  
 crowd -- except in front of The Antiquity, where excited  
 gawkers elbow each other to behold something in the window.

INT. THE ANTIQUITY - CONTINUOUS

Art lovers and poseurs sip champagne and hob-nob among the  
 objets.

Li wanders unnoted through the crowd. He wears a tailored  
 suit and tie, with his top shirt-button undone.

He scowls at his watch.

INSET: The watch shows 12:00 midnight.

FADE TO:

INSET: The watch shows 1:30 a.m.

PULL BACK:

The crowd has thinned almost to nothing. Li stands before the finished painting (still unseen by us) solemn-faced.

A pretty little hand plucks his sleeve.

CHERIZE (OFF CAMERA)

So this is what happens after "The End."

Li spins. There she is, the little --

LI

Yes: you mysteriously disappear, it would seem.

CHERIZE

That was quite a crowd. On short notice, too. Rich people, smart people, important people turn on a dime for you.

LI

Yes?

Cherize wanders around him casually.

CHERIZE

You, on the other hand, barely condescend to make yourself known, much less popular -- just secretly dominate your nifty little corner of the art world and let your admirers stumble onto your work.

LI

Your point?

CHERIZE

Just to show you: I've got your number, Li Shan-xue. And I have one final thing to say to you.

(beat)

Good-bye.



She turns away; Li seizes her.

LI

Why?

Cherize stares squarely into his imperial ire.

CHERIZE

Because you fed me crickets. And you said "I require the impossible, not the fantastical." And the only thing that interested you about me was that I was your muse.

LI

Was I wrong? Did I not give you your story of love and pride? Did it not inspire you to strengthen Nicolette's heart?

CHERIZE

If the point was nothing but finishing your painting, I suppose you're right: I was the perfect sacrifice.

Li turns her toward the painting.

LI

Do you see what you have given me?

A tear gathers in Cherize's eye.

CHERIZE

I'll always see it. It's the most beautiful thing in the world.

LI

He is as you described him: his royal pride humbled --

CHERIZE

-- but not crushed; Nicolette needs something to do for the next ten thousand years. But he still . . .

(annoyed)

He didn't use her to save his kingdom.

LI

True. He admitted his wrongdoing, acknowledged her suffering at his hands, asked her forgiveness, and gave her his heart. Because of that, he was saved.

He points Cherize back at the painting.

LI (CONT)

Do you not see it all here?

CHERIZE

I do.

LI

Then you see that you were indeed my indispensable muse. But do you not see that beyond that and all else, you are, now and forever, my most beloved subject?

Cherize ninety-nine percent melted as she looks back at Li.

CHERIZE

You can only say it in art?

LI

I just said it in words.

CHERIZE

Everything that comes out of your mouth sounds like some sort of royal edict.

LI

Kiss me.

Cherize looks lovely daggers at him as his arms slowly enclose her . . .

Her eyes fall shut, the last one percent melts away . . .

They KISS.

They linger in each other's arms.

CHERIZE

Li, I'm so imperfect.

LI

As am I.

CHERIZE

I barely know who I am. But I'm going to need a job -- and I haven't updated my resume since I was born.

LI

Well, I saw something today that I would like to paint . . . if only I can figure out its story.

Small smiles dawn on both their faces. They head for the door.

EXT. THE ANTIQUITY - CONTINUOUS

They walk out of the gallery arm in arm. The phoenix, in color, unseen by them, perches on a streetlamp.

NARRATIVE (VO)

The first steps of a new journey for both of them.

As Cherize and Li stroll together down the misty, empty street, the phoenix disappears in a pop of flame.

THE END