

Strike The Clouds

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CHARACTERS

SAGE LU - M, 30s. *The Tattooed Monk. An outlaw on Blackwing Mountain.*

RAIN - F, late 20s. *The Swordswoman. A lieutenant in the Emperor's army.*

TAISIE - F, 40s. *Rain's servant.*

TY "OX" FENN - M, 20s. *The Iron Ox. An outlaw.*

DAN "RED DEVIL" SANSARIN - M, 20s. *An outlaw with a port-wine-stained face.*

GENERAL SUD - M, 50s. *Rain's adoptive father. A general of the Emperor's army.*

STORK - M, 30s. *An outlaw.*

LEAF - M, 30s. *An outlaw.*

CHIEF - M, 40s. *Outlaw leader.*

INNKEEPER - F, 40s. *An innkeeper.*

SIR DAWAY - M, 40s. *A local magistrate.*

CITIZEN 1 - F, 30s.

CITIZEN 2 - M, 40s

SON - M, 18

WARDEN - M, 30s

DRUNK - M, 50s.

DAWAY'S ATTENDANTS

GENERAL SUD'S GUARDS

ASSASSINS

GUESTS AT AN INN

Doubling is possible under numerous schemes.

All roles other than Sage Lu and Rain may be easily paired with one or more other roles. It is even possible to produce a radical, stripped-down variation with only six performers. The combat scene in 2.2 requires some creative adjustment under such a plan.

A cast of ten is probably the minimum for companies seeking a more robust ensemble presence, of the sort more or less indicated in the script.

SETTING

Time: Long ago.

Location: Blackwing Mountain and General Sud's Compound in the pine country of the Inner Kingdom.

ACT ONE**SCENE ONE: THE MAGISTRATE'S COMPOUND**

Taisie, a servant, kneels over the body of Sage Lu. The room is lit by candlelight. She guides a wet cloth gently across his head, cooing a song.

Lu gasps and groans. Taisie stiffens, surprised.

Upstage, doors open revealing Rain. Seeing Lu moving, she shoos her servant away and takes her place kneeling over him. She snaps for the cloth, which is given to her.

The cloth is dry and cool. She shakes it at Taisie, who dunks it in warm water and returns it to Rain.

Rain brings the cloth towards Lu's chest, but it drips. She glares at Taisie as she wrings out some of the excess water.

At last she guides the cloth towards Lu's forehead. Just as she reaches out with it, his hand leaps up and catches her at the wrist.

Taisie gasps. Lu and Rain hold still.

LU

Who are you? Where am I?

RAIN

You are safe. I found you broken below the road, where the rain cut a gully.

LU

And you?

RAIN

I brought you here.

LU

You nursed me?

RAIN

Yes. I've cared for you. All this time.

Taisie huffs.

LU

How long's it been?

RAIN

Three days.

LU

What?

Lu tries to rise, groaning in pain.

RAIN

Careful.

LU

Where am I?

RAIN

This is my house.

LU

How -- 'scuse me, ladies, I'm gonna be sick...

A suspenseful moment. He manages to keep from vomiting.

LU

How did I --

RAIN

You were lying in the ditch, under the hill. You were badly beaten.

LU

(anger flaring)

Beaten? For what? By who?

RAIN

(treading carefully)

You don't remember?

Lu stands and falls back down.

LU

Not a damn thing.

RAIN

Not even your name?

LU

(a decision)

...no.

Rain glances at Taisie. Then turns back to Lu. She touches his chest as if to ease him back onto the floor.

LU

Thanks for taking me in. I doubt I deserve it. It's only mangy mutts you find beaten in the ditch. 'Course the one time you meet a nice lady, you're bloodied, naked, and knocked out in the rain.

RAIN

Your clothing...

Rain gestures at the Taisie who brings out a monk's robe.

RAIN

I mended your robe.

Taisie coughs.

LU

A monk?

RAIN

Your alms bowl lay cracked beneath your body. You were... weaponless.

LU

A monk? That's a relief. Maybe I didn't deserve a thrashing after all. What a nice surprise, eh? To learn you're a man of peace...

SCENE TWO: BLACKWING HIDEOUT, THREE NIGHTS AGO

Ty "Ox" Fenn, Dan "Red Devil" Sansarin, Stork, and Leaf chat over drinks.

OX

Let him find us. You can walk this General Sud right into my room. I'll crush his head like a quail's egg.

Ox taps his armpit and snaps his upper arm against his body.

LEAF

You can't crush a skull like that.

OX

I've crushed three skulls like that! At once!

STORK

Is that how you crack a quail's egg?

RED DEVIL

Unfortunately it is. I've seen it.

(to Ox)

Were you even listening?

OX

(still bragging)

Messy. Just like the General's skull'll be.

RED DEVIL

Sud led the campaign against the Al-tak. He left more carrion-birds on the steppe than people. If he's coming on the emperor's orders to root out bandits, then we'd all better lay low and avoid a fight.

OX

When does he arrive?

STORK

Any day. And no telling how long before some drunk in town gives away the hideout.

A chair flies across the stage and smashes into pieces against the far wall.

Sage Lu stomps on, furious.

LU

You pigfucker! Stand and face me like a man.

Ox stands.

OX

That's no way to talk to your brother, brother.

LU

You are not my brother.

OX

Hey, we're all brothers here.

LU

Look what you've done to my squash!

Sage Lu holds up a sad little squash.

LU

Trampled! With your damn donkey feet!

OX

How do you know it was me?

Lu hurls the squash at Ox.

LU

You stay out of my garden!

RED DEVIL

Hey Lu, maybe you've had too much wine...

Lu smashes other things around the room.

LU

I'll show you too much wine! How would you like it if I came into your room and started breaking your shit? Huh? Huh? Huh?

The others look on in fright or amusement as Lu destroys plates, cups, and the chairs they were sitting on.

LU

We may be outlaws but goddamnit there are rules! There's respect! And vegetables! Respect my vegetables!

As he picks up the table, the Chief appears.

CHIEF

Sage Lu!

Lu pauses, the table above his head.

CHIEF

What's gotten into you?

The other three answer simultaneously.

LEAF

Respect.

RED DEVIL

Wine.

OX

Vegetables.

CHIEF

I won't have you bucking around like a goat with a fly on its ass. You're too old for this. Remember your old monastery? The monks hid you from the law when you were wanted for murder.

OX

It was an accident. And the butcher had it coming.

CHIEF

They had to kick you out! Drunk. Rambunctious. The dust from their ruined statues still coating your feet. I took you in because you said you were reformed. Cat's Eye swore by you. Look at me!

Lu looks at him.

CHIEF

Three years you've been our brother. A good gardener and a better soldier. Go take a bath. Sober up.

Lu puts the table down. Ox mutters something under his breath.

Lu hurls a plate into Ox's face, smashing it.

CHIEF

Get out! Get out, you big baby! You billy goat!

SCENE THREE: AN INN IN THE NEAREST TOWN

Sage Lu drowns his sorrows.

LU

I am a damned goat. A born dirt-scratcher. Braying and kicking out since the minute I busted loose of my mother. How many men have I bloodied? With twice my brains I couldn't keep track.

INNKEEPER

You were born into chaos. The shape of his time bends a man to his path.

LU

It's my shit luck.

INNKEEPER

(refilling his cup)

In other words.

LU

There's another Lu, Auntie, I'm telling you. The bastards don't believe me, but he's there. He can touch a thing without destroying it. Fill my bath with paint-stripper and watch what peels away.

INNKEEPER

A change of climate?

LU

I wish I could forget everything. All the muck I've plowed through, what good's it done?

He counts on his hand.

LU

I was a rebel in the righteous brotherhood. And before that I was a shit monk with a murder warrant on his head. And before that I was a garrison major. And before that I was a bully. And before that I got bullied. And before that...

INNKEEPER

(refilling)

Drink up.

LU

(toasting)

Let it go. A life of peace. Another man.

INNKEEPER
If it's oblivion you're after...

She plops a dark bottle on the table.

INNKEEPER
The gateway.

LU
What's that piss?

INNKEEPER
A wine that will erase all memory. Two cups, and you'll be a duck in a white cloud.

LU
I'll forget everything?

INNKEEPER
For enough copper.

LU
Give it here.
(raising the bottle)
And stop me when you see through the bottom.

Lu drinks deeply.

LU
Eeuuuhh! How long's it s'posed to take?

INNKEEPER
The usual time, I think.

Lu grabs the Innkeeper roughly.

LU
You're not trying to rob me are you? I'll tell you now, I'm dead-ass broke.

INNKEEPER
The money for the wine, I hope.

Lu drops the Innkeeper and casts some coins on the table, smiling.

LU

Sorry, almost forgot who my friends were.

(a drunken realization)

Forgot! Maybe it's working! Ask me something!

INNKEEPER

There are two travelers on the road to Heaven Mountain. One approaches from the east riding twenty-four miles per day, while the other --

LU

No math! Moron! Ask me something I could have done before. Something I could understand no matter who I am.

INNKEEPER

I can follow you from the Far West to the sea and never fall behind a step. Neither heat nor cold will drive me off. But when you look for me at day's end, I am gone. Who am I?

LU

Say that again.

INNKEEPER

I can follow you from the Far West --

LU

No, the last part.

INNKEEPER

Who am I?

LU

Hold on. Back up.

INNKEEPER

Neither heat nor cold will drive me off. But when you look for me at day's end, I am gone.

LU

Gone....neither heat nor cold...

INNKEEPER

Neither heat nor cold.

LU

And you don't fall behind.

INNKEEPER

I can follow you from the Far West to the sea --

LU

Shh!

(pause)

See the wine must be working: I definitely could've solved this before.

Lu checks the Innkeeper's raised eyebrow.

INNKEEPER

....neither heat nor cold --

LU

Screw this. You have a glass somewhere?

Lu moves to the window, holding a candle up to look at his reflection.

LU

Who the shit are you? I don't know this man.

He pulls faces. Starts to laugh.

LU

It's working.

INNKEEPER

What's working?

LU

I don't remember!

INNKEEPER

Quit playing.

LU

Handsome devil!

INNKEEPER

All right, all right.

LU

Bring some girls around. My friend and I are too good-looking to be cooped up here with you all night.

INNKEEPER

Mr. Lu, you know it's not that kind of inn.

LU

Who's Mr. Lu? Mr. Lu can stay here ripping ass and throwing dice. I have to follow the night.

INNKEEPER

OK, maybe you'd better stay here with me. A good bed, no charge.

LU

(to his reflection)

She's trying to keep us to herself.

Innkeeper gets between Lu and the door.

INNKEEPER

It's dangerous to be on the road. You don't understand. General Sud's people are nearby. Outlaws better keep their heads low.

LU

Sure, sure, very scary -- *if* I were an outlaw. But I'm a man of peace. A man of peace and - poontang. And I'm gonna go get me a piece of poontang.

INNKEEPER

No, no. Mr. Lu!

Lu elegantly dodges by the Innkeeper,
patting her on the head on the way out.

LU

G'night, Auntie!

Lu strides into the night.

He quickly stumbles into Ox, Red Devil, Stork,
and Leaf.

OX

There's that asshole, now. Hey, monk!

RED DEVIL

Easy, buddy. We want him to come back with us.

Lu stares at them, drunkenly.

OX

He's plastered. Can't even hear me. Oh, Mr. Monk?

LU

You talking to me?

STORK

We came to fetch you home.

LU

I don't want any trouble. You guys look mean.

OX

What's he talking about?

LEAF

Come on, man. We walked a long way to find you. Ty even agreed to apologize about your squash.

OX

I'm sorry. I just like to trample things. It's who I am. I'm not proud of it.

LU

I'm sure you'll get better. Do you know where I go to find women around here?

RED DEVIL

Lu, don't you recognize us?

LU

No.

The group is taken aback.

OX

Very funny, asshole. I just apologized. And you haven't said anything about that plate you broke on my face.

STORK

Don't be that way. We're brothers.

LU

I don't remember any brothers.

LEAF

See, this is why you keep getting kicked from home to home. The boss is right: you act like a child.

RED DEVIL

It's humiliating. Recognize your friends.

LU

I don't see any. Just a bunch of dirt-faced dinguses trying to act tough on the road. If you'll excuse me.

RED DEVIL

Don't walk away from us!

OX

My face, brother! My face!

LU

I told you I'm looking to love somebody tonight. You keep me here any longer, and it's gonna be you.

The men fall into fighting stance.

STORK

You can't come home with those manners.

LEAF

We'll have to teach you.

LU

Nobody teaches me.

They fight. Sage Lu gets his ass whooped.
They kick him off the road, rolling him down
into a ditch.

RED DEVIL

Let him sleep it off. Asshole.

SCENE FOUR: THE MAGISTRATE'S COMPOUND, THE PRESENT

Sage Lu lies under Rain's care. Taisie has left.

LU

...a man of peace...

Lu sees Rain.

LU

Sorry. I don't know what happened.

RAIN

You faded out again. You are still recovering from your wounds.

LU

How nice to wake up. To such a face.

His hand is on her arm. Rain inhales sharply.
She says, flirtatiously:

RAIN

How dare you. Maybe you're no gentleman after all.

LU

I never claimed to be gentle.

RAIN

A monk's thoughts should be on higher matters.

LU

You don't know many monks.

RAIN

You don't know me.

LU

So introduce yourself.

RAIN

To a man with no name?

LU

I have a name.

RAIN

(tense)

Do you?

LU

Whatever you want to call me.

RAIN

That's not a name.

LU

Try it. I'll come.

RAIN

I'll call you hog. For the wallow I found you in.

LU

How bout dog for my cute snout.

RAIN

It suits your manners.

LU

A dog's loyal, and stays at your feet. A dog howls at beauty and never lets go what it bites.

RAIN

Some dogs are mistreated for their trouble.

LU

But from the right hand they'll live for scraps.

RAIN

Rain. My name is Rain.

LU

You have a family?

RAIN

General Sud is my father.

Lu starts up, as if to stand.

LU

General Sud! That -- !

Rain leans completely still over him.

RAIN

What?

LU

Nothing. My head. The name sounded familiar.

Rain takes the cloth and tends to him.

RAIN

Very strange. Perhaps you had a grievance with the General?

LU

It'd explain waking up in a ditch...no, I'm damn sure I never met him.

RAIN

No. It would be strange. For a monk.

LU

You're his daughter?

RAIN

Yes. By adoption.

LU

So this is his house?

RAIN

It will be. When he arrives. He sent his best lieutenant ahead to prepare the ground. Are you ok?

LU

A bit dazed.

RAIN

You must have made real enemies.

LU

I mean because of you.

Rain is frozen over Lu. She kisses him. They embrace passionately.

RAIN

What kind of monk are you?

LU

A good one, I swear.

He pulls her into another kiss. They roll over.

SCENE FIVE: BLACKWING HIDEOUT

Red Devil and Ox repair the damage of Sage Lu's rampage. They sing while they work.

BOTH

(singing)

Three little deer on Blackwing Mountain...

Red Devil breaks off in the middle of the verse.

OX

What's a matter, guy?

DAN RED DEVIL

I'm worried we did the wrong thing.

OX

Don't start that again. I apologized. And it wasn't my fault to begin with. Did I tell him to smash our chairs? To make an ass of himself in front of the boss? Did I ask him to break a plate in my face? Lemme tell you something -- this is a true life-fact here: if you lose your wits over a squash, you won't have any left by the time the women come around.

Pause. They go back to singing.

BOTH

(singing)

Two little deer on Blackwing Mountain...

Red Devil drops out again.

OX

What now?

DAN RED DEVIL

But leaving him in a ditch...

OX

Didn't he attack us? Was I the one who ignored his apology? Was it me who said we weren't brothers? Ditches are comfortable! I've slept in ditches half my life. With dogs and rats, with horse-piss and fleas. That was an okay ditch, believe you me.

Beat. Once more they launch into song.

BOTH

(singing)

One little deer on Blackwing Mountain...

Red Devil drops out. Ox ignores him.

RED DEVIL

We have to go back.

Ox re-breaks the chair he is fixing.

RED DEVIL

He's our brother.

OX

Not by blood he isn't.

RED DEVIL

By oath means more.

OX

He renounced us. You heard him.

RED DEVIL

A true oath can't be renounced.

OX

Tell that to my ex-wife.

RED DEVIL

You can't cut a sworn brother from your love any more than filter your mother's blood from your heart.

OX

So what?

RED DEVIL

So we owe it to our brother.

OX

He earned his ass-kicking.

RED DEVIL

And now he's earned the rest.

OX

Goddamnit I'm not going.

RED DEVIL

Think of our honor, if something happens to him.

OX

Honor? We're outlaws. Decent people wouldn't piss on me if I was on fire.

RED DEVIL

We're righteous men, persecuted by corrupt officials and waiting for the emperor to hear our story and pardon us.

Ox chuckles.

OX

Oh, here, let me finish you off.

Ox mimes jerking Red Devil off.

OX

Wow, what a load. You really been storing it up. Happy now?

Ox sits contentedly in his rebuilt chair.

RED DEVIL

Think of Lu.

OX

What've we been doing??

RED DEVIL

You wake up in a ditch. Freezing.

OX

It's an okay ditch!

RED DEVIL

You've only your light robe. It's torn and stained with mud. Your face is a pulp. You go to drink water and your jaw won't open. Your teeth are cracked. Your friends left you here.

OX

That's why you don't go around insulting people over vegetables.

RED DEVIL

You blink into the light. Horse hooves pound the road. You hear the creak as a cart stops and men shout. "Hey! Who are you? What are you doing there?"

OX

Guess I fucked up more than my fist could fix.

RED DEVIL

You try to roll into the weeds, to crawl away, but it's too late: "Boss, I recognize him: he's one of those bandits from the mountain." At once they're on you, beating you, tying your hands, setting the block across your neck. You want to fight, you want to run, but your body is broken. You reach deep within yourself searching for the card you'd saved for just this moment, and it turns over blank. You think, who'll come to save me? Who'll rescue me from the prison yard? From the warden's cane? From the final blade? Surely my friends, surely my brothers will come for me. And then you remember: they're the ones who put you here. You're alone.

Ox has begun to bawl.

OX

Poor Brother! We have to do something!

RED DEVIL

We have to find him before he gets in more trouble. You saw how drunk he was.

OX

I'll dry him out. If I have to toss every inn and drink the wine myself.

RED DEVIL

Don't forget it's an occupied town. The General was due to arrive today.

OX

I'll spank him like my old man. I'll sew him shut and poke him til he pops.

RED DEVIL

No! Listen to me, Ox: we don't want a confrontation. If we're gonna find Lu, we'll have to be subtle.

OX

I can be subtle!

Ox stumbles up out of his chair, re-breaking it and falling into the table.

ACT TWO**SCENE ONE: THE MAGISTRATE'S COMPOUND, LATER THAT MORNING**

Sage Lu and Rain lie sweetly entangled.

Ahhh!	LU
Yes.	RAIN
Mmmm.	LU
Mm-hmm.	RAIN
You...	LU
You have to go.	RAIN
What?	LU
Mm. I'll give you five minutes.	RAIN
I'm not going anywhere. We're comfy. We're cuddling.	LU
I'm letting you know.	RAIN
Don't say things like that. C'mon. Wasn't I nice?	LU
Four.	RAIN
Four -- what's the matter with you?	LU

Rain calls to Taisie.

Tay!
RAIN

She sweeps her robe around herself, leaving Sage Lu exposed, as Taisie enters.

Help this dog to his things.
RAIN

I can't go.
LU
(to Taisie)
I'm sorry.

TAISIE
(admiring his body)
Don't apologize to me.

LU
I'm injured! I need to time recover!

RAIN
I put you through your paces. Everything seems to be working.

Taisie holds clothing for Lu. He waves her off.

LU
No, thank you.

RAIN
Don't be difficult.

Lu waves Taisie off a second time.

LU
No thank you.

RAIN
Suit yourself, but you may be arrested.

LU
What's the rush?

Oh, just the General is coming.

RAIN

Makes no difference to me.

LU

You think so?

RAIN

Why, what's it to you?

LU

The General is my commanding officer and also my father. When you are in my position, there are expectations.

RAIN

Like you don't screw strays off the street?

LU

Like I don't keep them around once I do. My first affair was with an older officer. I was fifteen. I thought I was in love. He wagged his tongue too freely and left my sheets too late. My father executed him. In my presence, of course.

RAIN

I can be discreet!

LU
(shouting, naked)

Taisie exits, closing the door.

Who would guess? I'm just a monk. A poor, beaten monk. In need of comfort and a gentle touch.

LU

Put your clothes on. I don't want you discovered. Even if you are a good little monk.

RAIN

Who's little?

LU

Dog!

RAIN
(fierce)

Beat.

LU

I've got no place to go. I woke up without a past. Not a star in the sky to follow.
Nothing to tell me where I am. Except your face.

She turns from him. Hiding her face.

LU

There's something unfinished here, between us.

She remains silent. Perhaps putting her hair
up, with shaking hands.

LU

Fine. Have it your way.

(muttering to himself)

Bossy women.

Lu prepares to leave. On his way out, he trips
and falls spectacularly, knocking his head,
pulling down wall furnishings.

LU

Aah!

RAIN

Idiot! What did you do?

LU

I tripped. I'm OK, I swear, just let me --

He tries to rise. Falls again.

RAIN

Stay still. You hit your head again.

LU

It's nothing. I can go.

He tries to move, then winces grandly,
clutching his side.

LU

Uggh!

RAIN

It's not broken is it?

LU
Bruised, I think. Nothing to worry about.

RAIN
How did you fall?

LU
My legs were weak.

RAIN
But you can walk?

Lu appears to lose consciousness.

RAIN
Hey!

LU
This is humiliating. Of course I can walk. I gotta go.

She holds him in place.

RAIN
Stay. You will be my guest, a while longer.

They remain still.

RAIN
Just until you're better.

Lu kisses her.

LU
I told you I'd stay at your feet and live for scraps.

Taisie rushes in.

TAISIE
The General's here! With the magistrate. He's asking for you.

RAIN
Damn!

LU
Tell him we're busy.

Rain somewhat forcefully helps Lu into his monk's robe.

LU

Wouldn't it be better to hide?

RAIN

Hide what?

LU

Me, your off-the-books lover. I'm not trying to get my head chopped off.

RAIN

Calm down. Better to show an open hand. Let him trust what he sees to keep his mind off what he doesn't.

LU

I don't know about this.

RAIN

Come.

They enter a pavilion, where General Sud stands with Sir Daway, the local magistrate.

Rain leads the way, bowing to General Sud and to Sir Daway.

RAIN

Greetings, General. Sir Daway. It is good to see you again.

DAWAY

And always a pleasure for me. Your presence in our little provincial village is like the sun coming to visit in the house of the lamplighter.

RAIN

May I present a guest of my house, who wishes to pay his respects.

LU

General. Sir Daway. It is an honor.

DAWAY

And who are you?

RAIN

A wandering monk, sir. Without so much as a bowl to beg. I took him in.

DAWAY

Very proper. These deeds are always rewarded.

GENERAL SUD

The Heavens know your charity. You must have fed him well. He doesn't look starved, exactly.

LU

Big bones, sir General. From my mother.

GENERAL SUD

What do you call yourself.

LU

Monk Dog.

The General smiles. Daway laughs.

DAWAY

Monk Dog. Monk Dog.

GENERAL SUD

How humble. Welcome to our house, Monk Dog. We are both travelers here, visitors in this charming town, to which my esteemed friend has welcomed me with such modesty. There is a kinship of outsiders, don't you agree? Already I feel it with you. But it may be simply that your appearance is familiar.

LU

They say all rabbits look the same without their skin.

GENERAL SUD

Daway.

DAWAY

Yes, sir?

GENERAL SUD

Does this monk not strike you as somehow familiar?

Daway sizes Sage Lu up for a moment. Then, possibly lying, he says

DAWAY

Ah. Indeed he does. Though I couldn't say from where.

GENERAL SUD

Nor could I.

RAIN

He's come from the west. These past months.

GENERAL SUD

Perhaps that's it. Have you been to the lands of the Golden Eagles?

LU

Not so far as that, General. The cold.

GENERAL SUD

You see I have been among the barbarians. In the cities of the high plains. The sky peoples, the Reborn, the Al-Tak. I wondered perhaps if we had seen each other.

LU

Impossible.

DAWAY

The General has come on another campaign. It is my honor to host him, on the crown's behalf, as he delivers our poor village from the outlaws of the mountain.

LU

Outlaws?

DAWAY

You don't read the posts? Blackwing Mountain is overrun with bandits. Some of them are former gentlemen who've disgraced themselves. They harass officers and law-abiding citizens at every turn. Even you, mister monk, are not safe.

LU

As my Lady said, I have nothing on me of value. Not even a bowl.

GENERAL SUD

Where the emperor's will may be spurned, no man is safe. I wonder my lieutenant did not warn you.

DAWAY

I wonder you haven't heard. The rabble are in a babble. Outlaws this. General that. It's all I hear. Even my own cook.

LU

I met no one, since arriving. The roads were empty until I came into this house.

DAWAY

Maybe they were scared of you! Do you know, there's a monk among the outlaws? Oh yes! They say he's a fierce killer, with warrants from three provinces.

GENERAL SUD

I've heard of this monk. Dangerous to be mistaken for him.

RAIN

Father, this man is a simple follower of the faith and a faithful servant of the emperor. He has asked to observe your meeting with the people today. To understand judgment in action.

GENERAL SUD

Is that so?

LU

(laboring)

Yes. I've heard of your greatness. Your wisdom. And wanted to see.

DAWAY

The riffraff are ready, General. If you want me to let them in.

General Sud nods. With a motion from Sir Daway, citizens begin to enter.

DAWAY

You! Forward!

Citizen 1 steps forward.

CITIZEN 1

Honored General! When I heard you were coming, I wept with joy, for I knew justice would walk among us.

GENERAL SUD

Please.

CITIZEN 1

My husband has been in prison for three months. He committed only a small offense, no great crime against the state. Sung a few too many lines at the tavern. Carried on a bit. Who won't when he's had too much to drink? Three months he's been in prison for his foolishness, and each day I visit him, his hands are full of blood. His back so sore he has to lie on his face.

She points to the Warden.

CITIZEN 1

That miserable warden there is responsible.

LU

(aside, to Rain)

Bastard. I know the type.

RAIN

Shh. Wait and see.

LU

Canings for nothing but a song. And you can bet there's money in it for him.

RAIN

Quiet.

CITIZEN 1

He is vicious. He punishes beyond the purpose of the law. May a low officer take it upon himself to do what the magistrate has never asked? I beg him to let my husband alone. This man says nothing, only directs me to his deputy. Do you know what his deputy does? He asks me for money.

Lu slowly tilts his "did you hear that?" face towards Rain, who stares resolutely ahead.

CITIZEN 1

My neighbors tell me that is the way of things. Money speaks where men's voices cannot carry. I must do my duty by my husband as he has always done by me. I put copper in the Deputy's palm. The next day, my husband's tooth is broken. I put silver in the Deputy's palm. My husband's eyes are shut. His wrists and neck are bound to the board. I put my life in the Deputy's palm, and my husband is locked up standing, red dripping through his trouser legs, no sleep in days. What can I do?

GENERAL SUD

Warden! Is this true?

WARDEN

She lies. I've taken no money from this woman. If my deputy accepts bribes that's between him and his conscience. He holds no power over me.

CITIZEN 1

Liar!

GENERAL SUD

Quiet! Where is this deputy?

WARDEN

The prison. Someone has to stand guard while I stand before you on false charges.

GENERAL SUD

Enough. Miss. You come before me and insinuate that your husband's punishment exceeds his deserts, but a seditious song is like the wine your husband drank: poured into sober ears, it may incite to wildness, poured into drunken ears, it is a recipe for outright chaos. You question the authority of the warden, but to envision a disjunction, some impotent flailing end of the magistrate's power is the kind of talk that got your husband into trouble. And last you come to me *confessing* of a bribe you paid a sworn officer. Three times you tried to seduce the deputy into debasing himself. This I cannot allow. You have children, Miss?

CITIZEN 1

Yes. Yes.

GENERAL SUD

Good. Since they would be left alone without you, I will apply your sentence instead onto your husband's. Three months more.

Citizen 1 bursts into tears.

LU

That's outrageous!

RAIN

Shh!

WARDEN

Thank you, General.

GENERAL SUD

I am not finished. You are the representative of the magistrate, and your actions *must* therefore accord with the will of the magistrate.

WARDEN

Of course, sir.

GENERAL SUD

And so your deputy represents you. When he solicits a bribe, it is you who have solicited it. His corruption is your corruption. And I do not tolerate corruption.

Sir Daway is visibly uncomfortable.

RAIN

The magistrate sweats.

DAWAY

(to the Warden)

That's right. What have I told you?

GENERAL SUD

A perfectly designed temple will collapse where one beam has rotted. A great dynasty, whose blood has turned the wheel grinding civilization out of raw millions...with a single spoiled child may be torn apart and lost to time forever. The stars, the moons, the planets, set in their invisible courses, with one errant blow shall loose the universe into a chaos beyond the reckoning of man's years. You shall be confined in the prison yard, along with your deputy, and caned each day until the husband is released.

The Warden falls to his knees begging.

GENERAL SUD

Go!

The Warden is dragged away. Lu laughs.

LU

I liked that part at least. Harsh but consistent.

WARDEN

Your honor! Your honor!

Sir Daway pretends not to hear him. He whispers to one of his attendants.

GENERAL SUD

Mister Magistrate...

LU

Uh oh.

DAWAY

(nervously)

Yes?

GENERAL SUD

The next, please.

Daway summons Citizen 2.

LU

Oh, this guy's a winner.

Rain stifles a smile.

GENERAL SUD

What is it?

CITIZEN 2

Mr. General, your honor, sir. I am in a real pickle, there's no doubt about it. Doubt about it. Sorry, I'm a little nervous. See, I'm one of the town watchmen. I've been doing it for a few years -- a little boring, but on a warm night I kind of like it. Anyway, I don't make a lot. I know you're not in charge of that -- you're not in charge of that, are you? See, because of the money my family had to move down to the Bottoms -- and I'm not complaining for me -- heck, I like it hot and tight, anyone'll tell you

Lu laughs.

CITIZEN 2

...but my wife's health...she's supposed to have a drier climate, doctor's orders. Anyway, one night, I'm out walking the town, this is between third and fourth watch, I think, and my son comes running up. This is my son here, if you can believe it. He's a good kid. Say hello to the general.

The son prostrates himself.

RAIN

(muttering)

Keep your son out of it, idiot.

CITIZEN 2

He says Mom's having trouble breathing. You've been married. You understand. I went home to check, and she looks like she's about to kick. I couldn't think straight. I love my wife. If she could've been here, you'd see. I mean a seven out of ten, at least. A little mean, but -- oh, she's not dead or anything. Not yet. But it was a long night, and by the time I got back to my post, well, damn it if there wasn't a break-in. One of these outlaws. And a foreigner, the witnesses said. Stole some good jewelry. Terrorized a couple young ladies. Then out into the night. Now the captain says I'm out of a job, but I ask you, Mr. General, sir, is it my fault? Would you have done differently in my position?

GENERAL SUD

And what do you want from me?

CITIZEN 2

Put in a word for me with the captain, maybe? Tell him I'm a good guy. And shit happens.

RAIN

Oh no.

LU

Oh man, I like this guy.

CITIZEN 2

Also could I have some water my tongue is getting kind of..

He indicates his cottonmouth.

GENERAL SUD

I appreciate your testimony. For abandoning your post and allowing a foreign bandit into the town, you will be caned no less than twelve blows.

LU

What?

RAIN

Hush.

GENERAL SUD

Guards?

General Sud's men leap up and seize the Citizen. The Son tries to fight them off, but he is punched and dropped to the ground.

The Citizen is stripped and caned. His son crying out the whole time.

GENERAL SUD

Silence, boy! Or you'll get the same. Bandits I despise most of all. They pretend to live outside the law while subsisting on its produce. They mock the good citizens, thinking in the obscurity of the crowd to feed on the people like fleas on the belly of a horse. This your father allowed in. This I will stamp out if I must level the mountain itself.

LU

That's enough, sir!

GENERAL SUD

You have something to say, monk?

LU

To beat a father in front of his boy. Who does it serve?

GENERAL SUD

You question my verdict.

LU

It's disgraceful.

GENERAL SUD

Disgraceful? In my house you say this? I don't know what monastery you come from, sir monk, but they obviously failed to teach you manners. You'll respect --

RAIN

General --

GENERAL SUD

Quiet.

RAIN

General --

GENERAL SUD

Quiet.

RAIN

Father.

GENERAL SUD

What?

RAIN

I've not been entirely honest with you. This monk suffered a head wound. I discovered him beaten by bandits at the side of the road. He's had trouble remembering himself ever since. You must forgive him if he does not understand the law or know his own place.

GENERAL SUD

Is this so?

RAIN

Please. He's obviously unwell even now and suffering the effects of his trauma. Allow me to return him to my servants, who have cared for him these past days.

GENERAL SUD

Very well. I will not have a monk abused further. Though he would do well to remember the way of things soon.

RAIN

Thank you, Father.

Rain rushes Lu off.

LU

Ah! Easy! Easy! I'm injured, remember?

Back in her chambers...

RAIN

What are you thinking? You need to apologize to the General.

LU

Apologize? To that fathead? Good cover, by the way. You're quick on your feet.

RAIN

If it weren't for me you'd have been beaten like the watchman. That's why you'll apologize.

LU

It's the watchman deserves an apology.

RAIN

You take his side?

LU

You heard me. There's justice, and there's cruelty.

RAIN

There's no cruelty in giving to each what he is owed.

LU

So prisoner's wife deserved to lose her husband over a drinking song? Or to stretch his bid over a rotten bribe?

RAIN

What if every man accepted bribes? In an empire of money there would be no defense for the poor nor any law for the rich.

LU

Still the old lady --

RAIN

Knew the law. She could be in prison herself if not for the wisdom of the General.

LU

So there is a choice.

RAIN

Without discretion there could be no judgment.

LU

If the judgment is cruel it's at his discretion?

RAIN

What judgment is cruel?

LU

To beat a father in front of his son!

RAIN

He failed his duty

LU

Over nothing.

RAIN

He risked everyone!

LU

You support this bullying.

RAIN

I support the General.

LU

Your father.

RAIN

I support my father.

LU

If you were in his place, you would have done the same.

RAIN

I am not in his place.

LU

But if you were

RAIN

I am not. It's disrespectful to imagine.

LU

That's bullshit, that's not an answer.

RAIN

You don't have to understand; you have to apologize. I owe my father my loyalty. How could I be without him?

LU

Be loyal to yourself. I know you disliked seeing that man beaten -

RAIN

Loyalty flows upward, to our elders and betters. A soldier to his general, a citizen to the emperor.

LU

Elders, betters...

RAIN

Of course. It's the order of the world.

LU

Elders don't carry any water for me. And I've never met these betters.

RAIN

Who do you listen to?

LU

My brothers. And me, I guess. I ask myself.

RAIN

But who are you? Without parents, masters, who are you?

LU

I'm a dog. As long as I'm with you, I'm what you call me.

RAIN

I believe it's true what I told the General. You're not well. You're suffering from a brain injury and forget yourself. I pray your mind will return to you.

Rain goes to exit but is interrupted at the door by Taisie, carrying dishes.

TAISIE

Pardon me. I thought you might be hungry after a long morning.

RAIN

Please. Serve the monk. I'll eat later.

TAISIE

As you wish, my lady.

Taisie brings the food to the table.

LU

Come on. You'll make your guest eat alone?

RAIN

Eat with Taisie, if she doesn't mind.

TAISIE

I don't mind.

LU

Drain a cup with me. Let's put this behind us.

RAIN

I can't drink with *nobody*.

LU

Same here. Have a seat.

RAIN

Apologize to the General.

LU

I will. I will. I'll tell your dad I'm sorry for insulting him.

Rain steps aside to clear the doorway.

LU

After lunch.

She looks at him.

LU

I promise! We don't have to be like this. I know you're hungry.

Rain comes and sits at the table.

LU

So we saw this morning a little differently, my first time in court, you grew up in it, the whole thing --

RAIN

No more talk.

LU

Works for me.

They offer glasses and drink. They begin to pick at the food. At first they go slowly, and then, watching each other, they begin to compete. They go faster and faster, trying to finish the plates before the other gets there. It's a game: they discover in each other a massive appetite at the same time they wordlessly realize they are making a game of this appetite. If it weren't so messy and the sounds weren't so gross, it might be sexy (they certainly find it so).

At last they come to the end of the food. Their hands touch reaching for it. They retreat, try again.

Rain smiles and offers it to Lu. He picks it up, then offers it back to her. She eats out of his hand.

SCENE TWO: THE MAGISTRATE'S COMPOUND, NIGHT

Outside the General's chambers. Four guards are posted.

One of the guards suddenly falls, a dart in his neck. Three assassins appear.

Fight. The remaining guards are slain, though one manages to strike an alarm.

Rain leaps in and fights the assassins. She demonstrates off-hand combat, catching one assassin's blade and hurling it into another assassin. She kicks a spear back into the chest of the thrower.

She defeats the assassins. Breathing heavily over the corpses, Rain looks up to see General Sud. She bows to him. He nods.

RAIN

I'll have them removed immediately.

GENERAL SUD

Leave it for others. I'd like to speak to the monk.

RAIN

Father?

GENERAL SUD

Wake him. It's all right.

Rain bows and rushes off. General Sud walks among the corpses. Lightly, one at a time, he places a foot on the chests of the defeated, rolling them over if he must for access.

GENERAL SUD

Lunatics. It's as I told the emperor: there are frontiers within and without. Wherever there is discontent, where one voice rises against the harmony of the people it saws the ear. In the heart of a single man lies a frontier. And at the borders no law holds.

Rain fetches Lu.

LU

I rolled over last night, and you weren't there.

RAIN

An inconvenience.

LU

Not to me. I went right back to sleep.

She does not smile.

LU

Not so funny, I guess.

RAIN

Unexpected visitors. I showed them the gate.

LU

They coming back?

RAIN

The gate I showed them you can't pass twice. But there will be others.

As they come to the General's door, she warns him:

RAIN

Be on your guard.

LU

(yawning)

It's too early for fighting.

RAIN

Against yourself. Your reckless tongue.

LU

Too early for that, too.

She brings him in to General Sud.

GENERAL SUD

Leave us.

Rain exits.

GENERAL SUD

You see I have had visitors.

LU

I don't like guests after ten either.

GENERAL SUD

My daughter is a formidable opponent.

LU

I noticed.

GENERAL SUD

On your travels you have accepted the food of many houses, passed the hours in conversation with the men and women of this country.

LU

(trying to follow)

Food and women, yeah.

GENERAL SUD

It seems to me you might have heard whispers on your way --

(holding up a hand)

I know: the roads have been empty since you arrived in town. You were not aware of any outlaws on Blackwing Mountain. However, you might have heard other rumors. Stray complaints.

LU

Back pain's a bear, among the peasants...

GENERAL SUD

Tell me did you encounter any troubles on your journey?

LU

Troubles?

A guard appears and begins to drag the bodies off, one-by-one.

GENERAL SUD

I notice you are bruised about the face.

LU

Ah. Well, it's true.

GENERAL SUD

How did it happen, can I ask?

LU

It was a doctrinal dispute.

GENERAL SUD

With another monk?

LU

With my brothers, yes.

GENERAL SUD

When was this?

LU

Few days ago.

GENERAL SUD

They are still in the area?

LU

Ah, that who knows? Monks, sir. Always on the hoof.

GENERAL SUD

It is fortunate you landed here with my daughter. You are comfortable, in her chambers?

LU

Oh, plenty. That Taisie really packs the table.

GENERAL SUD

It is a gift for my daughter to learn something of the teachings.

LU

What she asks I tell.

GENERAL SUD

But it is difficult to communicate, isn't it? The wisdom. I find the sages tend to talk around it. The deepest matters seem to live where words fail.

LU

I'm not a word-guy myself. But our understanding sometimes --

General Sud steps over the last body just before the Guard steps in to drag it away.

GENERAL SUD

--Yes, that is just what I mean. There are some subjects about which nothing you can say is true. It takes more words to lie, I notice, and still more when you don't intend to. You fly around in circles, a hawk pouring his vision through the web of every tree, convinced by thoroughness you might protect yourself from false witness. But it is no good. A thousand words are no better than one, no better than silence, even. Nothing you can say is true.

Pause.

GENERAL SUD

I find that's especially so when it comes to the self.

LU

I'd say you're right, but then maybe that wouldn't be true.

Pause. The General smiles.

GENERAL SUD

Very good, Monk Dog. Thank you for visiting with me. Let us hope in silence we come closer to the truth.

SCENE THREE: THE MAGISTRATE'S COMPOUND, MORNING

Rain is training in her chambers.

Taisie appears in the doorway and watches.

TAISIE

You strike as suddenly as ever.

RAIN

I'm slower. Slower to strike. Slower to recover.

TAISIE

I don't see it.

RAIN

The spectre of thought creeps between impulse and action. The slimmest ghost, briefer than air, but it labors my limbs. I'm getting old.

TAISIE

Hardly. Not yet.

RAIN

Another year and who knows if I'd have been able to stop the assassins. Look.

Rain reveals a wound in her side.

RAIN

They should have let time do their work.

TAISIE

The General is safe thanks to you.

RAIN
But if he should fall...

TAISIE
Then you'll take his place.

RAIN
You count too much on the court. What father sees in me is invisible to his masters.

TAISIE
Maybe he'll elevate you himself. Before his sun falls behind Heaven Mountain.

RAIN
Maybe. It is more likely he's given me all he can.

TAISIE
(a question)
He can't want any more from you.

RAIN
No.

TAISIE
So you'll destroy yourself without opportunity. You'll risk everything for nothing.

RAIN
For Father's life. For what's good.

TAISIE
Can you imagine another life? If we're turned out?

RAIN
Imagine, maybe. I would have death rather than live apart from what is just.

Lu appears in the doorway.

LU
Morning, ladies.

Taisie acknowledges Lu, then exits.

Rain continues her training.

LU
(to Rain)
You know how to clear a room, eh? Up for a little training?

RAIN
We are in outlaw territory.

She pauses for a moment.

RAIN
Join me.

LU
This monk doesn't move before breakfast.

RAIN
Need arrives at all hours.

LU
Tell me about it. Why do you think I woke up last night.

RAIN
Danger, I mean.

LU
I'm a man of peace.

RAIN
It is good for righteous men to be strong.

LU
And for strong men to be righteous.

RAIN
Come on. Do you know Taming The Tiger?

LU
S'that the same as pussy control?

Rain adopts the stance.

RAIN
A low stance, with the weight balanced back.

Rain demonstrates the exercise.

RAIN
Not strike, but counter. Not punish, but restore.

LU

You've been doing this a long time.

RAIN

When you dedicate your life to protecting something, if you fail once, you fail forever. Come.

Lu steps through the exercise. He gives no effort.

LU

Hard life.

RAIN

Not as hard as it could be. Imagine if we did lose.

LU

A new order.

RAIN

In time, maybe. But not for those born into chaos. What are you doing? This way.

LU

I told you I'm no good at this.

RAIN

You're not trying.

LU

I can't learn it.

RAIN

Because you don't take it seriously.

LU

I feel like I've heard that before.

Rain suddenly launches at him in a version of the exercise. Lu, reacting on instinct, performs his part with great prowess, spilling her to the ground.

She is disturbed. And he is, too.

RAIN

What was that?

Beginner's luck. LU

But your speed. RAIN

He tries to flirt his way out of it, offering her a hand to help her up.

You must be a good teacher. LU

She waves him off.

Bullshit. RAIN

Are you hurt? LU

Don't be ridiculous. RAIN

Just salty. LU

Surprised. RAIN

It's good for righteous men to be fast. LU

She almost laughs. He offers her a hand again.

My bandages were done poorly this morning. RAIN

You *are* hurt. LU

I wonder if you would fix them for me. RAIN

She reveals her bandaged wound. He kneels.

During the following, he removes her old bandages, examines/washes the wound, and replaces the bandages with new ones.

How many were there? LU

The three you saw. RAIN

Who were they? LU

I don't know. Outlaws. RAIN

Where did they come from? LU

The General's guard investigates. RAIN

They came for him? LU

Of course. RAIN

Why? LU

There are many who despise my father. He's settled barbarians across the empire. RAIN

We're a long way from the border. LU

Still there are those who fear the law. And hate its justicers. RAIN

What happened to your parents? LU

They were killed by marauders in the west. Father claims he found me bundled in a wood-box behind the compound. Crying gave me away. RAIN

Here Lu has cleared the bandages and begins to examine and clean the wound.

RAIN

I have a different version I stand under the maple trees that line the path to the house where I was born. My eyes are stung by smoke. The door is behind me, but I cannot return through it. A giant stalks into my eyeline, his stride hunched like a fishing bird. He turns to face me. The sun disappears. His cheeks are smudged black. In his right hand is a club, jagged at the end, as if he'd snapped the rest off inside some poor body. Without a sound he is just here to me. His teeth are broken. One of his ears is half gone. He lifts the club to end my life. Then flies into a nearby maple trunk. General Sud, on a black horse, has hoisted him by the collar, and hurled him away from me. The General, clean, handsome, with his hair and teeth in place, dismounts. He kneels down to look at my eyes. Then his strong hands are under my arms, and I am set upon the saddle. All the while I have never looked back to my parent's door.

LU

Sounds real enough for me.

RAIN

Father's an honest man but not a humble one.

She points to the fresh bandages for Lu to rewrap her.

RAIN

That's just the sort of story that would appeal to him. But he denied it, laughing. I came from a wood-box. I couldn't have seen the deaths of those who bore me.

LU

What was it like growing up with the General for an old man?

RAIN

He's not much interested in children. He'd had several by then. All boys. All destined to die young. His hope, he told me later, was to give me as a gift to his new wife, so I could keep her attention while he was away on campaign.

Lu kneels beside her and begins wrapping the wound.

LU

What happened?

RAIN

I bedeviled his wife but delighted him. His house had been empty, and it made him prematurely old. No one expected a war foundling would awaken his heart. Him least of all.

LU

Why'd he take a shine to you? Not that I blame him.

RAIN

We're similar, father and I. Maybe he saw that even then? In a speechless child storming naked through his house, beating at servants and officials both? For reasons known to the gods alone, his spirit billowed up where it had cooled. I became his favorite. Much to my displeasure. I remember the first day he remained home and I was told to report to him. I smiled. He turned me over his knee and spanked me. Ladies did not show men their teeth. And no one smiled at the General except in his cups. With patience I've never had and a lack of pity I took years to learn, he broke me of my unruliness. He severed from me my selfishness and gave me back a self. Without a family, a place, I had been nothing.

Lu has finished the job. Tenderly, he draws her clothes back over the wound.

He kisses her.

LU

Thank you.

They begin to kiss heavily.

Taisie rushes in.

TAISIE

The General's men! Oh!

Rain and Lu separate quickly, composing themselves.

The General's guard arrives.

GUARD

Lieutenant.

RAIN

Welcome.

The guard looks at Lu, surprised.

GUARD

Sir Monk.

Lu bows. Guard returns his attention to Rain.

GUARD

Thank you again for saving the General's life last night.

RAIN

You debase me with your thanks. It is only my duty and my good fortune.

GUARD

No, I owe you gratitude. My men were supposed to defend his gate. For this they were inadequate. It is my failing.

RAIN

These were uncommon assassins.

GUARD

Exactly, Lieutenant. And hornets never fly far from the nest. Since the attack, my men have swept the town, looking for who might harbor such men.

RAIN

You believe they belong to the Blackwing bandits?

GUARD

Who else? We set off to trace their scent before the night could dissolve it.

RAIN

And?

GUARD

Two bandits. Skulking along the roads nearby. They are bound even now and await their doom.

RAIN

Bring them in. They can tell us more while their tongues still wag. If I get one speaking, soon we'll know every outlaw in the marsh.

The guard exits. Lu heads for the other door.

RAIN

You don't want to stay?

LU

I figured it's official business. You know how that went last time.

RAIN

These men tried to kill my father. I want you here to see.

The guard returns leading...the Innkeeper and the Drunk. Their wrists are bound behind their backs.

RAIN

I am Lieutenant Sun. This is a wandering monk.

The Innkeeper recognizes Lu and attempts to cover her shock.

RAIN

You are known bandits and associate with the outlaws of Blackwing Mountain. What do you know of the assassins who came last night to our general's gate?

INNKEEPER

Pardon me, miss, but we're not bandits or outlaws. I keep an inn just down the road.

RAIN

And him?

INNKEEPER

He's one of my customers.

The Drunk belches.

INNKEEPER

A regular.

GUARD

Lies! All the gossip in town says these two are crooks.

INNKEEPER

I may water down the wine from time to time, but is that the General's business?

GUARD

The assassins stayed with you last night!

INNKEEPER

I have guests every night. I can't know what they intend when they leave my roof.

RAIN

It's true, then, that you house outlaws?

INNKEEPER

I house whoever can pay.

RAIN

And feed them?

INNKEEPER

Even bad men have to eat. If it makes you feel better, I'm a terrible cook.

Rain strikes the Innkeeper across the face.

RAIN

Old woman! Don't fool around with your life. You tell me all about your friends.

INNKEEPER

Old?

She strikes her again.

INNKEEPER

What did I say? What have I ever done against you or the General?

RAIN

You harbored his would-be assassins. You'll house more tonight if I set you free. How would you like it if I came for your people?

Rain moves to the Drunk.

INNKEEPER

It's no good. He can't tell you anything.

DRUNK

Pretty lady?

She strikes the Drunk.

DRUNK

Miss?

She strikes him again.

INNKEEPER

He's not too sensitive. See, he's had a lot to drink.

She winds up to strike him one more time, but before she can, he keels over onto the floor, unconscious.

INNKEEPER

I usually give him eight or nine hours.

RAIN

Then it's only you I can depend on.

Rain draws her blade.

LU

Please, Lieutenant. This lady may serve bandits meals, maybe she even fed the punks from last night -- it's only her job, you know. There's no rule against it. She's not an outlaw.

RAIN

No rule against harboring criminals?

LU

They don't list their crimes in the guest book.

RAIN

No rule against conspiracy to assassinate a general?

LU

She's not a bad guy.

RAIN

She is! She consorts with fugitives and bandits! Men who rob society, who kill and rape and flout the law! She is in rebellion against the emperor and if she doesn't give up her co-conspirators, I'll execute her here.

INNKEEPER

I don't know anything. I just keep the inn.

RAIN

Liar!

INNKEEPER

Please, Sir Monk!

LU

She says she doesn't know anything.

RAIN

She lies.

LU

How do you know? Careful treading in the dark.

Rain holds her blade to the Innkeeper's
neck.

RAIN

Tell me, Auntie. The bandits of Blackwing Mountain.

INNKEEPER

I can't.

RAIN

Can't or won't?

LU

Mercy, Lieutenant. There are costs to those who harm the innocent.

RAIN

Innocent?

INNKEEPER

Please.

LU

There are costs to those who see the world through fear and hate and act upon it
with those weapons.

RAIN

You'll lead me to the outlaws or you'll die for them.

INNKEEPER

Sir Monk, you know me.

RAIN

Don't look at him.

INNKEEPER

You know me, Sir Monk. I have served you many times.

LU

Quiet, fool. Answer her.

RAIN

Answer me!

INNKEEPER

I don't know what's become of you or why you're here, but you are Sage L --

Rain strikes the Innkeeper's head off.

SCENE FOUR: ANOTHER INN, EVENING

Ox and Red Devil infiltrate town. Outside of an inn, they discuss their approach.

RED DEVIL

Hold, brother.

OX

What for? This inn looks like a good bush to rattle. Get some intel while we feed our food-holes.

RED DEVIL

Which one's your food-hole?

OX

Both?

RED DEVIL

We have to be careful around these people. It's bad enough you're a prize cow with a bounty in two provinces. I'm Al-tak. I can't party with you Inner Kingdom pig-eaters without notice.

OX

Ah, if they say anything, I'll squeeze their insides out. Leave it to me, buddy.

RED DEVIL

With the General in town?

OX

We're outlaws. Might as well act like it.

RED DEVIL

We need these people.

OX
 These people?

He spits.

OX
 Like I need my fleas.

RED DEVIL
 In the long run, if we want justice, we need them.

OX
 For what? To chew on our asses? You know what they call you. They're the reason we live in caves. They're enemies, man, not friends in waiting. You're a smart guy, you should learn the difference.

RED DEVIL
 They're not our enemies yet. If we act like we're at war, we *make* them our enemies. We *make* it war.

OX
 I got bad news for you, buddy: it's already war. They don't send generals to do diplomacy, and these jackasses rolled out the red carpet for a man who wants to kill us. Every second we pretend he doesn't mean what he says, act like this country's big enough for the both of us, we give them the advantage. We say "come kill us; we won't even fight." Because we care what you *think* of us.

Ox strides into the inn. Red Devil follows him.

OX
 Listen up, dicksucks: nobody leaves or makes any sneaky moves.

RED DEVIL
 We're here for information.

OX
 And food.

RED DEVIL
 And food. Information and food.

A guest tries to run out. Ox sticks out a hand and plucks him off the ground.

OX

You know who I am, right?

GUEST

Th-th-the Iron Ox. And he's the Red Devil.

Ox hurls the guest back onto a chair.

RED DEVIL

Sorry, folks. We're not trying to ruin your evening. Just a friendly visit.

OX

Who serves drinks around here? And why do y'all look like you puddled your pants?

GUEST

If you please, sirs. General Sud is in town.

OX

We know all about him. I'll stripe his ass like a tiger when I'm ready.

GUEST

But it's death to be seen with bandits. Even to share the same roof without reporting...

A second guest tries to sneak out. Red Devil swiftly blocks him at the door.

RED DEVIL

My apologies.

OX

What a load of horseshit.

SECOND GUEST

It's not, sir. The innkeeper next door was executed today. It's all we've been talking about.

RED DEVIL

Executed for what?

GUEST

They say she housed outlaws.

OX

Even outlaws have to sleep.

SECOND GUEST

And fed them.

OX

So she had better manners than you bedwetters.

RED DEVIL

Ox.

OX

You.

Ox points at a diner with a bowl of food.

OX

Bring me that.

Ox will spend the rest of the scene intimidating guests into bringing him their food and then raiding the kitchen to bring him more food and wine.

Meanwhile, Red Devil continues questioning those who will talk.

RED DEVIL

Was anyone there when the woman was taken?

THIRD GUEST

I saw it.

RED DEVIL

Tell me.

THIRD GUEST

The General's guard came to her door. The moment she appeared, they knocked her to the ground and a fat man sat on her back, while the others went inside. I heard a commotion and soon Goat-Head flew out the door head-first. He was bleeding at the ear. They didn't know he gets tossed all the time - he's used to it. Soon he was on his feet and trying to fight, so they had to get rough with him. Auntie begged them to stop, but it was no good. These men were worked up like a skin rash and twice as red.

RED DEVIL

Where did they go?

THIRD GUEST

The magistrate's compound. His house has been turned over to General Sud.

RED DEVIL

And someone saw the woman killed?

GUEST

Her body was returned to her husband this afternoon. And her head.

Disturbed chatter breaks out.

RED DEVIL

I'm looking for a friend of mine. A righteous brother who may have fallen into danger. He came here some nights ago and hasn't been seen since. Please. I need your help. Friends.

The chatter drops out. Citizen 1 from earlier appears among the rabble.

CITIZEN 1

You mean the monk. Sage Lu.

RED DEVIL

You know him.

CITIZEN 1

I've seen him. Just yesterday I appealed to the magistrate and General Sud. I saw Sage Lu.

RED DEVIL

Are you sure?

CITIZEN 1

He was there. The Tattooed Monk. My eyes may be poor, but he is impossible to mistake.

RED DEVIL

You wouldn't dare lie to me.

CITIZEN 1

Never.

RED DEVIL

Has he been chained? Beaten? Where do they keep him?

CITIZEN 1

If I may, he did not appear to be a prisoner. His hands were unbound. He wore his monk's robes and sat at the side of the Swordswoman.

RED DEVIL

What Swordswoman?

CITIZEN 1

The General's daughter. A warrior fiercer, even, than the General himself. She's the one who foiled our assassins. She ended the life of our dear Auntie.

RED DEVIL

Lies.

CITIZEN 1

I'm telling you what I saw. No doubt he's a hostage. He's known far and wide for his righteousness. Maybe they hold him by honor if not by force.

RED DEVIL

It can't be. That monk is a mad bull, bound to no man. He would break Sud's house at its timbers before submit to any yoke.

CITIZEN 1

The General is a clever man. A sorcerer of cruelty.

(slight pause)

...and I fear he has learned the location of your mountain hideout.

RED DEVIL

Ty Fenn!

Ox bursts forth, hands full of food.

OX

I'm listening! What'd she say?

RED DEVIL

The General knows where we live.

OX

How?

CITIZEN 1

Many of us know. When the General's heel blots out the sun, we're not all so brave as we pretend.

Ox goes after Citizen 1, hands full of food.

OX

Was it you? Did you sell us out you little rat-monkey - ?

Red Devil cuts Ox off, leading him away.

RED DEVIL

Never mind. She's not the problem. If the General can attack directly, all our brothers are in danger.

OX

Not the problem? This is what I'm talking about. She's the one who put us in danger. Her or one of these other dopes chewing their cud. Do you know what's good for you?! You wanna be overrun by assholes?

RED DEVIL

She was afraid.

OX

Who isn't? What kind of excuse is that?

RED DEVIL

Ox, we have to warn the Chief.

OX

We have to stomp out traitors right here.

RED DEVIL

There's no time for that.

OX

Do it now or do it later. But they're not part of the future we're fighting for.

RED DEVIL

It's their country, too. There's no future without them.

OX

Not if we start stomping.

RED DEVIL

Back to the hideout. Gather the men.

OX

And what about Lu?

RED DEVIL

I don't know. What I've heard confuses me.

OX

They'll cut his head off, too, before the battle's over. All for a damn squash.

RED DEVIL

It might be beyond us.

OX

What do you mean?

RED DEVIL

She said Lu is with the Swordswoman. The General's daughter.

OX

What is she hot or something?

Third Guest pipes up:

THIRD GUEST

She has a face like the moon and hair like the space between stars. She moves like a leaf on the wind and speaks

OX

OK, OK that sounds a little outta our guy's league. He's not exactly portrait material, know what I mean? Took a few punches as a kid, maybe some before he even left the womb.

RED DEVIL

He's been seen in her company.

OX

It stinks. I haven't got laid in six months, and he's pulling down the best piece in the province? After what we did to his face? It stinks.

RED DEVIL

So what are you --

OX

You gotta stay and rescue Lu. Get him outta the General's house before it's too late.

RED DEVIL

By myself?

OX

Hey, you wanna trust these bozos be my guest. But I think I made my view clear.

Ox steals the drink of a passing guest, downs it, and shoves the customer away.

RED DEVIL

You're right. He can't be serving her. Something's going on. And he can't wait.

OX

All right. So this is it then. See ya after the shenanigans.

RED DEVIL

If we both make it.

OX

Don't worry; I'll make it.

Red Devil offers a formal farewell.

RED DEVIL

Let us be brothers for lives and lives to come, mending then the bonds this world has broken.

OX

Gonna make me cry.

They part in opposite directions.

ACT THREE

SCENE ONE: THE MAGISTRATE'S COMPOUND, THE NEXT DAY

Sage Lu, alone. He settles into a posture and breathes. He releases tension, his eyes closed. Then he begins to move as if in combat.

He rehearses both sides of a conversation with Rain (her side in quotes).

LU

How dare you? How dare you? Think you're tough? Think power, think pain are yours to dole out?

In another space: Rain, alone. She, too, moves as if in combat, rehearsing a debate.

LU

"She was a criminal."

RAIN

She was a criminal.

RAIN

How dare you?

LU

She wasn't. She was nothing. You know nothing.

RAIN

She resisted me, resisted the law.

LU

Let me tell you something:

RAIN

Let me tell you something:

LU

The world is made of people, not laws.

RAIN

While the world is made of people, there must be laws.

LU

If you don't understand people, you'll be a scourge

RAIN

You think I'm a bad person?

LU

You're not a bad person. But I don't understand this cruelty. "Cruelty is robbing from the people. Hiding assassins who would take my father's life." Leave your dad out of this! For once!

RAIN

You don't understand bad people. You've never marched against the barbarians who break children on wheels in the sky. You've never opened their camps after battle to find young women made old by slavery, young men made women. Or seen cowards tied to the tentpole by their own entrails.

LU

What do *you* think? Do *you* think this is good? Do *you* think this is just?

RAIN

You forget the shadows where the law can't reach. Where strong men prey on the weak.

LU

You have strength on your side, you have responsibility.

RAIN

I arrested a man once who took from all his peasants the first generation of daughters.

LU

But you think your strength makes you right. Like folks on high are never wrong.

RAIN

He starved them and used them and when he was through with them -- because they cried, because they stank, because they no longer gave him pleasure -- he cut off their heads and left them in the room where the others slept.

LU

"Authority flows like the river, from the high hills to the low valleys." "Authority springs like the forest from the bed of old growth."

RAIN

When he finished with the first generation, he moved on to the second, simply killing off husbands or offering them their wives' weight in salt.

LU

Authority can lick my lumps.

RAIN

So he went on until his home was a charnel house of fleshless girls, anonymous in their bodies. And the village was only grandparents, dispossessed of their futures, and rich young men, dispossessed of their hearts.

LU

Oh, you say without law there's violence? I say your law is a mask for it.

RAIN

That's what grows in times of chaos.

LU

The same brutal acts, but with an official seal. And that's what...that's what you've done.

RAIN

I am holding it back. We are holding it back. At the tip of the sword, yes.

LU

"I was defending the peace, you ingrate. Imagine she had hid the men who killed your father." Not my father, I'd have thanked her for it. "How can you speak so?" You don't know the guy. "Respect your parents." You respect them, I had to live with them. "Stay on topic!" I'm just saying...

RAIN

"You and your corrupt cronies. Is the law always just?" Where the law is unjust it will be remade. Where men are unjust they will have no safety from the law.

LU

"Imagine she had hid the men who killed your sister. What would you do then?" I'd beat him til the pigs could eat him.

RAIN

"What about the warden?"

At this point they work themselves into the same space on stage. They face on another as they speak, continuing their drills.

LU

But it's not the same.

RAIN

It's not the same.

LU

I didn't know. You didn't know.

RAIN

You saw him punished.

LU

"You'd let him go?"

RAIN

The house tidies itself. Nature leaves festering bones for flies to breed.

LU

"Be honest now."

RAIN

"What about the magistrate? Did you see his face?" He'll be dealt with in due time. But who does it serve for an outlaw to ride in and lop off his head?

LU

I'd search myself for mercy.

RAIN

Chaos has no friends but death and strife.

LU

"Mercy?" Mercy.

RAIN

We have obligations beyond ourselves. Those obligations hold the *world* in balance. To go outside the law is selfish.

LU

"Mercy's like kindness: a made up word. An abstraction between what is deserved and what is given." No!

RAIN

"Not if you serve a higher law."

LU

Mercy is what's real; not deserve.

RAIN

Arrogance! Are you the one, the one person who knows better than everyone else?

LU

You had mercy on me when you found me lying in a ditch. When I clung to the trail of your sheets.

RAIN

We must cling together or die. Don't you see that?

LU

My life is a gift of mercy. Of monks who've sheltered the pitiful fire of my goodness. Men who've forgiven me when I have betrayed every bond between us. It's mercy that's kept me from the dark of my self.

RAIN

This world would be a paradise, if we could serve. This world right now, this broken world.

LU

I would be another man. And I would not be here, with you.

RAIN

That is why I serve.

LU

If you can't get that about me. You can't get me.

RAIN

If you cannot understand that. You cannot understand me.

Taisie appears.

TAISIE

Dinner is ready.

They come to the dinner table. They fill their plates in silence.

RAIN

How was your nap?

LU

So-so. You?

RAIN

Much-needed.

In silence, they begin to eat. Then pause.

RAIN

Shall we smile and be friends again.

LU

More than friends, I think.

RAIN

Yes.

LU

I'd like to smile.

RAIN

Can you?

LU

Lots of folks have turned away from violence.

RAIN

What an interesting remark.

LU

If you're unhappy.

RAIN

I'm not unhappy.

LU

Then smiling shouldn't be an issue.

They fall into silence again. And eat. Rain reaches for more food and halts.

RAIN

Your way would destroy society.

LU

To let the innkeeper live?

RAIN

You know what I mean.

LU

I mean the innkeeper. If nothing else, her life --

RAIN

One does not plead against actions already done.

LU

Then I'll plead for the next innkeeper.

RAIN

We must cling together as a people; we have parts to play --

LU

We are more than our parts.

RAIN

What more? How could we be more? You are the monk who dines with me. I am the sword in the General's hand.

LU

A sword doesn't go to bed with strangers. A sword doesn't fall in love.

RAIN

I like that I'm a sword.

Silence. They eat.

LU

I can't debate with you.

RAIN

Because it isn't in the scriptures?

LU

I'm not smart like you. I only know a few things. Like killing the woman was wrong.

RAIN

Cite your reasons, consult the law; your gut's not the only --

LU

And your father isn't either. You have to think for yourself.

RAIN

I have thought, and I agree with him.

LU

You agree with him or you take his side from some sick filial fetish he fed down your

RAIN

And I will not apologize for my father's --.

LU

The General's not your father. I'd bet everything he killed your dad when he wiped out your people.

Silence.

Lu waits for a response. He gives up waiting and reaches for more food.

Rain flips the table.

RAIN

Get out.

LU

You know the truth

RAIN

This is my life. My family. This is who I am. It is. You don't know me, but you turn my life over --

LU

I know you.

RAIN

You turn my life over and dump its contents on the floor. Then you kick it around saying "oh, this" and "no more of that." But who are you? I found you in a ditch. I brought you into this home. You'll leave by sunrise.

LU

OK, calm down. Rain --

Rain storms out. Lu stands stunned.

Taisie enters to clear the dishes. Lu sneaks a final bite of something as she takes it out.

LU

What do you think, will her ladyship simmer down?

Taisie gives him a look, then moves on.

LU

Hey, I treated her good! I'm not the bad guy!

Lu is alone again. He gathers his robe, his broken bowl, and his sandals. The only things he will set out with.

Then he puts out the lamps in the room. His last candle he carries back towards his small pile of things, examining them, empty on the floor. Finally he goes to bed and blows out the candle.

Moments pass and then a sliver of movement. Red Devil appears in the room. Not knowing whose room he is in, he moves carefully, feeling his way.

Lu snores, startling Red Devil. Now Red Devil creeps towards the bed, hoping to get the drop on its occupant. He steps on a creaky floor board -- or on Lu's broken bowl. Lu wakes and now begins trying to locate the intruder.

A "fight in darkness" ensues. The classic act from Beijing Opera features two performers attempting to find/kill each other in a "pitch black" space (by convention, the stage is always lit). It alternates slow bits of physical comedy, like something out of Keaton or Chaplin, with sudden bursts of weapon-play.

At last, Lu manages to light a lamp. He turns with the light just in time to catch Red Devil rushing towards him.

RED DEVIL

Sage Lu!

LU

Red Devil!

The men embrace.

RED DEVIL

So you do know me?

LU

I'd know your pretty ass anywhere. Why are you sneaking around my room like a thief? You could've got hurt.

RED DEVIL

I could've got hurt? Anyway, I'm glad it's your room I picked. And on the first try!

LU

What are you doing here?

RED DEVIL

I'm here to rescue you!

LU

Rescue me? Who said I need rescuing?

RED DEVIL

General Sud is here. Haven't you realized? You're living in his daughter's chambers.

LU

Of course I've realized. How dumb do you think I am?

RED DEVIL

We didn't know. Last time we saw you you were so drunk.

LU

That doesn't sound like me.

RED DEVIL

You couldn't even recognize us.

LU

Impossible.

RED DEVIL

And then you got hit in the head.

LU

Hit? Who hit me?

RED DEVIL

Just hit. And then you fell...

Fell?
LU

Into a ditch.
RED DEVIL

....ooooooooohhhh
LU

RED DEVIL
I'm so relieved. You're here. Well, not relieved you're *here*, exactly. We were worried. Me and Ox. When we heard you'd been seen in the General's house...well you can imagine. And then the rumor that you weren't a hostage at all. That you were cozy with the General's daughter.

LU
It's not like that.

RED DEVIL
Of course not. They don't exactly keep you in a dungeon, eh? These Inner Kingdom bastards. Hospitality even when they're trying to blot you out from the earth. But you must have seen the General. Is he like they say?

LU
He has a tiger curled in his skull.

RED DEVIL
Of course. All the stories. I never laid eyes on him, back west If I'd seen him in those days one of us wouldn't be here to complete the drama. Who am I kidding -- I was seven. Watching my uncles get cut down one by one. But the stars' roads are long, and here our orbits cross again, so many years later and closer still. Can he be defeated?

LU
He's well-guarded, that man. I've had my hands full surviving.

RED DEVIL
Of course. Of course. You've been questioned. Beaten. Tortured for our whereabouts. But I know you weren't the one who gave us up.

LU
No. It wasn't me. They don't know who I am.

RED DEVIL
What?

LU

I'm incognito. They think I'm just a meddling monk.

RED DEVIL

You? But you stick out anywhere. A horse could spot you from India. Kids can draw your tattoos from memory. I'd know you in hell with your skin stripped off. That giant dome of yours...that barrel gut...

LU

Ok...

RED DEVIL

I'd recognize you blindfolded with all the lamps off.

LU

Well...

RED DEVIL

Good point. Anyway, it's time to go. The men expect me, but they won't wait long.

LU

I'm not going.

RED DEVIL

What?

Rain bears a candle into her father's room. She sets it down and watches him sleep for a moment. His age seems to travel as she tilts the angle of her view. She reaches lightly for his shoulder.

GENERAL SUD

Heuuh!

General Sud startles and grabs at her harm violently with one hand, while with the other he prepares to strike.

RAIN

Father.

He recognizes her and melts.

GENERAL SUD

What's wrong?

Sage Lu's room.

LU

I'm not an outlaw anymore. I...I shouldn't be here, I know. But I don't want to fight.

RED DEVIL

I don't understand.

LU

I think I can escape.

RED DEVIL

Right. With me. Let's go.

LU

I think, I don't have to live like this. In constant war. I can be a person. With another person.

RED DEVIL

So it's true. You and the Swordswoman.

LU

That's only part of it.

The General's chamber.

RAIN

Have you ever regretted taking a life?

GENERAL SUD

We are not responsible for the waste of others. But I have regretted it, yes. Often enough.

RAIN

Have you ever wished you were in a position where you didn't have to kill?

He touches her tenderly.

GENERAL SUD

You chose this life. I would have been content if you had found another. If you had chosen a husband.

RAIN

But I'm your lieutenant.

GENERAL SUD

There are other lieutenants.

(over her response)

I am not saying they will be as fierce as you. Nor could they inspire as much faith in their dear old general. But the emperor's ranks are swollen, and we do not lack for fighters in these strange days.

RAIN

These others, they could also succeed you one day.

Sage Lu's room.

RED DEVIL

You're betraying your brothers for a piece of ass.

LU

I'm not betraying anybody.

RED DEVIL

I've come all this way for you, and you turn your back.

LU

I never asked to be rescued.

RED DEVIL

You didn't have to. Our men will come soon. The general knows our hideout. We have to strike first.

LU

How will this ever end? You topple one general, one lord at a time until the emperor himself ascends the mountain and stakes the country on a single roll?

RED DEVIL

How will it end for you? If you love her well enough will it stop her hunting me? If you two make peace will it keep her father from murdering everyone who isn't lucky enough to be born in the Inner Kingdom or simple enough to want to be? When they've done with the rest of us will you be waiting in her bed for her to come home and tell you the fighting's over, and you'll never have to argue again? She'll take you and say, "just look at me," and you'll have to because out the windows there's nothing left of the world you claimed to love.

General Sud's chambers.

RAIN

What is it you wanted for me?

GENERAL SUD

I've only wanted you to be what you are. So I am always happy.

RAIN

Is being a soldier what I am?

GENERAL SUD

It is not the sword. It is the spirit of justice.

She looks at him. He holds her gaze.

RAIN

I have to sleep. Thank you, Father.

GENERAL SUD

I'm a little sleepy myself. You're everything I wanted.

Sage Lu's room. A noise from outside. Red Devil starts.

RED DEVIL

Come with me.

LU

I can't. I'm not done here.

Red Devil leaps into the window.

RED DEVIL

Brother. A battle is coming. You have to choose a side.

Red Devil exits.

A tap at the door. Then it slides open, and Rain is there.

RAIN

I couldn't sleep.

LU

Ah.

RAIN

Then I heard noises from your room.

I couldn't sleep either.

LU

Like a dog growling at his dreams.

RAIN

Sorry I woke you.

LU

Never a delicate man.

RAIN

You know me.

LU

I do.

RAIN

Pause.

RAIN

I slept poorly as a child. Before Father allowed me to join his command. I would wake confused and lost. Unsure of the air. They thought nightmares at first, memories of the war and the day I was taken. When I was twelve I began sleepwalking. My aunties would find me curled naked in the garden soil. They said my face didn't seem frightened at all.

She trails off.

Is there more?

LU

It's not important. As a soldier my body is too tired for dreams. I've slept well since. To be up two nights at this hour...

RAIN

I like nine hours myself.

LU

Rain steps over to Lu's little pile of possessions. She smiles oddly.

You're packed.

RAIN

LU

I saved room for going-away presents.

RAIN

Ha.

LU

You said before sunrise.

Does she want to say something?

LU

Unless you've changed your mind.

RAIN

You can't stay. But I can't let you go. I don't know my own mind. For once. My father likes to say the self is a thing of which we cannot speak truly. But I'm the exception: "Rain is unmixed element." And I believed him and thought of myself, his sword, with such simplicity I took it for a prayer. Now the line is broken, the prayer halved and neither side can stand alone. I feel I'm not myself. But even that's untrue. Like everything I could say now.

LU

I love you. Do you love me?

RAIN

What does it matter?

LU

I don't know. But it'd be good to know.

RAIN

I'm not going to put myself in a position that is impossible. I already have.

LU

What's impossible?

RAIN

We don't have to say it.

LU

I'm in love with General Sud's daughter. Was that impossible? I did it. Didn't have to lift a finger. It happened.

RAIN

You broke your rib to stick around.

LU
It was already too late.

RAIN
Can you put your robe on?

LU
Why?

RAIN
It's hard to talk to you like this.

She holds up the robe for him.

He moves to her, but instead of reaching for the robe, he reaches for her arm.

She withdraws.

He steps towards her again, and she withdraws in equal measure.

He pursues her around the room as she retreats. She darts to a chest, which she opens. She pulls out clothes in many colors, which she begins to throw at him during his pursuit, he bats them away so that they flutter up into the air, catching brilliantly in the lamp-light. They remain suspended.

At last he closes the gap, so that when she begins to fling out another robe, he catches the opposite end before it has left her hand. He tugs her to him. They release the robe up into the air.

Lu slowly reaches for the belt of Rain's nightgown. He pulls it open.

The lights go dark except for a single spotlight on the floor, into which Rain's gown drops.

RAIN
I love you.

SCENE TWO: THE MAGISTRATE'S COMPOUND, AFTERWARD

LU

So is this the part where you kick me out. Again?

RAIN

Don't.

LU

Don't what? Don't joke?

RAIN

You're not very funny. You'll still have to go. Eventually.

LU

I've held off eventually for most of my life.

RAIN

You don't have that long.

LU

Ominous.

RAIN

What could we even be? Soon the bandits will be routed, and I'll return to the north. If you followed me, there'd be no secret left.

LU

We wouldn't have to remain secret.

RAIN

(with a bitter laugh)

What, marry? My father *will* push for marriage soon. And it will not be to a lapsed monk. Let alone one who...

LU

...has such a massive personality?

RAIN

I told you you're not funny.

LU

Persistence is my strength. You may have noticed.

She jabs him.

LU

"One who" what?

RAIN

My father will expect a son closer to his world.

LU

Generals are always adapting to new terrain.

RAIN

I expect a husband closer to my father.

LU

We haven't had much time to bond.

RAIN

You won't. I know you find him cruel. Just like me.

LU

I don't.

RAIN

Stop it. I'm not going to change. Neither will you.

LU

Why should we? I've been trying to tell you: it's the holes that give the flute its music. Say we lived on Heaven Mountain.

RAIN

How?

LU

I build a cottage at the mirror pool. We set up as arms instructors in town. Or you teach arms, and I teach scripture. We become famous for your toughness and my beauty. We're known in restaurants, where they keep the dishes coming. We go home and work the weight off then we eat again. Who needs to think of cruelty?

RAIN

Or fathers.

LU

When he sees the grandchildren, he comes around.

RAIN

Oh, so there are children now?

LU

Just a few. The neighborhood grannies stick their noses in, so we never have to worry. The boys inherit my wonderful sense of humor.

RAIN

And your giant personality.

LU

While the girls inherit your intelligence.

RAIN

The boys can't be smart?

LU

They get by on my looks.

RAIN

You're asking me to give up soldiering.

LU

We all have to give up something.

RAIN

What are you giving up?

LU

I had a life, before you.

RAIN

Ah.

LU

I had friends. Family. Same as anybody. Brothers who knew me and relied upon me.

RAIN

Even if you can't remember them.

LU

Right.

RAIN

It's more than my rank you're asking me to leave.

LU

I'm asking you to imagine. Because why couldn't we? We have what we need. Come with me. We can be ourselves.

She pauses. He takes her hand. Kisses her. They cleave together, about to make love again.

An alarm sounds.

They freeze.

Yes, that's the alarm. Rain leaps up, wrapping the sheets around her once again.

RAIN

I'll be back.

LU

You're going to fight in that?

RAIN

There might not be a fight. Stay here.

LU

What if someone needs a monk?

RAIN

Stay here!

Rain exits. Lu hops up and grabs his clothes, then rushes out.

SCENE THREE: THE MAGISTRATE'S COMPOUND, MOMENTS LATER

Fighting all over the compound.

Outlaws attack guards. The guards attempt to take defensive positions, but the bandits appear from all sides, bursting through doors and windows, leaping in from above.

General Sud emerges and fights off several bandits single-handed.

Ox laughs behind him.

OX

You must be the General. Reporting for duty, sir.

GENERAL SUD

Identify yourself, so I know how to mark your grave.

OX

They call me the Iron Ox.

They fight. Ox is stronger, but General Sud, through cleverness, manages to get the upper hand.

Sage Lu leaps in, saving Ox.

GENERAL SUD

Dog!

OX

Brother!

The two of them fight the General.

GENERAL SUD

A traitor after all.

LU

It's not how you think. These are good men.

GENERAL SUD

Good men. There are no good men beyond the law.

LU

They've been wronged. They're waiting for pardon.

GENERAL SUD

If that's true, and they have any honor, they'll submit, and await their pardon under my care.

LU

It's not so easy.

GENERAL SUD

Excuses.

You'll see.

LU

Lu and Ox disarm General Sud.

End it.

GENERAL SUD

Lu sinks to his knees before the General.

LU

General Sud. I humbly ask you to join our brotherhood. We are good men, who wish to serve the emperor and bring justice to his corrupt officials. You will be esteemed among us. Please, sir. You may live and live with honor.

GENERAL SUD

Honor. You have none to give. I have consecrated my life to fighting barbarians, and here at the heart of the kingdom I'll die among treacherous citizens. But you first, man of nothing.

General Sud attacks Lu.

Ox strikes General Sud fatally.

GENERAL SUD

This is what I saw in a dream. That soon the tongues of foreign beasts would be spoken in the court of the emperor. I am grateful I don't live to see it.

General Sud dies. Lu stands over the General, considering.

LU

Speaking of foreign beasts...I'm fucking your daughter.

Elsewhere, Red Devil fights his way through guards, shouting:

RED DEVIL

Lu! Lu!

Rain surprises him.

RAIN

Who are you looking for?

Only my brother. RED DEVIL

You've come to the wrong place. RAIN

You are the Swordsman? RED DEVIL

My name is Rain. RAIN

Dan Sansarin. The Red Devil. RED DEVIL

You are far from home. RAIN

I could say the same. RED DEVIL

This is my home. RAIN

You understand me. You don't belong here. RED DEVIL

You're wrong. RAIN

Your father slaughtered our people. And these ones here, half of them would do it again if they had the chance. Join us on Blackwing. We always have a seat for a fighter like you. I'll serve you myself. DAN RED DEVIL

I see how you serve. You know nothing. No wonder you see yourself an outsider: you're unworthy of the state. RAIN

Ugh, lady. RED DEVIL
(grumbling)

What? RAIN

Never mind. Ox was right.

RED DEVIL

They fight. Red Devil is slippery and inventive, but he is no match for Rain. She deals him a mortal blow.

He crumples, shocked and struggling to breathe. She stands over him, preparing the final strike.

Lu arrives.

LU

Lay down your weapons.

She turns to him.

LU

Haven't you had enough blood?

RAIN

Whose side have you chosen?

LU

I won't fight you. But please. Give up your sword.

RAIN

Your friends have come in force. Sage Lu.

He is stunned to hear his name from her lips.

LU

You know?

RAIN

I've always known.

She pokes at Red Devil.

RAIN

You remember?

LU

I never forgot.

She absorbs the blow.

After a moment, he takes one step as if to approach her -- her body straightens.

RAIN

Submit to the emperor. Come with me and beg for pardon.

LU

Is that what you have to say?

RAIN

It is the only way.

LU

Come with me instead. You can live with us on Blackwing. Or run to Heaven Mountain. We can still be together.

RAIN

After this?

LU

You won't make it out of here alive.

RAIN

What's happened to my father?

LU

I offered him a seat of honor. A place in our brotherhood.

RAIN

He would never accept.

LU

He didn't.

She understands his meaning.

RAIN

Then how could I do differently?

Rain angles herself towards Lu, weapon readied.

LU

This isn't possible. Think. Think where we were moments ago.

RAIN

A lie. That we can no longer pretend to believe.

LU

I believe it.

RAIN

No you don't. You whispered it to yourself even as you killed my father and I your brother. You heard the words rotting on your tongue. We can walk away forever, or we can fight.

LU

If last night a seed had been planted...couldn't we come back together? Or would the child be two halves hating each other, hating us both, until it's all hate?

RAIN

If a seed of yours were left in me, I would dry it out with disgust so it couldn't grow. I would burn its roots with bitterness before it came to flower. If it flowered, I would strangle it at birth, and if I couldn't strangle it, I would hour by hour nurse the half that's you out of her, like sucking the venom of a snake, until she was all mine. And I would tell her if she ever came upon a man such as you, she must not hesitate.

LU

You're right.

As Lu drops into stance, Rain launches herself at him.

They fight viciously and are well-matched. After several minutes of back and forth, they knock each other backwards and pause, breathing heavily, ready to charge once more and end this thing forever.

THE END