

## Ho Nguyet Co Becomes Human

*Ho Nguyet Co Becomes Human* is based on the Vietnamese story *Ho Nguyet Co hoa cao* (Ho Nguyet Co Becomes a Fox) that is most well-known as a *tuong/hat boi* or *cailuong* traditional drama. In the original version, a fox, through meditation, turns into a woman who becomes involved with two warrior-lovers. When the latter tricks her into giving up her Jewel of Humanity, she devolves back into a fox in a grotesque dance. In the **KETEP** version, the ancient turtle in Hanoi's Hoan Kiem lake persuades the fox to become human to rescue the forest animals. She works with a forest ranger to seduce and trap a poacher and then eagerly returns to being a fox.

### Characters:

Ghost of Cu Rua, *the great turtle that lived in Hoan Kiem lake in Hanoi (shadow puppet)*

Ho Nguyet Co #1, *vixen*

Ho Nguyet Co #2, *cailuong actress*

Ho Nguyet Co #3, *modern woman*

Ho Tinh, *nine-tailed fox, her husband*

Ly Tinh, *red-faced park ranger*

Tiet Gao, *red-faced poacher*

#5, *female wildlife trafficker*

### Scene 1

*Ho Nguyet Co #1, a red fox, is talking with Cu Rua, a large shadow puppet*

	Ho
No, I won't do it.	
	Cu
If there was any other way you know I wouldn't have asked you.	
	Ho
Ask someone else.	
	Cu
No one else has the necessary qualities.	
	Ho
What qualities? Thick red fur? A sharp nose?	
	Cu
Lovely fur it's true, but...but...	
	Ho
Say it!	
	Cu
Your...ability to think quickly on your feet.	

Ho  
You mean, trick and deceive.

Cu  
Well, yes.

Ho  
You flatter with insults.

Cu  
They're neutral skills, depending on how they're applied.

Ho  
And how am I expected to 'apply' them?

Cu  
By tripping up people, using their greed and cruelty against them.

Ho  
No, humans hate us, kill us for no other the reason than that they can. They're too barbaric. I won't go into their society. It's too dangerous.

Cu  
You won't be a fox among them, but a beautiful woman.

Ho  
Ah, one of those female fox spirits who attract men to destroy them. You go from one bad stereotype to another. Nothing entices me to take this mission.

Cu  
But all the animals are counting on you. Some of them will go extinct in the next decade if we don't work together.

Ho  
But we're dying from different causes—I can't solve all the problems—poaching, deforestation, pollution, development...

Co  
These are all symptoms of the same root cause—disrespect.

Ho  
People, like all animals, care only for their own kind. Other animals are merely beings they can abuse with impunity; we fall outside their moral code.

Cu  
Precisely. That's why you must persuade them it's in their own self interest to protect us.

Ho  
Too difficult. We're too dispensable—they never even notice when a whole species disappears. We just vanish even out of memory. No one cares.

Cu  
We do. We love life as much as they, and you're our best chance to survive. You must become human and find a way to stop them.

Ho  
How?

Cu  
Meditate.

Ho  
No. I meant how to stop them.

Cu  
You must find a red-faced man.

Ho  
What? Why red face?

Cu  
Actually, it's more pink.

Ho  
You mean, a Westerner?

Cu  
Don't you watch *hat boi*? Red means he's sincere, brave and honest. The best kind of man.

Ho  
And then what? Do I fight him?

Cu  
Seduce him!

Ho  
I have a husband!

Cu  
Not as a human

Ho  
Is he a warrior?

Cu  
He fights, but not like before. He doesn't use a sword.

Ho  
You mean I can't show off my martial art skills?

Cu  
Don't worry, they will come in handy.

Ho

And this meditation?

Cu

For a thousand years.

Ho

What? Sit cross-legged and murmur sutras? And not eat moles and squirrels?

Cu

Precisely. It's a strenuous transformation.

Ho

Will it take me another thousand years to become a fox again? I don't think my husband will wait that long.

Cu

No, that will happen as soon as you give up your Jewel of Humanity.

Ho

You make it sound like losing my virginity. I already have children, you know.

Tinh

*(runs in)* Ho Nguyet Co, I just heard the news. Don't go. Your family needs you. *(to turtle)* You can't send her; she has three pups of her own. I can't feed and protect them alone.

Cu

I've asked her sister to come live with you. Fox families always help each other in times of crisis. She's willing to postpone her own family to help raise yours. Don't worry. All the animals will protect your family while you're gone. *(to Tinh)* Instead of distressing her, you should support her for doing her duty. *(leaves)*

Tinh

I can't. I'm selfish and want you to stay.

Ho

*(teasing)* Are you afraid I'll fall in love with a human?

Tinh

No, of course not. Well, yes. I know how devious men are.

Ho

Don't worry about that. I'm doing this for us, for our children so that they won't live in a world of terror and starvation.

Tinh

*(sighs)* Then go if you must, but never get too confident; that's when one makes mistakes.

Ho

You know I'll be careful.

Tinh

I still have a premonition of dread. Even if you come back safely, you won't be the same. Your experience of being a human will separate us. Perhaps you won't love me anymore and will look down on foxes, thinking we're nothing but cruel beasts.

Ho

No, never. Humanity will only be my disguise. If I manage to return alive, all I'll ever want is a tranquil life with my family. I'll try to send messages to you. Look for any unusual signs.

Tinh

Climate change has made all signs in nature topsy-turvy. But don't worry about us. Think only of your own safety, and come back to us quickly.

Ho

I'll think of you day and night.

**Black Out**

## Scene 2

*In the forest*

Ho

I've fasted and meditated for a thousand years. My time is almost up. Wondering if I will finally become human, I close my eyes for the last time—*(she utters mantra, she does a dance of becoming human, solo or duet between fox and human; change actors)* Ho Nguyet Co #2

Oh I feel so dizzy, my eyes and ears are so far from the ground. My lovely tail is gone...no, there's still a little bump. My face feels so flat and ugly! *(sniffs, touches nose)* I can't smell a thing. This new nose is useless. It doesn't tell me about who has been here, who I should be afraid of, who I might like for food. Two legs too long, and two legs too short. At least these clothes are quite nice—soft smooth silk. But what am I to do now?

Ho

*(fans herself, occasionally sniffing the air.)* Someone is coming. *(she hides behind a tree; Ly Tinh, a park ranger goes to the tree and picks up a camera tied to it, a "camera trap")*

Ly

Let's see what we've caught here. Oh excellent. A fishing cat! A beauty. He looks healthy. We've never seen one in this area. This is great news. And what's this? A mother pangolin with a baby on her back. I'll have to come back to check up on them or they'll be killed in a day. Well, at least this part of the forest isn't completely dead. What else? What? A human? But wait, it doesn't look like a poacher. The photo is so blurred I can't see his face, but his clothes are strange. *(Ho comes out of hiding)*

Ho

Perhaps it's me.

Ly

*(still looking at camera)* Perhaps *(looks up, surprised)* Perhaps! Yes! No! Who are you? What are you doing here?

Ho

My home isn't far away. I came to the stream to bathe. Isn't that allowed?

Ly

No, this is a protected area. You need a permit to come here. You'll have to leave.

Ho

And why are you allowed?

Ly

I'm a park ranger. I was working here for WWF to see if any Javan rhinos remained. The project just closed, and the rhinos declared extinct in Vietnam. Now over 300 species gone forever, and 100 more on the brink of extinction.

Ho

So now what are you doing?

Ly

The rhino was thought to be extinct 20 years ago, and then we found one. Then for years we didn't see any, but we found scoop (poo) and that gave us hope. But DNA tests showed the scoop was from only one animal. Last month we found a dead rhino, shot in the leg and its horn cut off. That was the end. But I just can't believe it was the last one. I just can't accept that a whole species has been wiped out in my time. And for what? A trinket? A fake medicine? It makes my blood boil.

Ho

*(peers at him closely)*

Ly

What are you looking at?

Ho

Are you a red-faced man?

Ly

Certainly not.

Ho

*(continues to look at him, touches his face)*

Ly

Stop that! *(he blushes)*

Ho

Ah, now you are a pink-faced man, and growing redder!

Ly

I am not! You have to go. You're disturbing my work.

Ho

What work? Aren't you just deceiving yourself and wasting time?

Ly

Maybe, but I can't give up. Besides, I'm also checking up on other endangered species.

Ho

What can you do for them?

Ly

Catch the poachers. Punish the buyers and sellers. Make people indignant at the illegal trade. (*points to camera*) Look at this magnificent fisher cat. I have to protect it.

Ho

Really? How interesting to find a man willing to fight other men to...to...support an animal's right to live!

Ly

It's my duty.

Ho

As a ranger?

Ly

As a person living in this time.

Ho

I see. Have you seen any red foxes?

Ly

Oh, foxes are around, but I haven't seen any recently.

Ho

Do you think they're extinct?

Ly

No, they're smart and adapt.

Ho

Maybe it would be safer for species to be declared extinct. Then even poachers would give up looking for them.

Ly

But it's not just poachers, you know—it's development, habitat destruction, the farmers extending their fields into the forests. The government needs to hire more people to protect them, and educate about co-existence.

Ho

Perhaps I could help. I have rather a good eye and ear for detecting creatures before they get close to your camera. I might even be able to help you find a poacher.

Ly

I don't think so. One has to be specially trained.

Ho

I'm a forest dweller.

Ly

*(laughs)* In those clothes? You look like a court lady in a *hat boi* play.

Ho

You shouldn't let clothes deceive you. They're easily changed. If I dress more appropriately, will you meet me here tomorrow?

Ly

I'd certainly like to have some company, but it's too dangerous. So much money is involved that the poachers won't hesitate to kill.

Ho

*You* take that risk. I'll take it too.

***Black Out***

### **Scene 3**

*Ly walks in the woods.*

Ly

I knew she wouldn't show up. Probably got scared at the last moment. I'll have to find out what she was really doing here. She certainly wasn't a villager. Perhaps working for a poacher trying to distract me. *(notices something on the ground)* Blood! Something's been killed recently. *(Ho steps out)* You!

Ho

I've been waiting for you.

Ly

*(suspicious)* What do you know about this?

Ho

I didn't see it happen. The carcass hasn't been dragged away but probably picked up by a man. *(she bends to the ground and sniffs)* Yes, a man. He went that way.

Ly

I have another camera about a half mile from here. Let's check it.

Ho

*(they walk, she suddenly pulls him back)* Watch out!

Ly

*(pokes with a stick)* Ah, a leg trap. How did you know it was there?

Ho

The leaves are piled up artificially.

Ly

You're very good. We could use more rangers like you.



Ho

Yes, you could. You need to think like an animal.

Ly

*(they hear bird sounds and look up)* The Sarus cranes, migrating all the way from cold Siberia. It's a marvel how they fly so far and always find their way to the same place every year.

Ho

*(picks up a dead bird)* Here's one that didn't make it. Starved to death. Not enough fish in the ponds. All fished out by people, nothing left for the birds.

Ly

Too many people struggling to survive. They want to turn the wetlands into rice fields.

Ho

Too many people.

Ly

*(runs forward)* There's my second camera. Damn! It's broken. Someone smashed it.

Ho

The poacher must still be nearby. You take a rest and have your lunch. I'll try to find which direction he went.

Ly

*(by himself, eats)* This woman is amazing. Most women don't like to come alone into the forest. They're afraid of snakes. I've never seen even a hunter so keenly aware. If I had her skills, I wouldn't have to rely on technology so much. *(sleeps)*

Ho

*(runs)* Wake up! Someone's coming. *(they hide and wait a long time)*

Ly

*(after a long time)* Are you sure?

Ho

Yes.

Ly

*(a minute later)* Are you sure?

Ho

Shhh!

Tiet

*(he enters, carrying dead muntjac over his shoulder. he pauses, having heard Ho's 'shhh.' He throws a stone in their direction. Nothing happens. He laughs)* I thought that silly boy ranger might be around. He's probably furious I destroyed his camera. He doesn't know how helpful they are to me. I can look at them as well as he, and that last one showed me this muntjac was nearby. It'll bring a good price.

Ly

*(he struggles to contain his anger)*

Ho

Patience. We'll get him.

Ly

I have a gun and could capture him now with the evidence.

Ho

Wait. We want to follow him and catch those he sells to.

Ly

As soon as my phone can pick up a signal, I'll notify headquarters.

Ho

I'll follow right behind him. I walk more quietly than you. You stay further back.

Ly

All right, but don't lose him.

Tiet

*(pokes leaves)* Damn! They took my leg trap. I know there are monkeys around. I'll have to set another. *(sets a trap and goes, Ho follows behind)*

Ly

*(runs in)* They're moving too quickly for me. I hope she hasn't lost him. *(the trap catches his leg)* Ugh! *(he struggles to free himself from the trap. his leg is free but injured and he limps slowly away)* **Black Out**

#### **Scene 4**

*Ho follows Tiet into a shop and spies on the following exchange*

#5

Tiet Gao. Long time no see. Has WWF frightened you?

Tiet

Frightened me? You're the one who had to pay a hefty sum to stay out of jail.

#5

Aye, the government burning all that rhino horn and ivory was heartbreaking.

Tiet

Don't worry. As soon as the media glare has dimmed, it will be business as usual.

#5

Better, in fact. The burning drove up the price of tusks. Whatever they do to try to stop us just makes the product more rare and precious.

Tiet

Can't lose, eh? WWF has packed up and gone home after declaring the rhino extinct. But their money still helps the rangers patrol the parks. Local animals are getting scarcer.

#5

Perhaps your eyesight is beginning to fail.

Tiet

No such problem. Too many poachers, not enough animals.

#5

I've come to the same conclusion. Vietnam's forests are empty. I've expanded into Laos. Its forests are still good for a few more years.

Tiet

The forests here are not completely cleaned out. I've brought you a nice muntjac—good meat, good hide, good horns—all worth something.

#5

What? No tiger or leopard? The pickings are getting smaller and fewer. Soon you'll be bringing me foxes and squirrels.

Tiet

Nonsense. The rangers' camera traps help me find animals. It's rather an amusing game between us.

#5

All right, here's your money. But don't come again unless you've got tiger or ivory. Or get me something special like live lemurs. People like them as pets.

Tiet

Live animals are a nuisance. You have to feed them and make sure they don't get sick.

#5

Live babies bring in more profit. Consider it. Maybe take an assistant with you.

***Black Out***

## **Scene 5**

*In Ly's ranger office*

Ho

I should have dismantled the trap, but I was afraid of losing sight of the poacher.

Ly

You did the right thing. I should have been more careful, but I was afraid of losing sight of you.  
*(they both laugh)*

Ho

I followed Tiet to a woman's shop. They seemed to know each other well.

Ly

She's probably who the WWF calls 'person of interest number 5'. She was captured by the authorities and then bribed her way free.

Ho

If the authorities won't stop her, we'll have to find another way.

Ly

How? I'm even more helpless now. I can't go back into the forest until my ankle is healed. I feel like such a fool.

Ho

I'll have to take your place.

Ly

I won't let you go alone.

Ho

You have no choice. But you can do something here in town. Scare #5 away for awhile.

Ly

That won't be easy. She knows she can buy off anyone.

Ho

Then find another way to frighten her. *(gets up to leave)*

Ly

Where are you going?

Ho

I'm going to try to scare Tiet Gao.

***Black Out***

### **Scene 6**

*(Tiet comes into the shop and is pleasantly surprised to find Ho Nguyet Co #3 instead of Person #5)*

Tiet

Where's #5?

Ho

She's gone to Laos for a week.

Tiet

Oh, yes. You in charge while she's gone?

Ho

Yes.

Tiet

Well, I have to say you're quite an improvement over the old hag. She was no comfort to the eyes.

Ho

Have you brought me something?

Tiet

Just for you. *(he pulls out a leopard)*

Ho

*(exclaims in surprise)* Ah, a leopard. What a beautiful specimen! Anything else?

Tiet

Nothing important.

Ho

*(pulls out another body)* A fox!

Tiet

I wasn't trying to get it. This one set off the trap. Pay whatever you like for it.

Ho

But it's beautiful. *(she looks about to cry)* Foxes are usually too smart to be trapped. *(to herself)* Something must be wrong. Perhaps it was ill, or starving. *(to Tiet)* Did you bait the trap?

Tiet

No, just hid it under leaves as usual. I guess, some foxes have to be stupid.

Ho

*(gives him money)* #5 Told me how much to pay, so don't ask for more. *(he pushes her hand away)*

Tiet

For you. Don't tell the old lady.

Ho

*(smiles)* Then come, let's celebrate your success.

Tiet

*(puts his arm around her)* I know just the place. *(shadows of them drinking and dancing; Tiet's face turns red from drinking)*

**Black out**

## Scene 7

*(Tiet is hunting in the woods. Hears a sound, turns and discovers Ho Nguyet Co following him.)*

Tiet

I told you I wanted no woman here.

Ho

I had to follow you. I couldn't bear to let you out of my sight. Besides, I wanted to see your skill in action.

Tiet

No. I go alone. Go back. You distract me.

Ho

But #5 mentioned she'd like some live animals. I could help keep them alive.

Tiet

You could help keep me warm.

Ho

I wouldn't mind doing that. *(puts her arms around him)*

Tiet

Look, you've been kicking up the dirt and ruining my trail. Go away!

Ho

Four eyes are better than two.

Tiet

Only if they're keen and attentive. Be careful and be quiet.

Ho

All right. *(they walk, she secretly turns over a rock and rubs her hand on it)*

Tiet

*(hides himself)* She's up to something. I'd better find out. *(secretly watches. Ho again overturns a rock and rubs it. She pulls out a hair and ties it)*

Tiet

Ah. *(to himself)* A sign, but why? For whom? The rangers?

*(Ho lifts her head and listens. Then she sniffs the air. She senses an animal about. She stumbles noisily and breaks a branch.)*

Tiet

Damn! She's scared something off. Now where did she go? She's just disappeared. Was she just in my imagination? Or was she a spirit? *(he runs out)*

Ho

*(runs in)* Tinh!

Tinh

*(Tinh runs in.)* What is it?

Ho

The hunter killed my cousin. He doesn't care what he catches if it can bring in money. Stay safe in the burrow for a few days and don't come out till I give you a sign.

Tinh

I have to hunt.

Ho

*(gives him food)* These chicken bones still have a lot of meat. Go now! *(they run in opposite directions)*

Tiet

*(runs in, sees Tinh run away)* A fox! Just as I suspected! If I persuade her to turn back into a fox, I could sell her at a good price. Maybe I even catch the pair. Let's see. What to do? *(he suddenly groans and falls to the ground)*

Ho

*(enters)* What's wrong? You are now a very red-faced man!

Tiet

*(groans)* The pain!

Ho

Tell me! Perhaps I can help.

Tiet

I was seized by terrible pain. *(shrieks in pain)*

Ho

*(to herself)* Squirming with less dignity than an animal in a trap.

Tiet

A snake bit me.

Ho

Where?

Tiet

On the leg.

Ho

I don't see any red mark.

Tiet

*(groans)* Yesterday, I was bitten by many mosquitoes. Perhaps I have dengue fever or malaria.

Ho

*(puts her hand to his forehead)* No fever.

Tiet

*(again groans)*

Ho

*(to herself)* Such a bad actor! *(to him)* Perhaps the fever is in your heart.

Tiet

Yes! That's it. My love for you has overwhelmed me.

Ho

I meant the fire of greed.

Tiet

Oh, help me! You know I'm not really a bad man.

Ho

No? What does your greed and this foolish play-acting make you, then? An animal? (*she stands up and turns to go*)

Tiet

Don't go! Don't leave me.

Ho

I know what you want.

Tiet

(*surprised*) You do?

Ho

You thought you could deceive me with your silly aches?

Tiet

You know...and won't give it to me.

Ho

My Jewel of Humanity won't help you. You have to find, and value, your own.

Tiet

Ah, you don't love me.

Ho

At the cost of my own life? Last night you insisted you loved me.

Tiet

I do. This sickness is taking me away from you. Save me...save us!

Ho

No, you won't trick me this time. Love does not always make one stupid. But...I'll make a bargain with you.

Tiet

What?

Ho

Even knowing your cruelty and deceit, I'm still willing to give up my most precious possession. Thereby I show the generosity of my humanity. And in return, you must prove yours. Are you, man, able to make a noble gesture?

Tiet

How?

Ho

What I give you is not just the Jewel of *my* Humanity but the chance to discover your own. Mine is only a disguise; yours is locked in a prison. When I release myself, I give you the chance to be



free. Take this precious jewel, and become a better man. *(she hands him the Jewel and slowly dances to become a fox)*

Tiet

Wait! I give it back to you. Don't go! I really do love you.

Ho

Too late, too late.

Tiet

Come back.

Ho

Do as I ask and my spirit will aid your enterprise. If you don't, I'll haunt your nights forever. You'll never sleep again. You will become a true "beast."

Tiet

Come back.

Ho

I can no longer speak your language. Learn mine. *(she leaves behind a pile of silk clothes)*  
**Black out**

### Scene 8

*(Ho Nguyet Co #1 yaps and Tinh comes running)*

Tinh

My darling! *(the two foxes dance together)* I am so happy to see you safe.

Ho

You are my true red-faced husband. *(stage darkens, Cu Rua comes out)*

Cu

Did you succeed?

Ho

I did the best I could. We animals have spoken, and given the humans a second chance. Now it's up to them to decide which path to take.

Cu

May all be well. *(the large turtle's legs pull in so that his body becomes the moon and the image of Chu Cuoi (the Man in the Moon) emerges.)*

**The End**